

Possible Deviations by Frances Wright from Epicurean Texts ("The Gods" and "Necessity"?)

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2019 at 11:52 AM

1. On the Issue of "the gods" - Chapter 14 - Does this deviate from the letter to Menoecus? (But see the second excerpt in the next post.)

"On leaving you, last night," said Theon, "I encountered Cleanthes. He came from the perusal of your writings, and brought charges against them which I was unprepared to answer."

"Let us hear them, my Son; perhaps, until you shall have perused them yourself, we may assist your difficulty."

"First, that they deny the existence of the gods."

"I see but one other assertion that could equal that in folly," said Epicurus.

"I knew it," exclaimed Theon, triumphantly; "I knew it was impossible. But where will not prejudice lead men, when even the upright Cleanthes is capable of slander!"

"He is utterly incapable of it," said the Master ; "and the inaccuracy, in this case, I rather suspect to rest with you than with him. To deny the existence of the gods would indeed be presumption in a philosopher; a presumption equaled only by that of him who should assert their existence."

"How!" exclaimed the youth, with a countenance in which astonishment seemed to suspend every other expression.

"As I never saw the gods, my son," calmly continued the Sage, "I cannot assert their existence; and, that I never saw them, is no reason for my denying it."

2. On the issue of "Free Will" - Chapter 1 - Is this a less "free will" version that Epicurus taught?

"Does the human mind possess the power to believe or disbelieve, at pleasure, any truths whatsoever?"

"I am not prepared to answer: but I think it does, since it possesses always the power of investigation."

"But, possibly, not the will to exercise the power. Take care lest I beat you with your own weapons. I thought this very investigation appeared to you a crime."

"Your logic is too subtle," said the youth, "for my inexperience."

"Say rather, my reasoning too close. Did I bear you down with sounding words and weighty authorities, and confound your understanding with hair-drawn distinctions, you would be right to retreat from the battery."

"I have nothing to object to the fairness of your deductions," said Theon, "But would not the doctrine be dangerous that should establish our inability to help our belief; and might we not stretch the principle, until we asserted our inability to help our actions?"

"We might, and with reason. But we will not now traverse the ethical pons asinorum of necessity — the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers. You inquire if the doctrine we have essayed to establish, be not dangerous. I reply — not, if it be true. Nothing is so dangerous as error, — nothing so safe as truth. A dangerous truth would be a contradiction in terms, and an anomaly in things."

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2019 at 12:28 PM

But on the gods, also see this:

He must take for granted the evidence of his senses; in other words, he must believe in the existence of things, as they exist to his senses. I *know* of no other existence, and can therefore *believe* in no other: although, reasoning from analogy, I may *imagine* other existences to be. This, for instance, I do as respects the gods. I see around me, in the world I inhabit, an infinite variety in the arrangement of matter; — a multitude of sentient beings, possessing different kinds, and varying grades of power and intelligence, — from the worm that crawls in the dust, to the eagle that soars to the sun, and man who marks to the sun its course. It is possible, it is moreover probable, that, in the worlds which I see not, — in the boundless infinitude and eternal duration of matter, beings may exist, of every countless variety, and varying grades of intelligence inferior and superior to our own, until we descend to a minimum, and rise to a maximum, to which the range of our observation affords no parallel, and of which our senses are inadequate to the conception. Thus far, my young friend, I believe in the gods, or in what you will of existences removed from the sphere of my knowledge. That you should believe, with positiveness, in one unseen existence or another, appears to me no crime, although it may appear to me unreasonable: and so, my doubt of the same should appear to you no moral offense, although you might account it erroneous. I fear to fatigue your attention, and will, therefore, dismiss, for the present, these abstruse subjects."