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Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Piety*

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

As was the case with my previous commentaries on Philodemus' works, I have taken the liberty to distill the basic teachings of the scroll, as well as add my own commentary, in a manner that modern audiences can understand in order to advance a new and fresh Epicurean discourse in the 21st Century.

Contemporary Epicureanism is mostly made up of atheists and agnostics and must therefore take up the task of articulating an atheology founded on the ancient doctrine, but many militant and intellectual atheists who have appropriated Epicurus and who propagate atheist cultural memes with his quotes will be surprised to learn of the hostility that Epicurus exhibited against some of the atheists that he knew and of the great value that was placed on true piety, as defined by naturalist philosophy.

Even a non-religious Epicurean should find ways to cultivate the virtue of piety, as the quintessential katastemic practice is gratitude (usually towards nature, or life), which is an expression of piety. All of these matters will be attended in my reasonings on Philodemus' scroll titled *On Piety*.

Epicurus and Metrodorus Versus the Accusers

There were two main types of accusation that were raised by opponents of the early Epicurean school. First, there was the accusation of impiety or insincerity in their belief in Gods, which is what inspired Philodemus' work *On Piety*. In the work, he sets on a journey to establish a clearer understanding of true piety, and opposes this true virtue to the vulgar beliefs of the many. He also persistently reiterates how the founders of the school both produced arguments for the existence of the Gods and encouraged their followers to participate in worship and to be truly pious, in reply to the accusers' argument that it is foolish to celebrate festivals if Gods could care less.

The second type of accusation, once these arguments were presented, constitutes an attack on the imperfections or features of the Epicurean arguments for the existence of natural Gods. For in materialism, things can only exist insofar as they are composed of atoms. According to the traditional, realist interpretation of the Gods, if they do not have atomic bodies, Gods can not be said to exist in any form.

The accusers said that Gods can not have bodies, for bodies are compounds of atoms and all things that are composed of atoms are impermanent. They are subject to change, decay and death. Therefore, because compounds are destructible, these atomic Gods can not be immortal.

Philodemus then cites an argument made by Metrodorus, where he explained that if a compound is made of things that aren't numerically distinct, these things may be imperishable and indestructible or divine. In his work *On Holiness*, Epicurus is quoted as elaborating a doctrine about the physical Gods being eternal and indestructible, and saying that one who exists in this manner "in perfection as one and the same entity, is termed *unified entity*".

The original founders, says Philodemus, supposed that Epicurus never had reason to question the existence of Gods. It is universally accepted that Epicurus believed that the Gods were "clearly" conceived originally (by ancient people) as eternal and blessed, and that this was a *preconception* or *anticipation* (one of the elements in the Canon). However, Epicurus believed that people in later generations developed defiled ideas about the Gods and warned his followers to only hold "the purest and holiest beliefs about the Gods" and to avoid defiled views.

Anticipations are the closest thing to natural (as opposed to divine) revelation in Epicureanism: they are biological, inherited instincts. Anticipations, however can be triggered by things like airplanes (small birds may react to them in panic thinking they're large birds of prey; this vestige of instinctive panic helped their ancestors to survive), any parental figure (we may project our anticipation of father or mother against non-parents) or even bottles (by which babies looking for a nipple are fooled into feeding). Can it not be conceived that any anticipation for Gods that humans are pre-programmed to seek out in nature can be similarly mis-triggered by a non-god?

The accusations of inconsistency went back and forth between the Epicureans and the non-Epicureans. Philodemus argues against the accusers who claim that Gods can't be physical, saying that this is inconsistent with his opponents' view of Gods as having perception and experiencing pleasure.

Before we move on, we must make the observation that Epicurus believed that there was **good, pure and wholesome religion** as well as **defiled and unwholesome religion**, and that **not all religion was the same**. This is an important distinction, if we are to discern between true piety and false piety.

The Ontology of the Gods: In What Way Do They Exist?

For the sake of clarity, the original belief in the Gods within Epicureanism involved their physicality. They had bodies made of atoms. This was a necessity of Epicurean theology because nature and reality are one and the same in materialism and in atomism: Gods can only exist in nature. No-thing exists outside of nature.

Beyond this, other debates occur about what the Gods are in themselves, in what way they exist. One theory was that they lived in the space between the worlds. When we discuss virtue as it relates to piety, we'll see that the Gods are assumed to exist in a way somewhat similar to what we may think of today as radio waves or sound waves, or at least exude some similar quality ... an intriguing insight.

On Piety includes a frank admission by Philodemus, which opens the door for an Epicurean atheology and for the contemporary **idealist interpretation** of the Gods in Epicurean discourse, where they are merely viewed as concepts. This view is opposed to the traditional **realist view**, where they are conceived as natural beings with atomic bodies. The passage is as follows:

*It would be fitting to describe all men as impious, inasmuch as **no one has been prolific in finding convincing demonstrations for the existence of the gods**; nevertheless all men, with the exception of some madmen, worship them, as do we.*

Philodemus concedes that there is no convincing proof for their existence, yet he worships the Gods. Epicureans who embrace the idealist view (whom I imagine to be in the majority today) think that the Gods may be useful objects of contemplation, but that they are not real in the objective sense as natural beings.

Throughout the text, it is evident that worship serves, in part, to conform to societal expectations and laws. People were killed in the days of Epicurus for atheism. These pressures are no longer relevant, even if being a law-abiding citizen does contribute to our greater tranquility. However, this entire scroll is testament of the fact that we must not be quick to accept the accusers' claim that Epicureans were insincere in their piety, for their piety was true as we will see in future installments.

Doctrine of Harm and Benefit of the Gods

*(To others,) piety appears to include not harming both other people and especially one's benefactors and homeland. To be sure, they honor something rather kindly and propitious, whereas we all regard our views as the **true cause of our tranquility.***

The accusers also criticized Epicureans for "depriving good and just men of the fine expectations which they have of the Gods", which generated a discussion of what harms and benefits can be legitimately attributed to the Gods. As with many other doctrines, this one evolved as a result of the interaction with other schools of philosophy and in the process of evaluating the criticism of others.

Although the Gods do not concern themselves with mortals, there is harm and benefit that can be derived from our conception of them. In particular, our views about the Gods affect our imperturbability, virtue and tranquility. With the Gods understood by their effects in this manner, true piety therefore can be seen as a way to nurture virtue.

The papyrus explains that if people imagine their Gods as tyrants and with bad character, they will suppose bad things will befall them, whereas by imagining the Gods as harmless and virtuous, humans will seek to imitate these qualities. Likewise, and just as importantly, bad or evil conceptions of the Gods defile humans and produce depravity even in well-meaning people. A contemporary version of this teaching was articulated by an anti-religious thinker thusly:

Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.
- Steven Weinberg

Horrible conceptions of divinity, even if they are traditionally accepted by the many, are considered by the wise to be blasphemous, not pious in the true sense of the word.

... for every wise man holds pure and holy beliefs about the Divine.
- Epicurus

The worship of raging, mad Gods by the likes of jihadists and the Westboro Baptist Church produces harm and vice as much as the worship of virtuous Gods produces virtue. These extend, in both cases, to both the worshiper and those around him, and these effects can be as tangible as terrorist attacks and feeding the poor, with all the underlying emotions both hostile and tender, vulgar and sublime, in all these cases. Worship affects reality because it affects character.

According to the Philodemian papyrus, Epicurus advised mortals not to think that (anything worthy of the name) God is bad-tempered. In order to be imperturbable and safe from harm, the Gods could also not be imagined as

initiating disputes. However, the text laments that “things unworthy of indestructibility and blessedness are sought in prayer” by common people. According to the text,

But those who believe our oracles about the Gods will first wish to imitate their blessedness, insofar as mortals can, so that, since it was seen to come from doing no harm to anyone, they will endeavor most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone as far as it is within their power, and second, to make themselves noble ...

The just person has noble expectations concerning the Gods, and at the same time exceedingly enjoys pleasures that are unalloyed and effortless.

The undefiled, pure, noble, virtuous Epicurean Gods are an easily acquired source of pure pleasure. To a worshiper, it is always a pleasure to associate with them.

The unjust, on the other hand fear detection forever once they have committed injustices and also fear the Gods’ retribution, in spite of the fact that (as per a Hermarchus quote) “the Gods do not appear to harm wrongdoers even if the worst of mankind escape notice”. Even if they don’t fear the Gods’ retribution, they still “believe they are going to inflict everlasting misfortunes, so that they undergo no less disturbance than if they were really suffering such things”. They have no tranquility as a result.

The Philodeman papyrus states:

In On Holiness, he (Epicurus) calls a life of perfection the most pleasant and most blessed, and instructs us to guide against all defilement, with our intellect comprehensively viewing the best psychosomatic dispositions for the sake of fitting all that happens to us to blessedness ...

The word *psychosomatic* translates as symptoms exhibited by both body and mind, which can represent either disease or wellbeing. The reference to *psychosomatic dispositions* here, within the context of contemplation of the Gods, gives us an intriguing insight into Epicurean spirituality, which must never be divorced from nature and from the body. Both the diseases of the soul and its wellbeing manifest themselves in the body, in physical symptoms. Anger is one of the diseases most famously described in psychosomatic terms in Epicurean therapy: the face can turn red (from the blood rushing), the facial features get ugly, the body heats up, the rhythm of the pulse increases.

We must, therefore, suppose that imperturbability, cheerfulness and serenity also have symptoms within the body and its health, and this is obviously the case. The heart and blood pressure are calmer, and the body secretes more serotonin instead of cortisol, the toxic stress hormone. True spirituality and philosophy are medicinal in a very literal sense.

Epicurus believed that true piety requires that we see Gods as immortal and blessed, and as embodying other virtues. Ares, for instance, embodies steadfastness, virility and courage; Aphrodite embodies the purest pleasure and suavity; Athena is the noble embodiment of Prudence and Wisdom; Hera of loyalty, Hephaistos of inventiveness, resourcefulness and creativity; Zeus embodies self-sufficiency and victory; Apollo embodies lucidity and clarity while Dionysus embodies sublime release and rapture.

If we were to assume a Unitarian/Jeffersonian approach to Christianity and apply Epicurean criteria to it, the Heavenly Father might be syncretized with Nature, with the Holy Spirit or Good Breath embodying the principle of Life. That Jesus worshiped God as Breath is a very intimate insight into his transpersonal and immanent God’s immediacy and easily lends itself to a naturalist interpretation of what Jesus called the God of the Living. In a philosophy of life, things have value only for the sake of living, breathing beings, how much pleasure they add to them, and how much pain is removed from them. This Holy Spirit of Life and Breath at once embodies both

nature and all the philosophical virtues, and—while irrelevant to non-religious Epicureans—may serve as an outlet for piety among Epicureans with Christian-influenced religious tendencies.

Affinity for the virtues of the Gods makes us susceptible and receptive to them. **Ancient Epicureans believed that the pious can tune into their virtuous frequencies through worship, which is an interesting feature of Epicurean religion: piety is here understood as wholesome, therapeutic brainwaves. In other words, something that one can tune into.** Many Hindus and Sikhs have similar beliefs about Divinity manifested as sound vibration. There is also mention of alienation of the Gods from those who have no affinity with the virtues. This understanding resonates with the original semantical root for the word *religion*, the Latin *re-ligare*, meaning *to re-connect*. Perhaps **if we used the verb *re-connecting* instead of the noun *religion*, we would be able to once again grasp and speak accurately about the art of piety and its true nature and purpose.**

Whether we are really attuning to something physical and natural (as the realists believe) or whether this divine attunement is merely a mental construct (as we idealists believe), the important thing to understand about piety is that it is meant to beautify the character, to produce healing, virtue, happiness, wellbeing and tranquility. Piety serves therapeutic purposes.

Against the Poets and Theologians

... poets and theologians are praised by our attackers.

The reference to the poets as the creators of distortions in people's values must be traced back to Epicurus' early years studying the Greek Pagan creation myths (compiled by the poet Hesiod) under a Platonist instructor who was unable to explain the notion of Chaos. From this, he concluded, even as a child, that humanity needed a naturalist, scientific cosmology ... and poets may be fine writers, but unless they're scientists or philosophers, they're not qualified to write with authority about cosmology or ethics.

Also, we know of Zeus' bisexual escapades, of Hera's jealousy, of Aphrodite's infidelity with Ares, of Poseidon's rage, and many other signs of divine perturbation that were imagined by the poets, epileptics, and mystics.

What are we to make of the poets that compiled the Quran, the Bible, the Book of Mormon and other, equally perturbed scriptures, which also distort historical and scientific facts? In them not only is creation imagined in an entirely unnatural manner which is known to be manifestly fraudulent, but God is attributed with laws that say that women can be sold like cattle, married off against their will at a young age, and stoned for adultery if they don't like it. He orders genocide, institutes slavery and declares black skin to be a curse. He even accepts human sacrifice like Molok, and orders that gays be stoned to death. The God of these books is as impossible to reconcile with wholesome philosophy as the folk beliefs about the Gods of Greece were. Philodemus declares:

The false views of poets don't lead to virtuous or happy lives ...

Impious is not so much the man who denies the Gods of the many as the man who attributes the beliefs of the many to them.

To a theist philosopher like Epicurus, these false views about the Gods do not originate in natural *prolepsis* or anticipations, but are the product of cultural corruption. It's up to non-theist Epicureans to investigate whether we humans carry anticipations that deserve our pious attention. I personally believe that some forms of piety, such as our instinctive and natural filial piety towards our parents and other family elders, are entirely natural and based on the Canon and on anticipations.

On the Purpose of Religion, and On Whether it's Natural and Necessary

The idealist Epicurean theology produces the urgency to raise questions about the true **purpose of religion**. Is it even necessary or useful? It also raises questions as to whether religion can be judged by the same criteria as desires, anger, and knowledge, and therefore understood as natural and necessary, natural but unnecessary, or unnatural and unnecessary.

Is religion natural and necessary? The first Epicureans, in unison, seemed to think it's both, but modern Epicureans may hold different views. Specifically as to whether religion is natural, the papyrus says:

To pray is natural.
- Epicurus, in *On Lifecourses*

Again, because Gods are not concerned with mortals, prayer is of a non-petitionary nature. It's **an act of self-expression** meant to affirm and nurture the virtues and abiding (katastemic) pleasure. Gratitude is one of its main uses.

As to whether religion is necessary, that is less clear. Epicurus believes it is, but Philodemus (judging from his admission that the existence of the Gods has not been proven conclusively) appears to leave room for the legitimacy of doubt, even if by giving a voice to his predecessors he seems to be in more or less complete concordance with their views.

If religion is to be viewed as natural and necessary, then we can understand why Epicurus included pious displays in the decorations for the 20th and why the oath included religious references. Now, notice how much the Epicurean oath is non-different from piety:

Piety and justice appear to be almost the same thing ... because to break one's oath is to be unjust and also to lie, and both are disturbing.

The Epicurean oath originally produced religious duties among the disciples, and it is within this context that pious activities and duties were performed as remedies used to remove vice and increase virtue. Since all duties (religious or not, if we are consistent with the doctrine of natural justice) can only emerge as a result of agreements, then the only way in which the celebrations of the 20th and the other duties that are mentioned in the sources can be said to have existed is as a result of oath-taking.

The oath called into existence the hedonic covenant of the Epicureans: an oath not to harm or be harmed, which today thinkers like French philosopher Michel Onfroy have expanded to include an agreement to maximize the pleasure and minimize the pain of all covenant-members. We can therefore understand how the Gardens were mutual aid societies, the fraternities that early Christians admired so much and imitated.

If religion is to be viewed as both unnatural and unnecessary by some Epicureans, and therefore, empty and vain, then a new branch of Epicurean atheology emerges and piety as a virtue may lose value for many. However, even within the idealist view, there seems to be a case for piety as a remedy, as a way to cultivate the virtues that deserves exploration and experimentation (particularly in view of the available research on the benefits of chanting, prayer and other pious activities).

Can these pious activities be incorporated into a non-theistic form of religiosity? Certainly: Buddhism is a cogent and culturally rich, vibrant non-theistic religious tradition. We've previously shared on Society of Epicurus the beautiful [sutra of loving-kindness](#). The Gods are not the only object of pious devotion: the virtues themselves, sacred teachings or books, one's homeland, our departed loved ones, the most noble and virtuous among our friends, Gurus or teachers, and one's parents can be the recipients of pious gratitude and love.

In the early Epicurean communities, there are fragments that suggest that the etiquette among Friends was to treat each other with pious devotion. This is a peculiar instance of recognition of divine immanence generously extended to all of virtuous humanity. It's reminiscent of the Vaishnava Hindu tradition that all devotees are worthy of reverence and even resonates a bit with the Christian tradition about Christ washing the feet of his disciples. The following are some examples of this:

In your feeling of reverence for what I was then saying you were seized with an unaccountable desire to embrace me and clasp my knees and show me all the signs of homage paid by men in prayers and supplications to others; so you made me return all these proofs of veneration and respect to you. Go on thy way as immortal and think of us too as immortal. – Epicurus to Colotes

Lord and Savior, my dearest Leontion, what a hurrahing you drew from us, when we read aloud your dear letter.

– Epicurus to Leontion

I shall sit down and await your lovely and godlike appearance.

– Epicurus to Pythocles

In this manner, piety is used didactically to teach human values and how to properly treat each other. The image that emerges is one where communities of Friends create cultural spaces where they express their affection for each other in a celebratory manner (“*what a hurrahing you drew from us!*”). Piety towards our dearest Epicurean Friends is also consistent with the tradition that Epicureans are to live as Gods among the mortals.

God as a Verb, Not a Noun

We started our reasonings discussing how atomists legitimized the existence of physical Gods, but if the question they were trying to answer was flawed, the answer will be flawed too. What if we are idealists? What if the Gods do not inherently exist, except as (natural? necessary? useful?) cultural constructs?

The apotheosis of his Friends by Epicurus also raises questions about how Gods or objects of piety are created. We can worship stones, as well as real or imaginary (non-physical) beings. In all cases, anything worshipped is a God to someone. Epicurean realist theology was the result of atomist doctrine, but perhaps a theology of this sort was unnecessary and only one of many ways to go about studying the phenomenon of Gods which some people (philosopher Daniel Dennet among them) believe should be studied as a natural phenomenon, and Howard Bloom has suggested that the Gods are memes or cultural artifacts within our superorganisms involved in the collective psychological evolution of different portions the human race.

Perhaps what should be of concern to us is the process of deification and whether it is intelligent or healthy to deify anything or anyone at all. If deification is chosen, then how is this choice most prudently made? It is clearly more intelligent and more pleasure-inducing to worship ideals of prudence, cheerfulness and love than to worship ideals of warfare, hostility and anger. We've seen examples of both in our world.

In all cases, whether we adopt realist or naturalist views, whether we think religion is necessary and natural or whether we don't, all Epicureans agree that the Gods don't need a cult, and that they don't enjoy it. They'll remain imperturbable with or without our attention. The true function and purpose of piety and religion is for the benefit of mortals: to increase our pleasure and minimize our suffering.

Even if it's natural for wise men to worship, true piety only benefits the pious, and then trickles down through them. It is therefore understood as **an act of self-expression**, of pressing out of the Self the contents of one's character, an expression of a man's virtue or vice ... and of a philosopher's art of living.

Socrates and the Live Unknown Maxim

The papyrus makes mention of the fact that, unlike Socrates, Epicurus never had one single quarrel against the Athenians and never presented a single lawsuit against them (or they against him) during his entire life. Comedians, who often mocked the virtuous in their plays and works, never made fun of Epicurus, while Socrates was frequently characterized as a trouble-maker among the Athenians even in spite of his great wisdom, and other philosophers were kicked out of the city and created troubles and perturbances.

As a result, because Socrates did not have the prudence to “Live Unknown” but was always walking about and questioning people’s beliefs, he was in the end killed in spite of being an innocent and virtuous man, and was even accused of impiety and atheism in spite of being a truly pious man by Epicurean standards. By living among the crowd, he incited anger, put his life in danger, and was in the end killed.

And so, the events surrounding Socrates’ life and death are used didactically (and implicitly, not directly) in the papyrus to exemplify and demonstrate why living unknown enhances the safety of the philosopher, particularly if his views are not understood by the many.

Against the Atheists

It’s ironic that so many atheists today consider Epicurus as one among their number. Epicurus mentions the need to despise atheists, reproaches them as mad, Bacchic revellers and admonishes them “not to trouble or disturb us”, mentioning Critias, Diagoras and Prodicus by name.

The piety of Epicurus and his followers is mentioned frequently in the Philodeman scroll. It describes how celebrations of the 20th were, originally, in part religious and Epicurus’ “house was decorated piously” for the occasion. The oaths and invocations were, also, religious in nature and in his Epistle to Diotimus, Epicurus is said to have warned against “violating the covenant of the sacred festival table”.

We must grant, however, that the laws in the Greek city stipulated that any organization of the sort that Epicurus was trying to establish needed to have a religious character and worship the Gods of the city. Hence the insistence of abiding by law and custom.

Therefore, even if they are now in the majority, Epicurean atheist thinkers are part of the contemporary branch of the tradition and could not have emerged at the roots of our history. Epicurus would not have had it.

Having said that, modern Epicurean atheology is happy to concede that the allegations by opponents of our founders that Gods can’t have imperishable, atomic bodies are legitimate arguments against the realist interpretation of the Gods. If Gods can not be physical, then they must be non-existent and the idealist interpretation—which is, perhaps, atheistic or at least debases the worship of Gods to a mere artform, a technique for the cultivation of virtue—is the only way to reconcile materialism with pious philosophy.

Conclusion

We have seen that, for people who are religious and who embrace Epicureanism, our discourse on piety has the potential to save and to fully civilize religion, enhancing it, raising it to new heights and making it noble. Not only can Epicureanism be credited with fighting both the ignorant and innocent as well as the vile and heinous forms of superstition: it also seeks to preserve the best in religion, the blissful, the ecstatic, the joyous, every source of pleasure within it that does not defile the mortal soul.

Epicureans are not the enemies of religion, as some contend. In fact, most of us do not expect religion to ever disappear. But we do have *noble expectations* concerning any claim of true piety. This Philodemian scroll is more than an olive branch from secularists to religious people: it creates in effect an ecumenical tone in the way our teachings are imparted.

There are several key teachings that emerge from studying Philodemus' On Piety. The main ones can be summed thusly:

1. God(s) can be understood from realist or idealist interpretations.
2. Humans imitate the qualities they see in divinity. Therefore, the wise have noble expectations concerning the Gods.
3. Worship is an act of self-expression and only benefits the worshiper. It does not necessarily affect the object of worship.
4. There is good, pure and wholesome religion as well as defiled and unwholesome religion.
5. Worship affects reality because it affects character.
6. Epicurean doctrines are considered the true cause of our tranquility.
7. Piety is a sort of art of divine attunement with the philosophical virtues that produces wholesome, blessed, blissful, therapeutic states of mind.

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The above reasonings were inspired by Philodemus On Piety: Critical Text with Commentary, by Philodemus, edited by Dirk Obbink.