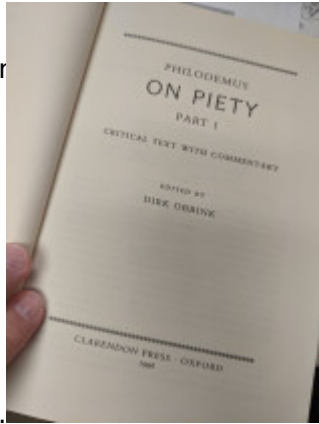


Philodemus On Piety

Post by “Don” of December 10, 2020 at 5:14 PM

Check out what can be read in this afternoon! I'll share thoughts etc on this



thread. Stay tuned...

Post by “Don” of December 11, 2020 at 11:47 PM

Skimming through on a Friday night. Reading the actual text translations and a little commentary. First impressions:

Fascinating but fragmentary.

Still enough continuous text to be understandable in parts.

Jury still out on idealist vs realist debate; have to dig in on that

Overall organization of Philodemus's On Piety:

1. Arguments for the gods
2. Observance of cult and ritual (This section was especially interesting and unexpected)
3. Harms and benefits from the gods
4. The origin of atheism and justice

There followed criticism of poets and mythographers and then Philosophers representations of the gods.

This isn't easy going. Dense and footnote-filled. But a pleasurable experience so far! More to come...

Post by “Don” of December 12, 2020 at 11:18 AM

I think it's also important to look at the actual word that Philodemus uses in his title:

EYCEBEIA (eusebeia)

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry=eu\)se/beia](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry=eu)se/beia)

Yes, the convenient single word English translation is "piety" but LSJ also gives the fuller "reverence towards the gods or parents, piety or filial respect."

Related to [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=eu\)sebh/s](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=eu)sebh/s)

I get the sense that it implies an obligation (providing what is due to someone, e.g., taxes to the emperor)

I don't want to get into the trap that we get fixated on the English without examining what word Philodemus uses... AND when that word is extant, or lightly missing a letter or two but easily read, or completely missing and added in by scholars from context (and makes sense) or added in by scholars blue-skying it. When we have the ancient words, it behooves us to dig into those. THAT'S what Philodemus said, and to quote Dr Seuss, we have to assume he said what he meant and meant what he said.

Post by “Don” of December 12, 2020 at 2:44 PM

This doesn't affect the content of the treatise but looking through the introductory material I came across this:

The author and title in the physical scroll are designated at the end only by:

Φ---

Π---

That's it. Just the first letters are left.

The title is taken to be Π[EPI EYΣ'EBEIAS] since the extant line right before the title and author lines describes the treatise as a ΛΟΓΟΣ logos (treatise) on EYΣ'EBEIA (piety).

BUT!

Obbink says it's just as likely that the author of On Piety is Φ[ΑΙΔΡΟΥ] Phaedrus as it is Φ[ΙΛΟΔΕΜΟΥ] Philodemus!! Obbink says he uses "Philodemus" throughout his work as a convention only.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaedrus...ean?wprov=sfla1> I wonder if this could be Phaedrus's On the Gods that Cicero requested or at least a related treatise

That authorship mystery took me completely by surprise so I had to share.

(Note: I'm going to start just using Σ and σ/ς for sigma (Latin letter S s) instead of the C c that I was using earlier because it's easier to type on the keyboard I'm using. C c is a later Greek/Hellenistic letterform for sigma, Σ σ/ς are the older and traditional forms. C c is used in the scroll. Just wanted to be sure to have full disclosure.)

Post by “Cassius” of December 12, 2020 at 5:55 PM

Thank you for posts like this Don! No way that one person can do all this by themselves and it is very helpful to have your looking at these issues so closely.

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 11:26 PM

Okay, so I literally have Obbink's work of On Piety right in front of me, reading through text and commentary up through Column 26 tonight... And I can't make heads or tails of this first section on the arguments for the existence of the gods. I'm getting the impression that even Obbink doesn't fully understand but uses literal translations and other means to obfuscate that fact.

I'm being a little hyperbolic, but not much.

As I understand the text, the primary goal here is not to lay out a systematic argument but to state specific examples from the authoritative texts of Epicurus (On Holiness, On Nature, On Lifecourses), Metrodorus (On Change, On Gods), Hermarchus (Against Empedocles), and Polyaeus to refute those who would accuse the Epicureans of atheism or impiety.

At some points, the gods (per the Epicureans) are material beings it seems.

But in others, they are described as being made up of similar or identical atoms making them "unitary beings" not subject to being corruptible. In other spots, they are made up of images (eidola) and the analogy given by Obbink is that of a waterfall (the constant flowing) or the flickering images of a motion picture that provide us the mental picture or idea of movement or a static image. The gods are compounds of this sort... Which sounds to me like Sedley's idealist view.

In some ways, this section strikes me as the kind of argument about "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin." And I find nothing that dissuades me so far to see the gods as helpful exemplars of the goal of the Epicurean path. I'm still exploring. This section runs from column 1 to 25/26 so I've made it through once. I'm more interested in the next section, cols 26-36, that talk about the Epicureans participation in rituals and rites.

I did find some good lines though:

"Therefore I think it is especially necessary to despise those who transgress or mock other observance as they do the traditional rites." ll. 720-730., col. 25-26

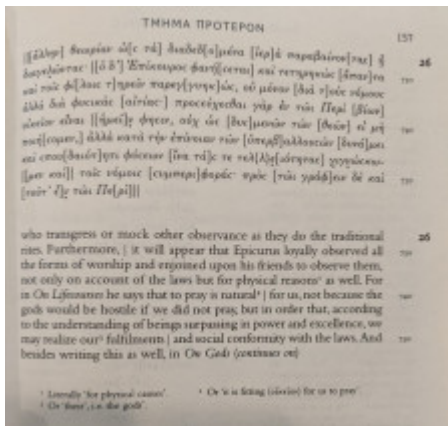
"Metrodorus reproaches even Socrates himself for saying, if indeed he did this, to Plato's Euthyphro: 'what is holy?' (τι ὁσιον ἐστί;)" ll.700-710, col. 25

"And if they have conducted themselves in a blameworthy fashion, with the result that they also aroused suspicion [], let the accusers formally charge those who have conducted themselves in this way." ll.680-690, col. 24.

"It is time to describe all men as impious, inasmuch as no one had been prolific in finding convincing demonstrations for the existence of gods; nevertheless all men, with the exception of some madmen, worship them, as do we..." ll. 650-60, col. 23

"Likewise Hermarchus in the final book of his Against Empedocles also cites this passage, adding: 'Concerning metaphor he (Empedocles) made use in human fashion of the connection with the divine entity for which worship and verbal attendance in cult take place'; and in Epicurus's case (or writings) this is shown by his eagerness for sharing in the mysteries at Athens..." ll.540-70, cols. 19-20

I'm also sharing a screenshot of column 26 since that is the start of the ritual participation section. I find the prayer quote interesting. I'm going to track down the Greek word for that... Tomorrow.



Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2020 at 6:12 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

. And I can't make heads or tails of this first section on the arguments for the existence of the gods.

Don do you have a sense of how much of the confusion is due to the material itself being difficult vs how much is due to it being fragmentary?

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2020 at 7:37 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

. And I can't make heads or tails of this first section on the arguments for the existence of the gods.

Don do you have a sense of how much of the confusion is due to the material itself being difficult vs how much is due to it being fragmentary?

A little of both. The papyrus is in bad shape in a lot of places; however, there's enough continuous text to confidently reconstruct a substantial portion of the author's work.

One issue is that there's a lot of technical, philosophical jargon in the original text. With the fragmentary nature of the papyrus, there's a lack of context for these terms. If we had the whole papyrus and a larger body of Epicurean texts there wouldn't be any question what is meant by similarities, "unitary entities," etc. As it is, it's like reading a textbook through Swiss cheese. Or trying to read a book with a strobe light for a desk lamp. Consider something like...

Quote

The unanimous Declar[----]n ... thirteen America, When in the Course..... events, it becomes necessary for..... dissolve bands..... with another, and to assume a[]g the of the earth, the separate and equal ..,..... Laws of Nature and of Nature's God..... a decent respect to the opinions of m[]kind requires..... declare the causes impel them to the s..... W[] hold these truths to be self-evi[]t, that..... equal, that they are endowed..... Creator with certain unalien[.] Rights..... Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Hap[]ness.

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2020 at 11:05 PM

προσευχῆσθαι γὰρ ἐν τῷ Περὶ [Βιωῶν] οἰκείον εἶναι [ἡμεῖς]ν φησὶν.

I promised something on prayer yesterday, so to fulfill my self-imposed obligation 😊, here's what Epicurus said about prayer according to column 26 of On Piety. The original is above and is mostly intact in the papyrus.

For he says in the *On Ways of Life*, προσευχεσθαι is οἰκείον for us.

προσευχῆσθαι [proseukhesthai] means "prayer", specifically to offer prayers or vows; offer prayers or worship. The word can be broken down into pros- "toward" + eukhesthai "to pray"

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ry=proseu/xomai>

This is, in fact, the word used to mean "pray" in the New Testament as well as previously in classical Greek. I'm looking forward to reading more about the manner of this praying.

And Epicurus says prayer is οἰκείον [oikeion] meaning "fitting, suitable, proper."

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=oi\)kei=os](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=oi)kei=os) (see definition IV)

So it would seem worship of the gods held some kind of benefit for Epicurus even if that benefit did not come from the gods themselves.

I'll dig into columns 26+ in the next few days and keep all posted. I'm intrigued.

Post by "Don" of December 17, 2020 at 11:58 PM

Taking a quick trip through some columns in the book tonight and wanted to share one line from column 47, ll.1340-1350:

(Paraphrase) To be sure, people in general honor or believe in something divine like a god who is benevolent, kindly, propitious, etc.; whereas we Epicureans all regard our doctrines as the true cause of our own tranquility (αταραξιας ataraxia)."

I liked the sound of this, but there's actually a lot going on here in the original Greek. I'll post a little more tomorrow.

From column 62A,

"And in his [Epicurus's] *Symposium* concerning the rites (he says) 'Let us celebrate the festivals' (τας εορτας [συναγω]μεν tas heortas synagomen) and 'Make auspicious sacrifices to a god' (θεώ[ι καλλι]θυτειν ειλ[.... ...] theōi kallithytein)"

Post by "Don" of December 18, 2020 at 10:05 PM

In looking through Obbink's work, I found mention of some important words in the original Greek text and thought they might shed some light on some of the extant writings of Epicurus where we have questions. Then again maybe not. So, here it goes. For this entry, we're looking at prolepsis which is mentioned only twice in *On Piety*.

Column 45, Line 1300

Obbink (starting around line 1280, emphasis added and notes added as parenthetical statements for clarity):

And they (Epicurus and the kathegomenes) are continually saying everywhere (in their

writings), lest I go on too long by adding treatises by them (i.e., to put it briefly), that of all existing things it (the divine) is the best and most holy, most worthy of emulation, having dominion over all good things, unburdened by affairs, and exalted and great-minded and great-spirited and ritually pure and purest and propitious. Therefore they say that they alone strive after the greatest form of piety and that they hold the most pious views about the gods, and they charge the rest with holding the opposite views, in as much as they (other, non-Epicurean philosophers) teach contrary to the naturally acquired generic conception (prolepsis), and [verb missing] the purest views as regards the ineffable pre-eminence of the strength and perfection of the divine... [gap - 1 col c.90 words]

Unfortunately, Obbink's note to column 45 doesn't help much. Here is an excerpt:

"Epic. Ad Moec. states that the assertions of the many about the gods are not derived from [prolepseis]. ... prolepsis, a technical term for which Epicurus was notorious, reflects a process of reasoning that forms a major part of Epicurus' epistemological programme. The source tradition is unambiguous that he thought it was at least possible to have a prolepsis of god or divine nature, but otherwise we do not hear much about it in this treatise, nor does it seem to have played a major role in Philod. De dis ... When Philodemus says here that the others teach about the gods in a way that is contrary to the prolepsis of them, the concept is probably deemed to be unproblematic and to be fully sketched out by passages such as KD 1, Ad. Menoec. 123, and the definitions of the pious and impious man above, 1130-65. (i.e., lines 1130-65 in On Piety)

For reference, lines 1130-65 discuss the pious person preserving the immortality and "consummate blessedness of God [i.e., the god, the divine nature] together with all things included by us" and the impious man who "banishes" these qualities from the divine. The pious person "we honour for his piety, whereas the other we despise as manifestly depraved."

Column 66A, Line 1887

Obbink:

For all (perhaps "infinity"?) [several words missing] is thought of, just as time is defined (or divided or distinguished), as being a naturally formed generic conception (prolepsis); and just as also in book 32 (of Epicurus's On Nature), he says that because the existence of the gods is apprehended with clarity (i.e., vivid knowledge of the gods), although as a unified entity among underlying existents, and their (gods') nature is less able to be perceived by thought than other existents, and generally towards [~25 words missing] who towards [one word missing] but of all those [word missing] self-completing [one word missing] all.

I found it interesting that time here is included in the examples of "naturally formed generic conceptions" or prolepses. I thought I remembered that "time does not exist" according to the podcast discussions of DRN Book 1: *We're wont, and rightly, to call accidents. | Even time exists not of itself; but sense Reads out of things what happened long ago, | What presses now, and what shall follow after: |No man, we must admit, feels time itself, | Disjoined from motion and repose of things.*

So, is the author (Philodemus or Phaedrus) here saying that “time” is also a prolepsis, a preconception that we learn? That would be an interesting development. If prolepses are formed by repeated exposures to a concept or thing, I suppose a concept/prolepsis of time could be formed. Here’s Obbink’s take...

Obbink has this in the notes to column 66A:

“1885-6 καθαπ[ερ ορι]ζεται χρο[νος] : here the fact that the gods exist in the first instance as conceptualized by humans is illustrated by comparison to the ontological status of time, which according to Epicurus is not even a per se entity (but rather an accident or attribute of other entities), yet is not in consequence any less real. Rather, it is in an epiphenomenon of our thinking about certain occurrences in relation to other events and objects. For the status of time as an accidental property of things see Epic. Ad Herod. 68-73; Demetrius of Laconia ap. Sext. Emp. Adv. math. 10.219-27, where time is styled an ‘accident of accidents’; Lucr. I. 459-63.

“1887 προληψιν : formation of the prolepsis of the gods (and the implied lack of it among opponents) is also discussed adobe, 1300, and it (or something very like it) is said to have obtained among the ‘first humans’ in cultural history above at 224-31. On the prolepsis of the gods see further Epic. Ad Herod. 76-7, Ad Menoec. 123-4; Luce. 5.1161-1225, 6.68-79; Cic. De nat. Deor. 1. 43-9.”

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2020 at 7:53 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

If prolepses are formed by repeated exposures to a concept or thing, I suppose a concept/prolepsis of time could be formed.

That is perhaps the ultimate question -- and that's where I think DeWitt / Velleius is correct and Diogenes Laertius is wrong, and that the primary meaning of prolepsis cannot be "a concept formed after repeated exposure to a thing." "Prolepsis" might involve some unrational process that plays into, or describes, the procedure by which the ultimate result is reached, but I think a focus on "after repeated exposure" improperly deprecates the "Pro-" or the "pre-" or the "anticipatory" words that indicate something that predated the repeated exposure.

But I certainly understand why this is confusing and I can see both sides of the argument.

As for both the time and gods example, I think it's telling that the context seems to indicate that anticipations can be both true and false to the ultimate facts, and that's again why I think

that 1 - the main focus has to be pre-rational and 2- we have to get used to viewing anticipations as a faculty that reports without injection of opinion, rather than fully-formed concepts which we then accept as the equivalent of a faculty. If you equate a "concept" with a criterion of truth then you lock yourself forever into a particular opinion which would never again be changeable through that faculty, and that's not the way we view the five senses or the feelings of pain and pleasure, which are continuously reporting whatever they receive regardless of preconceived notions.

Don THANK YOU for continuing to posts these details as they are extremely helpful!

Post by "Don" of December 19, 2020 at 11:02 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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This is why I'm so excited about the work of Dr Lisa Feldman Barrett. Her explanation of infants and children forming concepts of concrete and abstract "things" strikes me as that "repeated exposure" idea of prolepses. But those concepts are not immutable. I go back to Philodemus's On Anger where he writes about the ability to control our anger by the exercise of "putting-before-the-eyes" of the consequences of our anger before we're actually angry. This fits nicely with Barrett in that this exercise would change our concept (I'm saying prolepsis) of the emotion of anger so that the next time we construct that emotion from sense data and our innate concept/prolepsis of that emotion, our mind has a different prediction and hence a different - hopefully more appropriate - outcome: ex., Don't lose your mind and yell and swear at the person in traffic (they may be rushing to the hospital).

I've found a lot of echoes of Epicurus in Barrett's work from what I've been reading. It's made me more open to the "repeated exposure" idea of formation of the prolepses.

Post by "Don" of December 19, 2020 at 11:04 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Don THANK YOU for continuing to posts these details as they are extremely helpful!

You're welcome. I've been having a lot of pleasure doing it, so I'm glad it's helpful. 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2020 at 2:58 PM

The article by AA Long, "Aisthesis, Prolepsis and Linguistic Theory in Epicurus," makes a case for the repeated exposure theory and together with DeWitt's view makes a good presentation of both sides of the issue. I still haven't read her book but Barrett's work might bring the discussion into our current state of knowledge which seems very promising!

Post by “Don” of December 19, 2020 at 11:31 PM

I'm going to return to columns 26-36 that discuss the Epicureans participation in the rites and festivals of ancient Greece. However, columns 36 to 59 talk about the benefits and harms from gods. This topic also appears in the Letter to Menoikeus 124 where the hoi polloi think of the gods bestowing benefits on those they like and harms on those the gods dislike. I originally thought this was an empty opinion; however, it seems, from this section of On Piety, that Epicurus and the kathegemones ("those who led the way," i.e., the leaders of the school, e.g., Polyaenus, Hermarchus and Metrodorus) also held a version of this view. Note, too, that anywhere there is a reference to Book #, that's a reference to Epicurus's magnum opus On Nature.

Obbink's notes on Column 36, lines 1023-42 (excerpt):

Here the kathegemones are said to have held a doctrine whereby there are produced benefits and harms for good and bad persons respectively [το περαινεσθαι ωφελιας εκ θεων τοις αγαθοις και βλαβας τοις κακοις]. Philodemus paraphrases, saying that for wise and just men (i.e., οι αγαθοι) there is a completion or production (by humans in general) of benefits and harms (from the gods) which are no less or even greater than those harms and benefits which people in general usually assume. The present passage thus adds another dimension to that expressed in Ad. Menoec. 124. For in addition to assuming the account there of why people in

general think and talk as though the gods were a source of great harms and benefits (and, in a sense, are right about this), the present passage purports to give a rationale whereby the Epicurean sage will do so as well.

So, to retrace our steps, here are excerpts from lines columns 36 and 37 from the scroll itself:

And for the production of benefits from the gods for good people and harms for bad people they [Epicurus and the kathegemones] allow. And for the wise and just it must be conceived that benefits and harms which are no feebler [or 'more deficient' or 'weaker'] or even greater [i.e., no weaker {harms} or even greater {benefits}] than people in general suppose [literally 'attribute' or 'attach' to the gods] are made complete [i.e., 'are accomplished' 'are fulfilled'], not out of weakness or because we have need of anything from God, even in return for his benefit [or 'of his benefit here'], and these things they [i.e., the kathegemones] say most piously. And in On Gods what kind of source of retribution and preservation for humans through the deity must be accepted he [Epicurus] outlines in some detail. And in book 13 [of On Nature] he speaks concerning the affinity or alienation which God has for some people. And in book 35, in addition to clarifying somewhat this benefit, he says that even on account of thinking [5-7 words missing...]. And in his book On Destiny there is an exposition concerning the assistance [to humans] provided by them [i.e., the gods]. And in his letters to important individuals he is seen to pronounce consistently on this point;...

The topic continues into column 38:

...similarly in Book 6 concerning adjudication [6-8 words missing] and that [he says] those who are oath-keeping [ενορκους] and just are moved by the most virtuous influences [literally 'vibrations' 'repercussions'] both from their own selves and from those [i.e., the gods]. And similarly in book 8; and [Epicurus and the kathegemones] define the notion of benefit in the same way as Polyaeus in the first book of his Against Aristotle's On Philosophy declared his opinion that divine nature is the cause for us of these goods; and similarly Hermarchus that ...

Now, this goes on like this for awhile, but in column 42 we find out that some theologians and philosophers perpetuated and preserved tales and poems of vengeful, wrathful gods to keep people in general in line:

And preparing an immense deception against the rest, they subsequently rush into terrible, hidden injustices, since they no longer feared anyone believed to be all-knowing. Therefore it was safer to keep silent. Consequently that was what those of the theologians and philosophers who were just did. For the truth did not escape them, but, since they observed that evil deeds were held in check by the tales because foreboding hung over the more foolish of mankind, in order that we might not render life as a whole a beastly form of existence, and since otherwise the hostility ...[column missing...]

Now, later columns (44, 45 from my previous posts on 46 and 47) talks about the need to preserve the gods' blessedness and incorruptibility as being truly pious.

Col. 48 talks about why these views are held:

“it is necessary to declare to them simply and in a fairly direct manner that every person must observe the laws and the customs as long as they (i.e., the laws and the customs) do not command any element of impiety. For the deity, I think, ought to have been deemed surpassing in all things, that is to say, the deity that is evident and honoured in ritual observance (or ‘in intelligent contemplation’), as Epicurus proclaims.”

Keywords here are “ritual observance/intelligent contemplation” translating εν τη θεωρια. This ambiguous meaning goes back to my new translation of the characteristics of the Epicurean sage, namely this section <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...n-contemplation> Some translations of that section of Diogenes Laertius say the sage will enjoy the spectacles more than others. I feel justified in my translation since Obbink here seems to be dealing with the same ambiguous dilemma of the word θεωρια.

Column 49 gets at why some people said Epicurus wasn’t brought up on charges of impiety like Socrates was:

They [opponents of Epicureans] also claim that Epicurus escaped from the Athenian masses not because [2-4 words missing] he held less impious views, but because his philosophy had escaped the notice of many people.

Just slander? Or a manifestation of the lathe biosas?

Column 51 comes back to Epicurus’s practice:

And with regard to festivals and sacrifices and all such things generally, it must be entirely acknowledged that he acted in accordance with what he believed and taught and that he faithfully employed oaths and tokens of good faith, and he kept them; and the demonstrations about his life which are in Zeno [one of Philodemus’s teachers] make clear to people this most important testament among his agreements [i.e., Epicurus’s will]. So far in fact was he from being harmful to anyone of mankind that not only did he honour his parents as much as the gods, nor was he fondly disposed only towards his brothers, ... [missing pieces up to column 53]
...

Column 53 talks about how Epicurus was kind to everyone, didn’t bring any lawsuits, and did not become the butt of writers of comedy! He lived “without falling prey to the virtue-hating and all-harassing mouth of comedy.” “Virtue-hating and all-harassing mouth of comedy” translates the Greek το μισοχρηστον στομα και παντα σινομενον επεσε της κωμωδίας (misokhreston stoma kai panta sinomenon epese tes komodias). I must admit that’s a pretty good epithet to throw at someone! The Greek misokhreston literally means “hating-the-better-sort”.

53 continues in column 54:

And he did not even utter a word against the sophisticated orators who made mention of him; so great was the strength of the effective precaution against all things that could possibly annoy anyone in deed or word, or even give the impression of intending to inflict harm. For what some have ventured to say, namely that he went unknown to people, shows first of all that neither he nor his followers were harmfully disposed towards their fellow citizens; and then that no bitter slander or lawsuit on account of a major doctrine ...

I should point out that “he went unknown to people” does NOT use any form of lathe biasas in the original Greek text but rather [εγ]ινωσκε[τ]ο. The idea here appears to be to assert how much more Epicurus was an upstanding pious citizen who didn’t bother anyone unlike philosophers like Socrates who got himself charged, tried, and killed. Column 56 even says that Epicurus was “conducting himself so many years in a manner not inactive towards the city [i.e., playing his full part in public life].” Cassius may find that last line interesting in light of the popular apolitical “hiding in a cave” descriptions of Epicurus.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 20, 2020 at 1:27 AM

From the middle of column 51 to the end brings to mind the discussion near the end of the Barrett podcast concerning humans being an integral part of a social network (this is only fractionally online 😊). She and the host discuss how you can contribute either positively or negatively to the network and, over time, you basically reap what you have sown. Epicurus appears to be exemplary in this regard.

As to the preceeding columns, there's quite a bit to digest. Some of it seems to be contradictory to my current understanding. Which makes it quite interesting!

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2020 at 7:23 AM

THANK YOU for all that work Don! And yes the point about Epicurus not being inactive toward the city is very helpful.

Also the point about 'virtue-hating' and "all-harassing" -- I would suspect that might hint toward criticizing 'cynicism' or "nihilism" and that's a very interesting topic in itself.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2020 at 7:37 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Just to be clear, "virtue-hating and all-harassing mouth" is Philodemus's description of the comedy writers. So, he's contrasting, for example, the depiction of Socrates in Aristophanes' Clouds with the fact that Epicurus never got lampooned by the comedy playwrights because Epicurus was so exemplary a citizen of Athens.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2020 at 8:15 AM

Yes I think we are together. I can easily see the Epicureans criticizing attitudes that are *excessively* or *improperly* "virtue hating" and "all-harassing" while still agreeing with the criticism of Socrates, since the Epicureans considered Socrates to have been very defective in his teaching and therefore probably worthy of the ridicule he received.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2020 at 11:12 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I'm still not sure we're together. Philodemus is describing the comedy playwrights themselves as hating virtue and harassing everybody. Philodemus's tone "momentarily rises in vehemence" (as Obbink notes). The Epicureans are in no way taking a share in this description. Philodemus is disgusted with the comedy writers (whether in reality or just to make a point isn't clear). In some ways Philodemus is equating the political persecution of philosophers and intellectuals

with their derision in comedy.

Obbink notes the Epicureans didn't escape completely unscathed by the comic playwrights.

"Epicureans" appear in Hellenistic comedy stereotyped as μάγειροι "the cooks in charge of preparation of private sacrifices" and satirized as pandering to delicacies and fancy tastes.

Obbink notes that there is no clear evidence or instances of "Epicureans" being satirized for their theological views "but rather their attitude towards sacrifice and religious feasting (in the context of Epicurus's stereotyped doctrine of pleasure)."

Obbink notes that Philodemus is claiming that "Epicurus *never* fell prey to comic derision," and Philodemus doesn't "retreat" from that position. "Yet he could have safely argued that comic portrayals never led in Epicurus's case to exile/execution, as he, like many others, believed about Socrates."

Post by "Don" of December 21, 2020 at 11:22 PM

Column 71 has some interesting points:

"They [i.e., people manipulated by philosophers or rulers by means of the poets' false tales about the gods] will suppose that the gods are terrifying tyrants, and most of all because of their own bad consciences they will expect great misfortunes from them. Thus, as far as we are concerned, on account of the belief which they do not have, they would accomplish nothing [i.e., no proper conception of the gods]. But those who believe our oracles about the gods will first wish to imitate their blessedness in so far as mortals can, so that, since it [i.e., the gods' happiness] was seen [i.e., in the past experience of humans in cultural history] to come from doing no harm to anyone, they [i.e., readers of the present work] will endeavor most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone as far as is within their power; and second to make themselves so noble... [most of a column missing, ~60 words, continues at bottom of next column]... to change sides and, not having learnt to be grateful for past goods and to bear up against natural pains and of death [probably continues as not to fear death]..."

A few points of interest to discuss here. It appears again to show the gods' existence in an ambiguous light. We are asked by the author to "imitate" the "blessedness" of the gods "in so far as mortals can." The word used is μιμεισθαι (mimeisthai) which does indeed mean "to mimic, imitate, represent, portray" but also "of the fine arts, to represent, express by means of imitation, of an actor (or painting, music, sculpture)." I might think of it as "Fake it till you make it".

The word used for “blessedness” in the original Greek in column 71 is none other than our old friend ευδαιμονιαν (eudaimonian)! I would have expected something like μακαριος (makarios) as used in KD 1 and elsewhere in Epicurus’s writings, since markios and related words like markariotes are used in the text of On Piety. For example, in column 24, the author says:

“Therefore they [the kathegemones] simply and necessarily supposed that he [Epicurus] left unquestioned [or “posited” or “allowed the existence of”] the existence of blessed and eternal beings.”

The words translated here as “blessed and eternal beings” are ζωια μακαρια και διαιωνια (beings blessed and everlasting).

The word makarion appears again in a phrase in a fragmented column 43 along with και αφθαρ[τον] (blessed and imperishable). Column 44/45 uses variations on makarios:

“... and to dispel what is foreign to its nature [i.e., a god’s], and to marshal all its overpowering strength, nor in On Gods does he [Epicurus] say anything conflicting with one’s doing these things. And in On Holiness he calls the life of perfection [or ‘completeness’] the most pleasant and most blessed, and instructs us to guard against all defilements, with our intellect comprehensively viewing the best psychosomatic dispositions, for the sake of fitting al that happens to us to blessedness and especially having it in good order...” [more of column 45, I’ve included in previous posts]

The “life of perfection the most pleasant and most blessed” translates “τον τελειοτητος βιον ηδιστον και μακαριωτατον” ton teleiotetos bion hediston kai makariotaton. “Teleiotetos” is related to “telos”, something’s goal/completion/etc., so I can understand the ambiguous translation. Hediston is related to hedone “pleasure”! And finally we have makariotaton “most blessed.” The last mention of blessedness right before the end is also makariote--.

To return to column 71, the echoes of the Principle Doctrines and other familiar precepts of Epicurus are striking at the end:

- to be grateful for past goods
- to bear up against natural pains
- [to have no fear] of death
- to do no harm

I also expected something like kalos when column 71 says “to make themselves so noble...”; however, the word is “μεγαλοπρεπεις.” “to make oneself a great man, magnificent.; grand, elegant, or splendid in appearance; full of majesty; majestic.” So there’s a lot more going on there than simply “noble.”

I plan to go back to investigate that translation of “psychosomatic dispositions” tomorrow.

Post by “Elayne” of December 22, 2020 at 10:33 AM

[Don](#) -- how do you think Philodemus' apparent irritation at the comedians intersects with Epicurus using comedic insults against other philosophers? And with the multiple instances of pointed humorous snarkiness against multiple folks in Lucretius?

I wonder if Philodemus just didn't have much of a sense of humor, or if there was something particular about those specific comedians. Humans haven't changed that much-- I'm sure SNL/Colbert Show type humor was just as much fun then as now... and there are always a few humorless types too. "Punching up" humor also has a long history of political use. Court jesters, etc. Often seen as a safer way to let those in power know they are crossing lines that might lead to revolt.

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2020 at 11:27 AM

That's a good question. One point is that he seems to be equating the political charges and comedic portrayals of philosophers, especially Socrates (as the extreme case) but also others that were exiled or punished. My take is that Philodemus seems to feel that comedy playwrights shouldn't be "slandering" philosophers as if philosophers should be respected and immune from lampoon. It seems that he's also implying that Socrates may have brought this on himself by being so public in his questioning and gadflying of the people. He made enemies. Socrates basically made a nuisance of himself, and Philodemus is saying, "See what it got him?!" It also seems like he's saying that "we know what those comedic playwrights are like! Don't play into their hands." So Philodemus is saying that Epicurus was such an upstanding and civic-minded philosopher that he was not subject to comedic ridicule, and we should emulate his example. On the other hand, Epicurus's insults and name-calling were against rival philosophers and not political figures. So maybe Philodemus felt those kinds of activities were acceptable in defending Epicurus's philosophy against rivals. More of an in-house debate instead of a public "airing of grievances."

As for the comedy, I greatly enjoy Aristophanes. I understand his plays are FULL of contemporary satire directed against "celebrities" of the day, especially Cleon whom Aristophanes despised. I also find it interesting that Socrates himself is supposed to have stood up and taken a bow during performance of *The Clouds*. Evidently, he enjoyed the notoriety.

Post by “Joshua” of December 22, 2020 at 3:09 PM

This bit on the comic playwrights is interesting. One thing that Epicurus certainly had going for him in this respect was that he had Menander in his corner, as a boyhood friend who was sympathetic to the philosophy.

Another thing to consider is this; the comic playwrights were having a go at the "sacred cows" of Athenian high culture. Epicurus doesn't really fit into that category.

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2020 at 5:07 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I plan to go back to investigate that translation of "psychosomatic dispositions" tomorrow.

As I promised myself, I found that "psychosomatic dispositions" in Column 44 translates the word διαθέσεις (diatheseis).

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...y%3Ddia%2Fqesis>

So, yes, it does just mean someone's bodily or mental "disposition" so there's no word that's being translated "psychosomatic". Obbink just included that as a modifier to clarify the translation of διαθέσεις.

Interestingly, it does include the sense of arranging things in order. So, column 44 encourages us to guard against all "defilements" (μιαρον miaron <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...try%3Dmiaro%2Fs>) and to use our intellect to "comprehensively" view the best disposition to "fit all that happens to us to blessedness (makariotē-)"

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2020 at 11:19 PM

To get a little better insight into Obbink's translation, I looked in my copy of Tsouna's The Ethics of Philodemus to see where it might be quoted. Surprisingly, I found something helpful both in

itself and in making me dive back into specific servings of On Piety one being col 25.

First, Obbink references two other works in regards to column 25: P. Oxy. II 215 col 1,4-24.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus_O...215?wprov=sfla1

[The first part talks about those people who sacrifice only because they fear the gods. The author thinks "in this there is still no firm basis for piety." Then continues.] But you, sir, consider it a thing of the greatest blessedness to discern properly that which we can conceive as the one best thing among existing things. Marvel at this notion and revere it in freedom from fear."

<https://archive.org/details/oxyrhy...age/30/mode/2up>

That sounds and awful lot like Sedley's idealist view of the [Epicurean gods](#). Whether they exist or not seems to miss the point. "Marvel at the notion" this papyrus says.

There's also Philodemus's own De mus. col. 4,6 (fr. 386 Usener) Philodemus, On Music, Vol. Herc. 1, I c.4,6: (Obbink) "Let it suffice to say now that the divine needs no mark of honour, but that it is natural to honour it, in particular by forming pious notions of it, and secondly by offering with each individual usage (to each of the gods in turn) their traditional sacrifices."

Attalus's site gives this translation:

"Now, these very important things may still be said at the present: that the divine does not need any honor; for us, nevertheless, it's natural to honor it, above all, with pious convictions, even through the rites of national tradition, each according to his proper part."
<http://www.attalus.org/translate/epicurus2.html>

I see the "notion" has turned to "conviction" in the second but I can see similarities in those two words. Again, this still seems to echo Sedley's idealist argument to me. The word used in P. Oxy. 215 is διαληψις. This is also used in On Piety in Column 10 and translated as "understanding" specifically as "an understanding according to similarity" when talking about the nature of the gods. I'm okay with any of those translations in context. And that similarity, in some cases, is the formation of the idea of the gods through similar "images" or eidola perceived by the mind.

But to return to Tsouna (finally), she references col 38 of On Piety and says in a note, after admitting that Philodemus's argument can be difficult to understand given the condition of the papyrus and textual difficulties, she notes the main thrust of his argument appears to be:

Epicurus and the founders DO assert that the gods do have harmful or beneficial influences on us; BUT genuine piety not fear is what makes people just (NOT as the theologians who tell scary stories about the gods contend). Also, the gods do not actually "do" or "give" goods and evils to men, nonetheless, they are responsible (αίτιοι) "in a way" and only partially, not wholly. Col. 38 says " Those who keep their oaths and are just are moved by the most virtuous influences both from their own selves and from those (gods)."

Tsouna also summarizes Obbink in that he outlines interpretations: the gods are responsible for harms/benefits by being implemented in various physical processes of causation; or that our *ideas* of the gods function as direct causes of harm/benefit for people.

So, again, to me, it seems to come back to the physical existence of the gods doesn't really matter. It is our notion or understanding or conviction of the gods' blessedness etc. that can cause us benefits and an incorrect view of piety that can cause fear and harm.

Still digging in but I felt this was important to get down.

Post by “Don” of December 25, 2020 at 10:05 PM

The following are excerpts and notes from columns 27-36 of Obbink's Philodemus On Piety which outline the participation of Epicurus himself and the early Epicureans in religious festivals and other rites and practices. Obbink also shared more detailed notes in his book, so I may try and share some of those pages in later posts. For now, the material below has proved quite interesting...

Quoted in col. 27, On Piety: Epicurus, On Gods (Περὶ θεῶν): as being both the greatest thing and that which excels in sovereignty possesses everything; for every wise man holds pure and holy beliefs (καθαρὰς καὶ ἁγίους δόξας) about the divine (τοῦ θεοῦ) and had understood that this nature [or 'this entity'] is great and august (καὶ μεγάλην τε καὶ σεμνήν). And it is particularly at festivals (εορτῇ) that he, progressing to an understanding of it [i.e. divine nature], through having its name the whole time on his lips, embraces it with conviction more seriously..."

Notes

σεμνός (< σεμνήν)

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...7:entry=semno/s>

revered, august, holy

Col. 28/9: Epicurus wrote to Phyrson during the archonship of Aristonymus (289/8 BCE) about Phyrson's countryman from Colophon, Theodotus, Epicurus says that he (Epicurus) shared in all the festivals... Epicurus celebrated the festival of the Choes and the urban mysteries and the other festivals at a meagre dinner, and that it was necessary for him (prob. Theodotus) to celebrate this feast of the Twentieth for distinguished revelers, while those in the house decorated it most piously (ὁλως) and after making invitations to host a feast for all of them.

Notes

For festivals, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthesteria>

The Choes were part of this festival dedicated to Dionysus

The "urban mysteries" refer to the Attic Dionysia, either the Lenaea (in the month of Gamelion, Epicurus's birth month) or Lesser Mysteries during 20-6 Anthesteria, both in honor of Dionysus.

I find it interesting that the festivals mentioned were dedicated to Dionysus. It could just be coincidence that those are mentioned; or Athens had a lot of Dionysian festivals; or Epicurus had an affinity for Dionysian festivals or the god. No way to tell from what I've read so far.

Col. 29: Epicurus advised them to retain assertions made by means of these and similar expressions, and above all to preserve those made by Zeus himself (maintain the practice of swearing by Zeus by name νή Δία!)... Not merely "it must be so!"

Notes

So, Epicureans, feel free to pepper your writing and conversation with νή Δία! "By Zeus!" 😊

Col. 30: during the archonship of Charinus (291/0 BCE) and that of Diotimus (285/4 BCE), Epicurus wrote letters warning against violating the covenant of the sacred festival table.

Notes

Much of these lines is reconstructed. Extant:

δε Χάρι...

Διοτίμ....

την κα[θ' ιεράς τρα-

πεζης [συσθήκην μη

παραβαί[νειν· καί

Col.31: Epicurus, in a letter to Polyaeus, writes: "(It is necessary for us) to conceive of their nature as accurately constituting the notion of benefit according to the epistemological standard (kriterion). Let us sacrifice to that gods devoutly and fittingly on that proper days, and let us fittingly perform all the acts of worship in accordance with the laws, in no way disturbing

ourselves with opinions on matters concerning the most excellent and august of beings. Moreover, let us sacrifice justly, on the view that I was giving. For in this way it is possible for mortal nature, by Zeus, to live like Zeus, as it seems. And concerning obeisance (προσκυνήσεις) in [Epicurus's] On Lifecourses [Περί βίων]"

Notes

- devoutly and fittingly ὀσιως και καλως

- "in accordance with the laws (νόμους)" can also be translated as in accordance to custom"
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=no%2Fmos2>

- obeisance (προσκυνήσεις) refers to "the custom of kneeling, prostration, or throwing kisses before statues of them gods or as marks of honor to important humans." Obbink recounts in the notes the story of Colotes embracing Epicurus's knees during a teaching session when Colotes was overcome with reverence toward his teacher.

Col. 32: Philodemus writes "statues of the gods Epicurus says that he reveres... .. he says that he employs observance in every natural conception of god taking up [one word missing] divinely [one word] to speak auspiciously."

Notes

- reveres = σέβομαι "to feel awe or fear before God, especially when about to do something disgraceful; to feel shame, religious awe"

- observance

- "natural conception of god" (της του δαιμονος επινοιας) Note we're using daimonos instead of theos here. Not sure why.

Col.33: Epicurus in a letter to Herodotus: "Even if there should be war, it would not be terrible, if the gods are propitious.

In a letter to Polyaeus: [Epicurus says he] has "lived and would continue to live a pure life with Matro himself, if the gods are propitious (same word as above)

Epicurus's brother and advanced student, Neocles, is quoted as saying: "it's is necessary to distribute piously assistance from our money for the gods" in writing to Phyrson (Phyrson decould be "a man second to none in political affairs.").

Notes

propitious (ἴλεων < ἴλαος propitious, gracious, merciful; kind, mild, gentle)

Matro: "i.e., Epicurus said that, if the gods were propitious, he would continue to live a pure life, Matro and all" Obbink has an extensive note on Matro. He was a παιδαγωγός paidagogos a slave-chaperone for students.

Neocles is literally said to have "achieved miraculous or marvelous (δαμόνιον) advancement in his (Epicurus's) teachings") δαμόνιον is the divine power, Deity, or in-dwelling spirit that also gives us the word eudaimonia and kakodaimonia. See also above in Column 32.

Columns 34 and 35 are very fragmentary, and I've commented on col. 36 previously.

Post by “Don” of December 26, 2020 at 11:49 AM

Obbink's notes on Matro

Post by “Cassius” of December 26, 2020 at 12:35 PM

Lots of good stuff there. In addition to the main point on divinity, there are peripheral points of interest such as:

- Metrodorus having a child, which bears on the marriage / children issues.
- The advice to be obedient to parents, which might be relevant to issues of reverence / respect for teachers.
- The reference to slaves, which bears on attitudes towards individual slaves as well as slavery itself (probably one of the best examples for remembering how morality is relative to circumstances)
- I gather at least part of one letter is directed to a young person (?) which would bear on how Epicurean philosophy is something to teach young people and not just for adults.

Post by “Eikadistes” of March 20, 2022 at 11:04 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

- "natural conception of god" (της του δαιμονος επινοιας) Note we're using daimonos instead of theos here. Not sure why.

[Don](#), do we have any other instances of rhetorical symmetry between *daimonos* and *theos*?

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2022 at 11:20 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

- "natural conception of god" (της του δαιμονος επινοιας) Note we're using daimonos instead of theos here. Not sure why.

[Don](#), do we have any other instances of rhetorical symmetry between *daimonos* and *theos*?

Excellent question. I'm not *aware* of any but that doesn't mean there isn't, of course. I often wonder if *eudaimonia* connotes a connection and what the ancient Greeks understood by using that term.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2022 at 12:01 PM

I just remembered that that was one of the charges against Socrates: that he was creating new gods when he talked about listening to his daimon.

Maybe that's one of the reasons why Epicurus and the Epicureans worked within the existing symbols and why Lucretius could say it's okay to say Bacchus and Mother Earth as long as we remember they're metaphors and that we're actually talking about wine and ability of the earth to bring forth life.

Post by “Eikadistes” of March 20, 2022 at 12:17 PM

I'm getting more comfortable getting away from the "*specially-privileged extra-terrestrials*" idea of "*the gods*" and beginning to see how "*god*" works as "*each person's individualized concept of the best version of the ideal person*".

I propose that the Epicurean framework recognizes that (a) extra-terrestrials must exist in an infinite universe, (b) some of those extra-terrestrials would be human-like, (c) some of those human-like extra-terrestrials would be awesome, (d) some of those awesome, human-like extra-terrestrials could have already been accurately envisioned by at least one person, (e) all such deities can, and, perhaps, do, exist (*so long as they are not assigned supernatural qualities*).

At the same time, even in a conceptually finite universe with limited beings, it would not invalidate each human's "*god*" as their "*ideal character*", a useful tool for human moral development. However, the Epicurean universe *is* infinite.

I am not as comfortable with the suggestion (what I'm going to call the "Radio Analogy") that knowledge of the gods is being inadvertently transmitted from the gods to the *receiver* that is the human mind in the form of weird particles. Humans would idealize regardless of whether or not the subjects of their ideals exist outside of the mind, and those idealizations (given that they do not contradict the reality of nature) can be used for moral development.

Perhaps that might be a grounding qualification, sort of a blanket generalization for all religious traditions: we might say, "their deity is real *if* it can be conceptualized as a distant, yet specially-privileged extraterrestrial". "God" can be assumed to be real as long as "God" is not supposed to have created the universe nor act in the human drama.

I've been looking through a biased lens, as a critic to my dominant culture. Our Abrahamic religions, at least, support creationism and immanence, and as a critic, my orientation, relative to our language, is, theologically, a-, or anti-. Ancient theology is difficult to understand through this lens. "God" begins to make a lot more sense to me if I accept that we all have our own, internalized idealizations of perfect character, and that The Creator is mistaken epitaph of god.

Post by "Titus" of June 20, 2025 at 4:28 PM

Does anyone know what happened to Obbink's Philodemus On Piety Part 2? I just can find an [online link with no further information](#).

Post by "Bryan" of June 20, 2025 at 4:43 PM

Oxford does seem to say it was "published," at least internally at Oxford, but apparently it was not issued to the public. Obbink is out of academia for the foreseeable future, and Oxford is unlikely to publish any more of his work.

Post by “Cassius” of June 20, 2025 at 4:47 PM

Maybe there's a "preprint" available somewhere that we can search for....