

Translation of Philo, *On the Decalogue* §§66-81

§66 Now while all who are ministers and servants of sun and moon and of the entire heaven and the cosmos and of their principal parts, as if they were gods, are in error – for how could they not be? – since they show more reverence for the subjects than for the ruler, they still do less wrong than the others, who have given shape to wood and stones, silver and gold and similar materials, each of them doing just as they please, and then have filled the inhabited world full of images and wooden figures and the other hand-wrought things, whose makers, sculpture and painting, have caused great harm in human life.

§67 For they have gouged out the best prop of the soul, the proper estimation of the ever-living God, and, like skiffs without ballast, they roll around, forever tossed all over the place, never able to put into port nor to anchor safely in the truth, blind to what is worth seeing, the only thing for which we must be sharp-sighted.

§68 They seem to me to live more unhappily than those who have lost the eyes of the body; for those people have been damaged through no wish of their own, whether by suffering some serious disease of the eyes or by being treacherously attacked by enemies, but these, by their own free choice, have not merely dulled the eye of the soul but they have determined to get rid of it completely.

§69 And therefore pity is due to the former as having met with misfortune, while punishment justly waits on the latter as wicked people, who among other things have not even reflected on the most obvious of them all, which even a simple child knows:

that the craftsperson is superior to what has been crafted, both in time, being older and in a certain way a parent of what has been fabricated, and in power, since what acts has precedence over what is acted upon.

§70 And what they should have done, if they were really doing wrong, was to make gods of the painters and the sculptors themselves, with extravagant honours, but they leave them in obscurity, granting them no superiority, while they acknowledge as gods the figures and pictures which have been fabricated by them.

§71 The artists have often grown old, destitute and dishonored, dying at the end of a series of misfortunes, while the products of their art are honored with purple and gold and the other costly things which wealth provides, and they are served not merely by freemen but by those who are of noble birth and bodily perfection. For the priestly class is examined with absolute precision, as to whether it is perfect, and the framework of the parts of their bodies, as to whether it is entirely complete.

§72 And we have not yet reached the real horror, although this is horrible, but here is the absolute worst: I know some of those who have made things, who pray and sacrifice to their own creations; they would have done much better to worship each of their own hands, but should they not wish to have a reputation for self-love and choose to avoid it, then at least they could worship hammers and anvils, styluses and pincers, and the other tools by which the materials were shaped.

§73 Indeed it is right to say openly to those who are so far gone in madness: it is actually the best of prayers, good people, and the goal of blessedness to become like God.

§74 Therefore you too must pray to become like the images, so that you may enjoy the height of blessedness: not seeing with your eyes; not hearing with your ears; neither breathing nor smelling with your nostrils, and not speaking or tasting with your mouth; neither taking nor giving nor doing anything with your hands; not walking with your feet, and with no activity in any other of your parts; but, like a prisoner in your temple, watched and guarded, forever soaking up the smoke of the sacrifices. For that is the only good that you invent for your images.

§75 I reckon, however, that on hearing these words they would treat them with hostility, as if listening to curses, not prayers, and that they would take steps towards vengeance for the outrage, making counter accusations in turn. This would be the strongest proof of the widespread impiety of human beings who believe in gods of such natures that they would pray never to become like them.

§76 Therefore let no one who has a soul worship anything that has no soul. For it is grossly improper that the works of nature should direct themselves towards the service of hand-wrought things. But Egyptians are rightly charged not only with the accusation common to all lands, but also with another that is all their own. For in addition to wooden images and statues, they have introduced irrational animals to divine honors – bulls, rams, and goats – making up some marvelous mythical fiction for every single one of them.

§77 And [the worship of] these perhaps has some reason, since they are completely tame and very useful for life. The ox is a plougher and cuts open furrows at seed-time; it is also very powerful for threshing, when the seed must be winnowed. The ram provides the best of coverings, our clothes; for if they were naked, our bodies would soon be destroyed, either by extreme heat or by cold, in the one case by the scorching of the sun, in the other by the excessive coldness of the air.

§78 But now, going to a further extreme, they honor the fiercest and most savage of untamed animals, lions and crocodiles and among reptiles the venomous asp, with temples, sacred lands, sacrifices, assemblies, processions, and similar things. For having tracked down the most savage animals from either of the elements given by God for the use of human beings – earth and water – they found among land animals none more savage than the lion and of those in the water none fiercer than the crocodile; these too they worship and honor.

§79 And they have made gods of many other animals too: dogs, cats, wolves; among the birds, ibis and falcons; and fish too, either the whole or just a part of their bodies. What could be more laughable than this?

§80 What is more, foreigners on first coming to Egypt, before the delusion of this land has made its home in their minds, die of laughing at it. But those who have had a taste of good education, astounded by the veneration of things unworthy of veneration, pity those who do it and, with good reason, take them to be more unhappy than the things they honor, with souls transformed into the very same animals, so that so that they seem to prowl around like beasts in human form.

§81 Therefore he abolished from the sacred legislation all such making of gods and called for the honoring of the God who truly exists, not because he needs honor for himself – for he who was completely self-sufficient was in need of nothing else – but because he wishes to lead the human race, wandering through places with no roads, towards a road from which none can wander, so that by following nature they might find the best of goals, knowledge of the being who truly is, who is the first and most perfect good, from whom, as from a fountain, each of the individual goods is showered upon the cosmos and upon those within it.