

# From Cicero

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 28, 2020 at 10:28 AM

Cicero in De Natura Deorum – On the Nature of the Gods, Book I (45 BC)

*This version from Epicurus.net:*

*In book I, sections 8 through 20, Cicero draws upon an essay of Philodemus, “On Piety” (which has survived in fragmentary form) to present the Epicurean theory of the gods, summarizing and rearranging it in the form of a monologue. He puts it in the mouth of a certain Velleius (an associate of L. Licinius Crassus), who delivers a spirited attack on non-Epicurean philosophers and explains the Epicurean theology, including its denial of divine providence over human affairs (a highly controversial stand which critics, with some justification, seized upon to accuse Epicurus of being a covert atheist):*

The complete section of the book is here:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/index.php?...re-of-the-gods/>

Excerpts

For he alone perceived, first, that the gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there but possesses untaught some ‘preconception’ of the gods? Such notions Epicurus designates by the word *prolepsis*, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing, without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed. The force and value of this argument we learn in that work of genius, Epicurus’s *Rule or Standard of Judgment*.

“You see therefore that the foundation (for such it is) of our inquiry has been well and truly laid. For the belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom, or law, but rests on the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind; their existence is therefore a necessary inference, since we possess an instinctive or rather an innate concept of them; but a belief which all men by nature share must necessarily be true; therefore it must be admitted that the gods exist. And since this truth is almost universally accepted not only among philosophers but also among the unlearned, we must admit it as also being an accepted truth that we possess a ‘preconception,’ as I called it above, or ‘prior notion,’ of the gods. (For we are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word *prolepsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before). We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that ‘that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and

accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak.'

"If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshipping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine Power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

"For the divine form we have the hints of nature supplemented by the teachings of reason. From nature all men of all races derive the notion of gods as having human shape and none other; for in what other shape do they ever appear to anyone, awake or asleep? But not to make primary concepts the sole test of all things, reason itself delivers the pronouncement. For it seems appropriate that a being who is the most exalted, whether by reason of his happiness or of his eternity, should also be the most beautiful; but what disposition of the limbs, what cast of features, what shape or outline can be more beautiful than the human form? You Stoics at least, Lucilius, (for my friend Cotta says one thing at one time and another at another) are wont to portray the skill of the divine creator by enlarging on beauty as well as the utility of design displayed in all parts of the human figure. But if the human figure surpasses the form of all other living beings, and god is a living being, god must possess the shape which is the most beautiful of all; and since it is agreed that the gods are supremely happy, and no one can be happy without virtue, and virtue cannot exist without reason, and reason is only found in the human shape, it follows that the gods possess the form of man. Yet their form is not corporeal, but only resembles bodily substance; it does not contain blood, but the semblance of blood.

"These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

"Moreover there is the supremely potent principle of infinity, which claims the closest and most careful study; we must understand that it has in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart. This property is termed by Epicurus *isonomia*, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so

many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the causes of destruction are beyond count, the causes of conservation also are bound to be infinite.

“You Stoics are also fond of asking us, Balbus, what is the mode of life of the gods and how they pass their days. The answer is, their life is the happiest conceivable, and the one most bountifully furnished with all good things. God is entirely inactive and free from all ties of occupation; he toils not neither does he labor, but he takes delight in his own wisdom and virtue, and knows with absolute certainty that he will always enjoy pleasures at once consummate and everlasting.

“This is the god whom we should call happy in the proper sense of the term; your Stoic god seems to us to be grievously overworked. If the world itself is god, what can be less restful than to revolve at incredible speed round the axis of the heavens without a single moment of respite? But repose is an essential condition of happiness. If on the other hand some god resides within the world as its governor and pilot, maintaining the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons, and all the ordered processes of creation, and keeping a watch on land and sea to guard the interests and lives of men, why, what a bondage of irksome and laborious business is his!

“We for our part deem happiness to consist in tranquillity of mind and entire exemption from all duties. For he who taught us all the rest has also taught us that the world was made by nature, without needing an artificer to construct it, and that the act of creation, which according to you cannot be performed without divine skill, is so easy, that nature will create, is creating, and has created worlds without number. You on the contrary cannot see how nature can achieve all this without the aid of some intelligence, and so, like the tragic poets, being unable to the plot of your drama to a *dénouement*, you have recourse to a god; whose intervention you assuredly would not require if you would but contemplate the measureless and boundless extent of space that stretches in every direction, into which when the mind projects and propels itself, it journeys onward far and wide without ever sighting any margin or ultimate point where it can stop. Well then, in this immensity of length and breadth and height there flits an infinite quantity of atoms innumerable, which though separated by void yet cohere together, and taking hold each of another form unions wherefrom are created those shapes and forms of things which you think cannot be created without the aid of bellows and anvils, and so have saddled us with an eternal master, whom day and night we are to fear; for who would not fear a prying busybody of a god, who foresees and thinks of and notices all things, and deems that everything is his concern?

“An outcome of this theology was first of all your doctrine of Necessity or Fate, *heimarmene* as you termed it, the theory that every event is the result of an eternal truth and an unbroken sequence of causation. But what value can be assigned to a philosophy which thinks that everything happens by fate? It is a belief for old women; and ignorant old women at that. And next follows your doctrine of *mantike*, or Divination, which would so steep us in superstition, if we consented to listen to you, that we should be the devotees of soothsayers, augurs, oracle-mongers, seers, and interpreters of dreams. But Epicurus has set us free from superstitious terrors and delivered us out of captivity, so that we have no fear of beings who, we know,

create no trouble for themselves and seek to cause none to others, while we worship with reverence the transcendent majesty of nature.