

Reasoning through the Letter to Menoeceus' On the Gods

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One problem I also seen with the notion that the gods exist, by themselves, independent of the human mind, is that they are "eternal", whereas humans had a release date. If the human-shaped gods are "eternal" as things that exist independent of the human mind, and independent of the planet Earth, then that would imply that the *human form*, itself, somehow existed in the metakosmos *prior* to the evolution of the human animal on Earth, and that contradicts his rejection of *Platonic Forms*. Human forms cannot exist before witnessing human animals.

Epíkouros (in Book 12 of *On Nature*, so Philódēmos writes) provides a historical description of early humans beings, and the ways in which they "arrived" at conceptions of the gods. So the notion of the forms of the gods as humans see them, according to Epíkouros, has a genesis in history. That seems to reinforce the notion that human gods are not more ancient than human beings.

He further describes that the ways in which we arrive at the gods has slightly changed.

As I see it, after modern humans appeared on the scene, it didn't take us too long to develop art and invent story-telling ... set on *low heat* for a few dozen millennia... and *voilà!* You get paleolithic, limestone statues like the Venus of Willendorf, and other "Mother Goddess" depictions. After that point, I consider that (with increasing frequency) new, human children were being born into cultures that were littered with visual depictions of the forms of those beings we call "the gods". Neither you nor I invented them. Those chunky statues were waiting for us, like everything else.

That's a bit of a difference, when we're discussing how we apprehend images of the gods. Prehistoric children weren't born into cultures with god-art. We're all stuck in it.

So we're situated in this colorful place in history where no living person remembers a period of time on Earth when there were *no* visual depictions of gods. This period has lasted for millennia, and, so long as humans continue existing, we're going to continue to be "inundated" with god-images.

I couldn't even walk through the Advent hospital in Orlando without seeing paintings on the wall of a long-haired, white-robed, bearded hippie, holding the hands of surgeons in the operating room. For some reason, a larger-than-lifesize mural of Adam and Eve was waiting for me at the bottom of the escalator. Pictures of smiling, winged humans were abundant. Truly, "knowledge of the gods is evident" because you can't even get medical care without running into pictures of

them.

And this, I think, is where I see practical coherence with the word "immortal". Friendship is also described as "immortal", and it has a definite beginning. It's not immortal both ways, it's only immortal going forward, into the future. Likewise, "the gods" don't need to have existed infinitely from the past. Their forms just need to have the possibility of being reproduced after the deaths of those who contemplate them. Visual art provides us (I think) with a great analogy: the form of Aphrodite is "immortal" in this regard, because even though individual marble constructions can be broken, the form can be reproduced forever. That's why we have busts on our desks.

So, if we distance ourselves from the idea that "immortal" means "going back forever", then that puts less necessity on the idea that "human-forms *must* have existed somewhere beyond the stars, over billions and billions of years ago, living life as would future-humans-on-Earth". Their mental forms are eternally-reproducible by new people imagining them, and their new forms are made of particles in new minds (just like casting new busts with new plaster to reproduce old designs).

Sorry, that was a roundabout way to make my point about "immortal". 😊