

# Episode 240 - Cicero's OTNOTG 15 - The False Allegation That "General Assent" Was The Epicurean Basis For Divinity

Post by "Don" of August 6, 2024 at 9:28 PM

For what it's worth, here is a relevant section from my Menoikeus commentary and translation:

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον "a god (is a) ζῶον. But what is a ζῶον?

ζῶον (zōon) is where English zoology comes from.

LSJ gives two primary definitions:

- living being, animal
- in art, figure, image, not necessarily of animals (or a *sign* of the Zodiac)

So, unfortunately, at this point in the Letter we can't necessarily resolve the question of what the nature of the gods (or of a god) is according to Epicurus. Some scholars think Epicurus believed the gods were material beings ("living being, animal") somehow living between the various world-systems (cosmos) in the universe. Some think Epicurus believed the gods were mental representations or personifications of the concepts ("figure, image, sign") of blessedness.

...

**θεοὶ εἰσιν.** "Gods exist." "There are gods."

The implications of those two words have had entire essays written about them. We looked at this a little in 123b with ζῶον. But Epicurus is not equivocating here: **Gods exist.** What he *means* by this we simply have to discover from his extant works and fragments. Again, if we take Sedley's position, each person has their own personal concept of a god. Many people, many individual gods. Those gods exist.

**123f. ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ γνῶσις.**

- Here's our δέ "on the other hand."
- ἐναργῆς [δέ] ἐστὶν αὐτῶν ἡ γνῶσις

"And the knowledge (ἡ γνῶσις (gnōsis)) of them (θεοί "gods", note the plural here) is ἐναργῆς." But what does ἐναργῆς mean?

LSJ provides two primary definitions:

- visible, palpable, in bodily shape, properly of gods appearing in their own forms (in Homer); so of a dream or vision; ex., ἐναργῆς ταῦρος "in visible form a bull, a very bull"
- manifest to the mind's eye, distinct

Epicurus can't mean the first meaning since he's adamant that the gods don't interact with humans. But the second definition coincides with his contention (and the idea of the prolepsis of the gods) that the gods are apprehended by the mind only. In first Principal Doctrine's scholia (i.e., a note added to the text by a later author), we read τοὺς θεοὺς λόγῳ θεωρητοῦς "the gods are conceived of through contemplation by reasoning." We don't - can't! - see the [Epicurean gods](#) with our physical eyes as Homer describes seeing the Olympian gods "in visible form." Homer's gods were ἐναργῆς in one sense of the word; Epicurus's in the other sense. The truth of the gods' existence in Epicurus's philosophy takes place entirely in our minds by reasoning through their existence by means of contemplation. But through that contemplation, Epicurus asserts that their existence is ἐναργῆς "clearly discernible to us / manifest to us in our minds."

This emphasis on contemplation is interesting in light of the characteristic of the Epicurean sage in Diogenes Laertius Book X.30: μᾶλλον τε εὐφρανθήσεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις. I continue to maintain that "in contemplation" is the best translation of ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις for this characteristic of the sage: "The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation, speculation, and theorizing." Many translators see this as referring to state festivals and spectacles. I've explored the use of the word elsewhere in Diogenes Laertius' work as well as in Aristotle online. <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...tion?authuser=0> If the gods are "manifest" in contemplation, this seems consistent with that characteristic of an Epicurean sage.

Unfortunately, this does nothing to resolve our problem with puzzling out *how* a god is a ζῶον. Are they physically-existent material beings? Are they existing only as mental perceptions manifest merely to the mind's eye? The ambiguous nature of ἐναργῆς doesn't necessarily help us fully. It does, however, set up some of Epicurus's clever wordplay contrasting his view with Homer's.