

Scientism, Atheism, And The Admissibility Of Spiritual Experience

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2020 at 4:12 PM

Like Don I want to think and then comment further. There is much in what you have written Susan that I think I can agree with, but I am not yet comfortable that the issues are clear enough. That's much what I would say about the Scientism article-- I read it and I THINK I know where he might be going, but I am not yet clear what lines he is willing to draw.

So of course what comes to my mind immediately is the letter to Menoecus:

First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many. For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, **but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods.** For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien.

It seems to me that the field of what most people seem to be talking about when they discuss religious experiences is very clearly over the line in what would be "false suppositions," according to the test of what I think are many Epicurean texts that the nature of a true god is entirely blissful and undependent on others, which excludes them from liking or disliking any particular humans. It would be on that basis that I would exclude the great majority of what most people in my experience have called "religious experiences" - because those in my experience have always been shorthand ways of saying that these people have direct communications and special revelations resulting from them.

Just on general experience I would suspect that the author of the Scientism article is probably going in that way too, which I say just on the statistical basis that I have never seen someone in public argue from an Epicurean views of divinity such as is expressed in the Epicurean texts.

But I don't yet want to lump you in with that, Susan, because I simply don't know specifically what you are talking about as "spiritual experiences." I think it is perfectly possible that experiences of awe such as I think Don and Joshua have referenced could be experienced in many different ways, with many different levels of intensity, prompted by many different phenomena. But I don't expect that Don or Joshua are implying "communication" in a sense

that would amount to a special revelation about some special truth.

And again, I am at this point just coming at this from the point of view of applying the Epicurean texts as I understand them, not from the point of view of wanting to make sweeping statements of what is and what is not possible.

So for now my comments are I think pretty much what I have said before: the texts are what they are, and they are pretty clear about the benefits of experiencing "images" of divinity. The remaining texts are ambiguous, however, and it's easier to say what they "must not" mean, when reading them in context of other core principles, than it is to say what the "do mean."

So right now I'll close with repeating your quote from Joshua, which I think sums up where I understand us to be:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

As Joshua recently and astutely pointed out: "A large measure of our project then, must be to mark that boundary. If the study of the divine starts to lead where the philosophy cannot and should not go, we have to say as much."