

# Pros and Cons Of Considering Epicurean Philosophy To Be A "Religion"

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2024 at 9:51 AM

## [Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

However we can't assume that the gods are engaged in a struggle to 'feed' and preserve their bodies similar to that of biological beings. This would imply that they are not blessed but live in a state of at least partial insecurity. The idea that instead of dealing with issues of survival the gods engage in care-free creative activity (like creating works of art) and then in contemplation as a means of 'resting' from creative activity fits the image of blessedness better.

Here is the very interesting section in DeWitt that explains the "gods must preserve their deathlessness" issue, which begins on page 267:

## Quote

At the outset it must be observed and kept diligently in mind that nowhere in his extant writings does Epicurus call the gods immortal. This might be thought an accident of the tradition were it not for the fact that other considerations rule out this possibility. If Lucretius does call them immortal repeatedly, this may be set down as an indication that he never really mastered the Epicurean lore of the gods and did not live to make an intensive study of it in preparation for writing about it.

The reasoning behind this doctrine of incorruptibility is readily discerned. From the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void it follows that the bodies of the gods must be corporeal. Gods are *zoa*, "animate beings." They are thus units in the ascending order of Nature, as is man. Being in this order and corporeal, they cannot be deathless. If deathlessness were inherent in their nature, they would be in another class by themselves. Since they do belong in the same class as man, it is a logical necessity to think of their incorruptibility as by some means preserved. Since in the cosmos of Epicurus, unlike that of Plato, this incorruptibility lacked a superior being to guarantee its continuance, the sole possibility was that the gods preserved it for themselves by their own vigilance. Thus it must be discerned that just as the happiness of man is self-achieved, so the happiness of the gods is self-preserved.

However astonishing this doctrine may seem, it is well authenticated. Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile, wrote with texts of Epicurus before him, has this to say:

"Freedom from pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blissful being, standing in no need of active concern."<sup>57</sup> This manifestly implies that the [Epicurean gods](#) were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its perpetuation.

The incongruity between this selfish concern for their own bodily security and their indifference to the good of mankind was certain to elicit condemnation from believers in divine providence, and this has not escaped record. Thus the Christian Eusebius quotes his Atticus as saying: "According to Epicurus it's good-bye to providence, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods bring to bear all diligent care for the preservation of their own peculiar blessings."<sup>58</sup>

When once it has been discerned that the gods are under the necessity of preserving their own blessings, the next step is to learn that this activity is ascribed to them as a virtue. The recognition of this fact will serve to explain a rather cryptic statement from the pen of Epicurus himself. Writing of the "false suppositions" of the multitude, who thought of the gods, now as punishing the wicked, now as having venal relationships with them, he concluded as follows: "for [the gods], being exclusively devoted to their own peculiar virtues, are partial to those like themselves, deeming all that is not such as alien."<sup>59</sup> The first half of this statement has been variously interpreted, but the recognition of our puzzling doctrine will make the meaning intelligible. Just as it is the virtue of men to achieve their own happiness, so it is the virtue of the gods to preserve their own blissfulness. This task so completely engages their attention that no participation in human affairs is possible.

This notion was so well known as to have been familiar to the dull Horatian commentator Porphyry, who lived early in the third century A.d. Horace had quoted freely from Lucretius: "I have learned the lesson that the gods live a life free from concern."<sup>60</sup> The comment runs: "This derives from the doctrine of the Epicureans, who assert that the gods cannot be immortal unless enjoying leisure and immune from all responsibility."

This doctrine has two facets. The gods are characterized by two attributes, blissfulness and incorruptibility. Neither is inherent in their nature. They are incorruptible only because the contingency of destruction is avertible by their vigilance. If this seems subtle, the notion that keeps company with it is more so and also paradoxical. Let it be allowed that incorruptibility is tantamount to eternal life. Then, according to Epicurus, this eternal life is not to be thought a cause of happiness but rather the perpetuity of happiness is a cause of eternal life. The gods win eternal life by maintaining their own pleasures perpetually. This conceit appealed to Menander, who exploited it in his *Eunuchus*. It survives through transfer to the *Andria* of Terence, where the happy lover is made to exclaim: "I think the life of the gods to be everlasting for the reason that their pleasures are perpetual, because immortality is assured to me if no grief shall

intervene to mar this joy." <sup>81</sup> This is labeled as "Epicurean dogma" by the Donatus commentary.

This curious conceit consists in a curious semantic shift. Since the life of the gods becomes immortal only through perpetuity of happiness, it follows that the word *immortal* comes to denote a quality of life, something superb or exquisite. This is the only sense in which it is employed in the extant remains of Epicurus. For example, the good Epicurean "lives among immortal blessings" and friendship is styled an "immortal good." <sup>62</sup>

The notion that this activity should be ascribed to the gods as a virtue seemed as weird to Plutarch as it does today: "This is not what we mean when we speak of virtue as strong and vice as weak; we do not apply the words to the perpetuation and dissolution of body; wherefore [the Epicureans] are at fault when they represent eternal life as accruing to the divine being through guarding against and dispelling the forces that would destroy." <sup>63</sup> Manifestly the gods are not assured of their safety merely by dwelling in the spaces between the worlds. They must also be forever on the watch. This is the view satirically presented by Seneca: "[The divine being] in the space between this heaven and another . . . dodges the debris of the worlds crashing to ruin above it and around it." <sup>64</sup>

Very differently are described the divine abodes in the opening lines of the third book of Lucretius; all is at rest, no wind, no rain, no frost, no snow, and no clouds, but always serenity of sky; Nature unmasked supplies all needs and nothing occurs at any time to mar the perfection of peace. <sup>65</sup>

This contrast between Lucretius and Seneca marks a chimerical union in the thought of Epicurus between a relentless logic and a sort of romanticism. The logic can be made clear by a chain argument. It has its source in a tenacious materialism, which demands that the bodies of the gods be corporeal; by the same logic the corporeal cannot be immune from the hazard of destruction; the gods are consequently not deathless, only incorruptible; this incorruptibility, not being inherent, demands some sort of conservation, which can only be ascribed to the foresight and effort of the gods themselves. This, then, is their virtue, to preserve their own happiness and incorruptibility.

The weakness of logic, of course, is its lack of dynamic. Men do not feel called to devote their lives to the propagation of syllogisms. The merit of romanticism, on the contrary, is the dynamic that goes with it. It is powered by emotion. Lucretius often handles the logic of Epicurus with clarity and skill, but the force of propulsion behind the logic is emotion, pity for the superstitious misery of man and eagerness to emancipate him. In respect of this enthusiasm Lucretius seems to surpass his master, and yet Epicurus is on record as saying: "[The wise man] will be more susceptible of

emotion than other men and this will be no obstacle to his wisdom." <sup>6a</sup> Here we have the recognition of the chimerical blend of logic and romanticism. It is the latter, the emotion, the eagerness to emancipate men from fear and to show them the road to happiness, that leads Epicurus to extol the blissfulness of the gods as a perfection to contemplate and imitate. It is the logic of materialism that compels him to deny it to them as a birthright, so to say, and to impose upon them the necessity of preserving it.

Strange as this contingent immortality may seem, a similar notion was entertained by Plato. According to him the eternity of the cosmos depends upon the will of the supreme demiurge; since he was the creator, he could also destroy. It is impossible, however, to think of him choosing to do so.<sup>87</sup> Thus the cosmos is eternal because it is subject to a contingency that will never occur. Even the immortality of the Christian falls in the same class: being the gift of God it could also be withdrawn by the same power, but perfect faith exists that this contingency will never occur.

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#### [Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

Maybe the gods even have a blessed 'end' where they reach a stage of existence so high that they merge with God.

I can't imagine the phrase "merge with God" to be something Epicurus would find consistent.

#### [Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

The notion that reality has a divine foundation means theism. It means that divine beings in some form exist, that the universe is in some form a divine expression and that the whole of reality emanates in some way from ontologically superior planes.

No I don't see that as compatible with Epicurus at all. There is no implication whatsoever that the universe arises from the divinities, and in fact quite the opposite - any "divinities" that exist are purely natural.

#### [Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

Religions are false and harmful not because they accept the reality of a divine sphere (regardless of how they define this sphere) but because of their completely false notions about the divine.

Now that sentence I agree with as being exactly what Epicurus is saying.