

Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 26, 2020 at 12:19 PM

The conversation has diverged into too many directions now than could be pulled together in anything short of a book. I won't attempt to write that book. (Nor would I presume that anyone would wish to read such a thing.)

I would just like to attempt the approach that Cassius endorses of focusing on “The Master's” teachings. But in so doing, I want to avoid the purely exegetical approach where we are only interpreting texts as divorced from real experience, and without personal relevance. In Greco-Roman philosophy, theory is never considered an end in itself. It is decidedly put in the service of practice.

I, for one, am interested in seriously taking up the formulas of the creator of this tradition. If we need to take up any new meanings for these formulas that the creator could not have anticipated (due to lack of scientific knowledge, for example), that is acceptable, and can be seen as an evolution of the original doctrine. However, the new meaning must correspond to the deep intentions of this philosopher. [Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pg 6-7] Otherwise it is no longer, in this case, Epicureanism as Epicurus intended it to be.

Epicurus is very clear that the attitude towards the gods is pivotal to his philosophy, as I hope to demonstrate. Here are some of the important elements of that Epicurean Theology. All quotations are from our DeWitt book.

pg. 250: “Epicureans were taught that the images of the gods float down into the receptive minds of the truly pious.”

The implication is that the impious will not receive such images. There must be a certain degree of receptivity.

pg. 255: “So far as vision is concerned, Epicurus denied that the gods were visible to the physical eye, though he did think them visible to the mind when operating as a supersensory organ of vision.”

Therefore, the normal senses such as sight, are not the way by which the gods are perceived, but by “a supersensory organ of vision”.

pg. 255: “Prolepsis or Anticipation was the prime and primal evidence of the existence of gods.”

This gives the prolepsis greater weight than the other senses as means of perception in matters of the divine.

pg. 262: Epicurus believed "he had discovered 'true philosophy,' originating in the teaching of Nature herself."

This reinforces the validity of the prolepsis as a source of true knowledge, not only reason.

pg. 257: From Sextus Empiricus: "according to Epicurus man derived his idea of godhead from the visions of sleep, the assumption being that these correspond to external realities. This evidence is confirmed by the testimony of Lucretius." The function of such dreams "is to act as a stimulus to the innate Prolepsis of a godhead, which up to a point is merely potential, and thus render it actual."

Therefore, Epicurus saw some visions obtained during sleep as conveying real information about the godhead.

pg. 260: "Since virtue is a prerequisite of happiness, it follows that the gods, as enjoying happiness, must possess virtue. Moreover, since an irrational creatures cannot possess virtue, it follows that the gods must possess reason, and that too in the highest degree."

Therefore, we are not adjured to feel pious reverence towards pigs, or any other creature that feels pleasure in the absence of reason. The gods are highly rational and virtuous.

pg. 264: "An interminable shape made up of identical images arise from the inexhaustible supply of atoms and flows to the gods."... "the corresponding efflux, as usual, being taken for granted."

It seems to me that this implies that we have "images" flowing from the gods to the observer, and also from the observer to the gods, but it is not clear. The two-way information flow could describe a form of communication. Note the exchange of information does not imply any intervention of gods, which we reject.

pg. 271: "of the very greatest importance is the significance of infinity and in the highest degree deserving of intense and diligent contemplation."

This is purely conjecture, but perhaps it is this type of contemplation that could make one more sensitive to "images from the gods".

Pg 279: "The covering principle in such matters is the beneficent effect of reverence upon the worshipper. A dictum of Epicurus on the point has been quoted previously, Vatican Saying 32: "Reverence for the wise man is a great blessing for the one that feels the reverence." ... To reverence is ascribed in particular to a guiding power of supreme experience. This guidance is toward a correct concept of the divine.

Reverence towards the divine is what leads us to a correct understating of the divine. This is described as a great and desirable blessing.

pg. 281: "[The wise man] regards with wonder the nature of the gods and their disposition [tranquility], and endeavours to draw near to it and yearns, as it were, to touch it and to be in

its company, and he also calls wise men the friend of the gods and the gods the friends of the wise."

This implies that it is possible to "draw near" to the divine, and to have a relationship with it akin to friendship.

pg. 283: "[The gods] are not incapable of loving; 'they are partial towards those like themselves'; they are 'friends of the wise.' There is a psychological nexus between men and them..."

There is a connection here between man and the divine. It is not one of intervention, but there can be no loving, friendly relationship where there is no contact whatsoever.

I believe these teachings from Epicurus demonstrate that there is a place for not only spiritual beliefs in Epicureanism, but also a spiritual practice. This is only one book I have quoted from - there is so much more that could be said!

Seeing these kinds of teachings in Epicureanism is what really lit my fire and got me excited about discovering how a theology/spirituality would function alongside an ethics that was *not* based in notions of sin and repentance, or samsara and maya, or duty and detachment, but rather in a telos of pleasure. So as the first step, I started to discuss the ways in which the personal experience of most people in human history could reflect the pointers that Epicurus gave us: feelings of reverence and awe, the visions of the dream-state or other altered states of consciousness, the innate prolepsis/instinct towards belief and reverence for the divine., etc. These things are real. But if we adopt an epistemology that fundamentally rejects all of these experiences as valid or valuable, and completely rejects them as a means of knowledge of the divine or of connection with the divine, then we are rejecting a very significant proportion of Epicurean doctrine, not to mention human experience. It leaves no room for further exploration, let alone personal spiritual development.

I suspect I have found myself alone here in these ambitions, which is awkward. So I really think it would be appropriate for me to wrap it up now and stop forcing my agenda.

The rest is exegesis, if there is an interest.