

Notes on "Epicurus and His Gods" by A.J. Festugiere

Post by "Godfrey" of October 23, 2020 at 6:49 PM

This book was written in French by Festugiere in 1946 and translated to English by C.W. Chilton in 1955. It's fairly short at around 100 pages, including pages of footnotes (many in Greek and many non-English sources) at the ends of the chapters. It's a pretty easy read, not too academic, with but a little untranslated Greek, but there is enough information in it that one could dig into the subject quite deeply if so inclined. It can be read for free online at [the internet archive](#).

Here are some brief notes I took while reading it. They're not so much descriptive of the book as a whole as they are of things that caught my interest while reading it: I was looking to find out more about Epicurus' use of religion and perhaps prolepseis. The notes are quotes or paraphrases from the book, followed by page numbers. Any of my additional thoughts are added after the page numbers. Overall I'd say the book is worth reading as a good overview, although it leans heavily toward the ascetic and toward the absence of pain school.

1. In the preface is a discussion of absence of pain....

2. The tetrapharmakos, **freedom from pain, etc is only the means to ataraxia. Ataraxia does not comprise all happiness, it is the indispensable condition. Otherwise EP would be Buddhism, which it is not. There is a positive aspect to joy which depends on the self sufficiency of the individual: spiritual joy. This is found in the study of nature and of philosophy. Ευθυμία, χαρά, ευφροσύνη. To meditate unceasingly, day and night, on the things which bring happiness, alone or with a friend, is the essential obligation of a sage.** (pages 32-33)

3. From Google translate: Ευθυμία = frolic, (from Wiktionary: cheerfulness, good mood, contentment, tranquility); χαρά = joy; ευφροσύνη = cheerfulness

4. Wisdom means a life of the spirit and the exercise of wisdom is the practice of that life. (page 36)

5. Friendship contributes more than anything to happiness. Epicureanism was a spirit much more than a doctrine. (page 42)

6. In a sentence the author uses the phrase "concepts born of sensation" (followed by προληψεις [prolepseis] and a citation that I don't understand) (page 58)

7. Prayer is proper to wisdom, not because the gods would be annoyed if we did not pray, but because we see how much the nature of the gods is superior to us in power and excellence.

(page 60)

8. We adapt everything that happens to us to the manner of living which befits divine felicity. (page 61)

9. The divine needs no mark of honor, but it is natural for us to honor it, in particular by forming pious notions of it, and secondly by offering... the traditional sacrifices. **...since the gods are indescribably happy, to draw close to them in prayer and to offer sacrifices and traditional festivities is to take part in their happiness.** (page 61)

10. The goal of this religious activity is the contemplation of beauty, a very Greek notion. (page 62) I have in the past attended church services for the purpose of listening to an exceptional choir, this was quite pleasurable. This also brings to mind my enjoyment of some of the finer examples of church architecture. I think we have a thread with some discussion of this from when Notre Dame burned down in Paris.

11. The Sage addresses prayers to the gods, he admires their nature and condition, he strives to come near to it, to touch and live with it, and he calls wise men and gods friends of each other. (page 63)

12. The most blessed gift is to have a clear perception of things. (page 64)

13. **The Platonic gods of necessity leave room only for fear and despair: it would be better to banish belief in gods altogether.** (page 75) This seems to touch on our contemporary problem. The idea of "god" has become Plato's idea of god over the centuries. To me, this is why it seems so difficult to understand Epicurus' gods and why the only proper interpretation today is to imagine gods as an ideal to strive for. I'm not even sure if this conception of the gods relates to what to me is a prolepsis of awe and wonder.

14. In a world emptied of the divine seek the means of living happily by the sole means of limiting one's desires. (page 88)

15. DeWitt article in bibliography: The Gods of Epicurus and the Canon, Trans. Roy. Soc. Of Canada, Ottawa, XXXVI, 1942, pp. 33ff. (I'm not able to find this but it might be a good read.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 8:54 PM

Thanks for those notes Godfrey - I presume that means you are feeling better so that's good too!

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2020 at 9:34 PM

Still a little shaky but I'm well enough to be bored!

Post by “Godfrey” of October 24, 2020 at 12:56 AM

Don't I thought you might enjoy that catnip 😊. Thanks for looking into it!

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 24, 2020 at 6:32 AM

[Godfrey](#), thank you so much for posting this. Based on your notes, I am printing the book right now! Hugely appreciated.