

# New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

Post by “Godfrey” of April 12, 2022 at 1:51 PM

From Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods:

*XVIII. With regard to his form, we are directed partly by nature and partly by reason. All men are told by nature that none but a human form can be ascribed to the Gods; for under what other image did it ever appear to any one either sleeping or waking? and, without having recourse to our first notions, reason itself declares the same; for as it is easy to conceive that the most excellent nature, either because of its happiness or immortality, should be the most beautiful, what composition of limbs, what conformation of lineaments, what form, what aspect, can be more beautiful than the human? Your sect, Lucilius (not like my friend Cotta, who sometimes says one thing and sometimes another), when they represent the divine art and workmanship in the human body, are used to describe how very completely each member is formed, not only for convenience, but also for beauty. Therefore, if the human form excels that of all other animal beings, as God himself is an animated being, he must surely be of that form which is the most beautiful. Besides, the Gods are granted to be perfectly happy; and nobody can be happy without virtue, nor can virtue exist where reason is not; and reason can reside in none but the human form; the Gods, therefore, must be acknowledged to be of human form; yet that form is not body, but something like body; nor does it contain any blood, but something like blood. Though these distinctions were more acutely devised and more artfully expressed by Epicurus than any common capacity can comprehend; yet, depending on your understanding, I shall be more brief on the subject than otherwise I should be. Epicurus, who not only discovered and understood the occult and almost hidden secrets of nature, but explained them with ease, teaches that the power and nature of the Gods is not to be discerned by the senses, but by the mind; nor are they to be considered as bodies of any solidity, or reducible to number, like those things which, because of their firmness, he calls Στερέμνια; but as images, perceived by similitude and transition. As infinite kinds of those images result from innumerable individuals, and centre in the Gods, our minds and understanding are directed towards and fixed with the greatest delight on them, in order to comprehend what that happy and eternal essence is.*

I don't find anything in there about speaking Greek. Googling, I came across a reference to this Philodemus referring to the gods in this way, but I can't find a specific cite. Without the quotation in Philodemus, there's always the possibility that Cicero was up to his lawyerly trickery in this passage. The reasoning doesn't seem to be very Epicurean to my reading.