

# **Epicureanism as the spiritual essence or 'religion' of an entire community**

**Post by “Peter Konstans” of September 30, 2023 at 8:30 AM**

I do believe that Epicurus was serious about the existence of perfect gods. I suspect that he embraced this form of philosophical polytheism in order to separate his own position from that of other hedonists who embraced anti-social attitudes and transgressionism (there is a definitely a link between Theodorus the Atheist for example and the philosophical positions of Marquis de Sade) or other schools like the Sophists. The Sophists who were the main villains in the Platonic corpus taught that the Gods were exclusively human creations. Epicurus' strategy was to disarm the gods completely but preserve their existence as blissful cosmic deities in order to show that a pleasurable life is possible all while respecting and preserving the social norms which were firmly associated with popular religion. Epicurus was definitely not very sympathetic to youthful counter-culture-style hedonism (recall that letter where he in a non-judgemental manner advises a youth to check his urges) and believed that social norms (like chastity in this case) do provide some useful and beneficial services to society. But he also observed that they easily acquired an oppressive and harmful character so he wanted to disarm the gods since they were habitually used to justify oppression and exploitation. Magicians and oracles for example fleeced poor uneducated people out of their money while sexual slavery was dressed up as sacred slavery and brothels as temples to Venus. In Greek 'sacred slavery' (hierodouleia) still means prostitution. In later centuries some Epicureans disagreed with Epicurus' position on the gods and simply saw them as immaterial fictions. This is in the modern context a far more defensible position. In any case Epicurus can be called a functional atheist since the gods were denied any agency in human affairs. In antiquity people sacrificed in the expectation that they receive a reward. If you affirmed that this practice is useless you were essentially an atheist as far as people in antiquity were concerned.