Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 5: Epicurus: True Belief about the Gods

In the collection of Epicurus’ *Principle Doctrines* (KD) brought by Diogenes Laertius, we read that the first principle of a good life is to possess true belief about the gods. Because there were inconsistencies with Epicurus’ atomic theory—it was thought that no composite body could be immortal—it was concluded that Epicurus was really an atheist. However, it seems he believed in the gods as perfect, blessed, and immortal beings, who can be a model for humans. There are two interpretations of this statement: one the realist, asserts that for Epicurus, the gods live in an immortal realm, unaffected by human life. The other view is that they are thought projections, idealized human conceptions, somewhat like the projections described by the nineteenth century Christian theologian Ludwig Feuerbach and popularized in the twentieth century by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.i

According to either interpretation, Epicurus means to discount incorrect beliefs about the gods. For one, incorrect beliefs about the gods are the source of the greatest degree of mental anguish and frustration because people are afraid of being punished and losing divine providence. But Epicurus rejects the notion of divine providence; one of his arguments is that the suffering of the world attests to the fact that it is decidedly not under the control of a loving guiding deity.ii The gods thus do not concern themselves with human affairs; to do so would detract from their blessedness. The impious person is not one who denies but rather one who accepts the conventional view of the gods. This traditional view is not empirical; it is not based on sensation (*aisthēsis*), the ultimate source of our knowledge, but on false beliefs. The correct view of the gods in contrast is empirical, since it is derived from the vision or effluence that comes to us in a purely naturalistic way from the divine immortals.

Second, the gods offer us a model of blessed happiness, a model of ethical and spiritual ideals. According to the realist view, we see what it is to have supreme beatitude and blessedness through the vision or effluence that is given off by the gods.iii For those who believe that Epicurus was actually an
atheist, the gods provide a real model, but only as a thought-construct, or a human projection of the idealized blessed life. Either way, correct beliefs about the gods gives us a model to strive for—that of the blessed, happy life, a life of pure tranquility.

One might think that this would mean that we strive for divine immortality. Somewhat surprisingly, Epicurus argues the opposite. Death, he asserts, is nothing to us. Epicurus is an empiricist. All good and evil is based on sensation, and in death there is no sensation, so there is nothing to fear. If we fully believe that we are mortal and that there is no sensation in death, then we lose the craving for immortality. “There is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. . . death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.” This can make life more enjoyable, not because it adds to life an infinite span of time—as does the imagination of immortality—but because it takes away the craving for immortality.

We might wonder at this assertion of Epicurus. Many of us are terrified by precisely this aspect of death: the prospect of not being present and conscious. What could be more frightening than being obliterated, losing our very consciousness and identity? Epicurus reasons, however, that since we will not be present, there is nothing to fear. We often project fears onto a future that can turn out to be wholly different than what we anticipate. Socrates in the Apology appears to be agnostic about life after death. A more plausible argument might be that since none of us know what will be after death, it is pointless to fear or anticipate it. Better to live life to its fullest and enjoy what can be enjoyed here and now. The next moment will take care of itself; thus there is neither need to shun death nor to crave it. Likewise, there is no need to crave more of life. Better to enjoy the most pleasant life, and not seek immortality in having more, just as we don’t need to crave the larger share of food, but can enjoy the most pleasant.

While Epicurus’ argument is quite rational, we might wonder whether it accords with human nature. Humans want not only the present pleasure, but more pleasure, and if we are enjoying life, we
seem to want more of it—in fact, everlasting life. Epicurus thus offers a kind of cognitive therapy, meant to discipline our innate desires through rational argument. He reminds us that more is not necessarily better. Recent scholars have taken him to task for this argument. Gisela Striker has argued that a life is like an opera—we expect it to take a certain shape, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. We thus feel that a life cut short has been denied some of its prospects. The reason some elders do not fear death is that they feel they have enjoyed a full and rich life. But is there not a sense of tragedy in the unrealized potential of a person who dies young? And if we are enjoying our lives now, might we not rationally wish for more? The answer lies in Epicurus’ notion of stable, constitutional (katastematic) pleasure, to which we will turn shortly.

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iii According to a second reading of the Greek, the gods are projections from our vision, thought forms that we create. See O’Keefe, *Epicureanism*, 158-62.

