

About This Subforum - Everyone Please Read!

Post by “Cassius” of October 28, 2020 at 7:24 AM

Epicurean Divinity is a huge topic, especially because it differs in so many interesting ways from the theologies of mainstream organized religion, or the state-sponsored religion of Epicurus' own time. Unfortunately, very little of the original writings on the subject have survived; however, from secondary period sources referring directly to the original teachings, we can still glean a great deal about the original doctrines of the Epicurean School of Philosophy. For those to whom these teachings prove personally appealing, we can even examine ways in which Epicurean views of divinity may be applied today.

This forum includes several main sections. The first, “Relevant Texts”, gathers together the textual source material pertaining to Epicurean theology, while the second consists of the sub-topics. Areas for exploration and discussion. include Epicurean Piety, Images of the Gods, Anticipations of the Gods, The Material Nature of the Gods, The Origin, Life, and Potential Death of the Gods, The Relationship of Non-Intervention Between Gods and Humans, and The Appearance of the Gods.

Threads on these topics or similar can be created by users as their pleasure prompts them. Links can be created referring to the source material to support ideas expressed.

As we proceed here we need to go forward with some procedural standards to apply when evaluating the texts on statements about the gods. These should be:

1) Epicurus' own words take precedence over all other source material. Anywhere Epicurus leaves room for different interpretations is not narrowed down by commentary from other sources, such as Philodemus or DeWitt. Neither will individual quotes be taken out of context with his whole body of work.

2) The process of determining what is real takes precedence over details of prior or current conclusions. When new data is available that Epicurus didn't have, we agree to present both what he concluded based on information available to him _and_ revisions which are necessary to continue adhering to his process of observing nature and trusting the senses. We agree that such revisions are an embedded expectation in a philosophy based on observations of nature, and that to ignore new data is to distort Epicurus' intentions beyond recognition.

3) Prolepses are subject to the same verification process as any other sense data and are not to be given special status when the combined sense evidence contradicts them, no matter how compelling they are. We will not say prolepses are infallible when the content is in the form of a conclusion about reality. This is the same as we do not say a straw in a glass of water is bent

because it looks to be so from one view. Instead, we examine it from different positions and touch it. We combine our senses to test any conclusion. A sensation about gods from an intuition or dream is not a mistake in the same way seeing an optical illusion is not a mistake, but assumptions about the cause of those intuitions and dreams is a matter up for verification by the other senses. We must especially beware of making assertions of material fact on grounds that we received special knowledge due to a prepared mind, because this closes off the importance of examination by the senses.

(Note: The above "standards of interpretation" was added here October 28, 2020. It is subject to revision as we proceed, and will likely be added to the forum as a whole along with the "Not Neo-Epicurean But Epicurean" statement as we have more experience with it.)

Post by "Don" of October 30, 2020 at 3:00 PM

Quote

1) Epicurus' own words take precedence over all other source material. Anywhere Epicurus leaves room for different interpretations is not narrowed down by commentary from other sources, such as Philodemus or DeWitt. Neither will individual quotes be taken out of context with his whole body of work.

I just read this a little closer and need to convey concerns about Philodemus and Dewitt being mentioned as examples of "other sources."

I firmly agree that Epicurus's extant works take precedence. No question. It's hard to know what Epicurus wrote if it is quoted in a hostile source like a rival pagan writer or early Christian, but the Letters and Herculaneum scrolls that survive are number one.

However, I would consider Philodemus as a primary source of classical Epicureanism with his direct links to the Garden in Athens. I would place Philodemus higher as a reliable source than Cicero certainly. Cicero is helpful, but he had an agenda to write his version of Epicurean doctrine and then contest against it. Philodemus had an agenda but it was transmitting and documenting Epicurus's philosophy to the best of his ability and understanding. And again, Philodemus was a student of Zeno of Sidon who was the successor of Epicurus in Athens.

All the modern academics and commentators - Dewitt included - are looking through a glass darkly and are definitely secondary sources. I understand we have to rely on their scholarship and translations, but I would not include Philodemus among them as just an "other source."

Post by “Cassius” of October 30, 2020 at 3:20 PM

We could mix Lucretius in there in a similar category as Philodemus. Some people seem to think there are substantial differences between Epicurus and Lucretius -- I don't think that at all, but given the time difference there are certainly possibilities that he didn't get everything right despite his best efforts.

I think I posted on Philodemus elsewhere that I think there is a big issue with corruption of texts and issues with reconstruction in evaluating him.

Every discussion turns into a discussion of evidence, doesn't it? The best I can say is that every time we hit a controversial issue we have to look closely at the state of the text to determine how much confidence we have in that. If the text is fragmentary and we're relying on reconstructions and have large amounts of missing context, then sometimes even something Cicero or even Plutarch records could actually be more reliable.

My classic example of this is the "tetrapharmakon." It seems to be very clear, but there is little or no (I always hedge and say "little or no" but I think the truth is, there is NO) context from surrounding paragraphs to tell us who was saying this, or why. And since what I read in the tetrapharmakon seems to be a gross oversimplification of the first four PDs, which I think it was intended to mirror, then I don't accept any implication of the tetrapharmakon that conflicts with the first four PDs.

So considering the ranking of Philodemus vs DeWitt, there are definitely caveats that have to be considered that separate them.

Post by “Don” of October 30, 2020 at 3:32 PM

As for the Tetrapharmakos, I find it a helpful condensation of the teachings. Dare I say a "dumbed down" popular version, but helpful. An analogy I thought of is the Bible school song:

Jesus loves me

This I know

For the Bible tells me so.

Or something along those lines or the summary of the Christian creed in I Corinthians 15:3-10 or the Apostle's Creed https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27_Creed?wprov=sfla1