

Epicurus, gods and God

Post by “Godfrey” of October 13, 2019 at 4:36 PM

Lately I've been thinking about the [Epicurean gods](#) and would like to share some thoughts.

It's commonly acknowledged here that physics has advanced a great deal since Epicurus' time, but that Epicurean physics is still valid.

As for the gods, although it probably exists I haven't seen any discussion regarding the advance of religious thought since Epicurus. Today in the West there aren't gods, just God. Although valuable, the discussion of [Epicurean gods](#) is purely abstract to us living today as Epicurus was responding to the culture he lived in. Today God has replaced the gods, and it seems that is the idea that we must address if we want to truly live EP.

So, firstly, EP completely neuters the current idea of an all powerful God who created the universe and such. Therefore it seems that atheism is the only choice for an Epicurean, at least until further evidence becomes available. For me, having been raised Presbyterian, this isn't a choice that I make lightly even though I've been heading this way for a long time.

Secondly, what could have prompted Epicurus to make such an effort to retain the gods? What are the advantages of religion in general, regardless of which god or gods is/are concerned? Community, shared belief, safety.... He says that there is an anticipation of the gods; could this be simply awe and reverence for the universe we live in? Which I find increases once the idea of god is discarded.

What about Epicurus trying to avoid the charge of impiety? Or was he testing his ideas with the culture he lived in, which is something that we, too, must do.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 13, 2019 at 4:50 PM

In general, it was much more *faux pas* for ancient Greeks to claim **hedonism** than **atheism**, which was a fairly acceptable theological position to take (and Epicureans were **very** comfortable claiming hedonism). It is **not** likely that they were trying to avoid charges of *impiety*, especially when Epicurus expressed that he "*never yearned to please the masses since what pleased them was not understood by me, and what I knew was remote from their comprehension*".

It's reasonable to suppose - in an **infinite** universe - that *beings who enjoy perfect, constant pleasure* (or, in other words, beings who enjoy *atomic blessedness*) can exist. If it were **not** the case, and such a being could **not** exist, then it might be *foolish* for us to pursue pleasure in the first place, because it would be fundamentally limited.

It's just weird for us to think about a "God" that (1) is not responsible for creation or creative acts, (2) does not set a moral standard for the cosmos, (3) does not care about humanity, (4) does not judge, reward, or punish us, and (5) a "God" that cannot perform supernatural acts. Monotheism has really ruined some rather interesting definitions and conceptions of "God" and "the gods", because we default to thinking about theology only within the context of monotheism.

Post by "Cassius" of October 13, 2019 at 5:15 PM

Godfrey if you read any of my past commentary on this you probably will expect that I am someone who thinks that the Epicurean theory of divinity has important practical uses even today. My position is grounded on a number of different issues, some of which I will probably forget to list here, but mainly being (1) the desire to come up with a comprehensive theory of humanity's place in the universe (if we alone, then there is something special about us), (2) the desire to consistently apply our theory of observation on the widest possible scale (the isonomia issue - which is closely related to "nature never produces only a single thing of a kind, and also the issue of anticipating that life exists on a spectrum from low to high.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Community, shared belief, safety.... He says that there is an anticipation of the gods; could this be simply awe and reverence for the universe we live in?

I do not think that the issue is strictly related to "reverence for the universe" which is after all "just" a combination of matter and void, like we are. I think the issue more relates to reverence for "life" or even "pleasure" as for example considering pleasure to be a goddess (Venus). For example, why NOT live in a cave eating grain and scratch stick men on walls, if indeed we can fill our experience with simple physical pleasures, rather than worry about pleasures that are more mental? There is something going on in the minds of higher animals that causes them to work to improve their ability to experience pleasure and avoid pain, and even among humans there is a wide variety of patterns as to how to approach that issue ("progress"). Where does this come from? Religionists will suggest gods or ideal forms, but that's clearly not the answer, nor is it "random" - so a coherent explanation of why civilization life has (to some extent) "improved" over time that does not involve supernatural gods would be a logical question for a

philosopher to consider.

I tend to take Epicurus exactly at his word, and to discount explanations that suggest that he was scared of hemlock or the like (I agree with Nate's comments above on this).

It seems to me that some people just don't seem to be concerned, especially nowadays, about issues of "who created the universe" and "why" and so forth. But I tend to think personally that that number of people, even today, is really smaller than some of us in the highly developed nations might think. I think those are compelling questions which demand a coherent explanation, and "I don't know" just isn't good enough.

Post by "Cassius" of October 13, 2019 at 5:17 PM

In fact I just re-scanned over Nate's post above and I agree with every word of it. We moderns are polluted in a sense with our upbringing (both academic and religious) and not only are we not the norm in human history, I am not sure at all that we are more advanced in our thinking, especially over the last hundred years or so.

Post by "Cassius" of October 13, 2019 at 5:22 PM

One more comment for now: To me, I see a thread running through the Epicurean texts of a deeply-felt concern for ALL life - both animal and human, and I think that they would share what I gather to be Nietzsche's detest for "nihilism" and "stoicism" from that perspective. Life is tremendously short and an eternity of non-existence is a very long time, so I think there is a strain of reverence and awe for LIFE which is built in to the respect for pleasure and pain as Nature's stop and go signals. And this is different from the Stoics looking at "the universe" as essentially a mechanistic god -- this is looking at LIFE / PLEASURE and seeing "Venus" as a "goddess" deserving heartfelt gratitude and energetic embracing. And that's why I really appreciate Catherine Wilson's slide from her recent talk:

Image may contain text

Being "stoic" and unmoved by the possibilities of pleasure that life affords is a form of savagery, or madness. And so the reverse is also true, which is why they seemed to have embraced Epicurus as "godlike" and saw the goal as living "as gods among men" and not

shrinking from emotion.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 13, 2019 at 5:25 PM

Thanks Nate and Cassius! Lots digest....

Post by “Cassius” of October 13, 2019 at 7:25 PM

Yes it is lots to digest and I hope you will continue the discussion. This reminds me of the current thread on "justice" that we are talking. We have strong preconceived notions of what we "should" be talking about in terms of both "justice" and "divinity." But at this point in studying Epicurus we ought to be cautioned that we need to re-examine virtually everything we have been told about Epicurus, and try to approach him from as unbiased view as possible, always starting back at the fundamental observations about the atomistic/eternal/boundless nature of the universe, and how mankind (all life, really) fits into it.

And without going too far off beam i think a related question arises from "pleasure." What IS pleasure and where did it "come from?"

My own admittedly radical answer to such questions is that we have to consider the possibility that Epicurus was going in the direction of concluding that "life" (not individual lives, but 'life' as a natural development of nature) is just as "eternal" as any other aspect of nature. In fact I am pretty sure that that is demanded by the physics -- so that while it might be correct to entertain that "life" developed on Earth at a particular moment from non-life, we would expect that that process had happened over an over an infinite number of times for an eternity up to this point.

While I would not think that planet-to-planet or "cosmos-to-cosmos" movement of life is a necessary conclusion, it is probably at least a "possible" conclusion that Epicurus would have entertained in the same way he entertained numbers of alternative theories that could not be proven to be uniquely correct, but which do not necessarily conflict with what we do observe.

Remember one of Lucian's satires involved alien life forms and interplanetary travel too. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_True_Story

But to repeat I am not advocating any of this as required either by scientific evidence today, or by the surviving Epicurean texts. But I think we have to open up just about any possible theory that we do not *know* to be impossible, if not as something that we think ourselves, but at

least as something that the Epicureans might have entertained.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 13, 2019 at 7:31 PM

The plot thickens! Yes I'm planning to continue this discussion. Tonight is date night though, so it won't be for a while 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 13, 2019 at 7:35 PM

Ah you are right to focus on what is important!

Post by “Cassius” of October 14, 2019 at 9:35 AM

Godfrey:

Elayne and I were discussing anticipations in regard to justice and I think this part of that applies here:

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Of course there is a long section of DeWitt talking about anticipations of the gods, but I was focusing here solely on "justice", and to continue:

Sometimes to me it seems that DeWitt shifts into talking as if we have an innate "idea" which I think goes to far. It seems to me his best argument is in the sentence highlighted. We have at birth no names for colors, no "concepts" of colors, but we are born with eyes that have the innate ability to perceive different colors differently. The eyes don't tell us whether those colors are pleasing or not, but the sense of pleasure does. In justice, the innate ability to distinguish something as "relating to justice" does not necessarily tell us whether what we are observing is pleasant or painful, but the sense of pleasure, operating at the same time, will weigh in too. With the point being that if we did not have some kind of innate ability to distinguish situations

that fall into a category as concerning "justice" then we would never recognize the relationship in the first place, and never process it any further, any more than a lower animal would.

And Godfrey this is the part that relates to this discussion:

In this "innate capacity to recognize an issue" issue, I think this is where DeWitt is going with Epicurus' view of divinity. The anticipation of divinity is a disposition to recognize that something is going on in the relationship between, let's say, where the living thing "is at the moment" and where it "might be" if it developed its capacities to "perfection." As a poor example, sort of like where a person might fit on a spectrum from an Olympic gold medal winner (at the top) to throwing plastic darts in the back yard (at the bottom). The Olympic gold medal winner is a "god among athletes" just like we might aspire to be "gods among men." Either that term "gods among men" was a pure joke, which I doubt, or else it had some relationship/aspirational meaning like this.

So an anticipation of divinity might have a purely earth-bound interpretation, which is separately applied to the issues of isonomy and the infinite / eternal universe to speculate as to the versions that live in the intermundia. But the two aspects of the issue would nevertheless fit together, I think.

So I would expand on the sentence in the DeWitt quote that I underlined in red above by adding the underlined part to speculate this:

"The innate capacity to distinguish colors is an anticipation of experience no less than the innate capacity to distinguish between justice and injustice [or to distinguish life forms that are "godlike / divine" from those that are not].

Post by "Godfrey" of October 14, 2019 at 6:36 PM

There is so much here to digest, I'll try to narrow down my comments and questions as much as possible to help wrap my head around things. (Cassius, your comments on pleasure are quite interesting and could make another thread in themselves!) For the most part I totally understand and agree with the points made. I'd like to focus on 1) an infinite system, 2) chance, and 3) isonomy.

1) In EP, the number of atoms is infinite. The types of atoms are innumerable. If my thinking is correct, the types of combinations of atoms would therefore be innumerable but not infinite (innumerable type x other innumerable type = seriously innumerable). If the types of

combinations were mathematically infinite (although it could be said that, practically speaking, they are infinite) then the probability of any given thing existing in the universe would be 100% and if I'm not mistaken this doesn't seem to be the case in EP.

2) Regarding chance, my understanding is that chance is involved in the combinations of atoms. Once compounds are formed there are properties that affect future combinations, but as a general idea chance is a factor in the Epicurean universe (but not in the life of a wise man). If it were not a factor, then all would be by necessity and such is not the case.

3) Isonomy is where I get completely confused. DeWitt lists three aspects of isonomy: "first, that in an infinite universe perfection is bound to exist as well as imperfection; that is, 'that there must be some surpassing being, than which nothing is better'; second, that the number of these beings, the gods, cannot be less than the number of mortals; and third, that in the universe at large the forces of preservation always prevail over the forces of destruction."

DeWitt also mentions an isonomy of values as well as of things. Perfection and imperfection are values, but they are ideas of man and at the scale of man and not at the scale of the universe, to my understanding. Otherwise, wouldn't they be Platonic Ideals? And how can "equitable apportionment" occur in a chance system? Is the reason for more gods than mortals because the forces of preservation must exceed the forces of destruction in an everlasting universe? I'm completely on board with his third premise of preservation exceeding destruction. My understanding, however, is that that would apply only to the atoms. All else is compounds and is subject to dissolution.

Post by "Cassius" of October 14, 2019 at 7:19 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

then the probability of any given thing existing in the universe would be 100% and if I'm not mistaken this doesn't seem to be the case in EP.

Yes Godfrey you are right in seeing an issue here. As I read Lucretius, he is very firm that although there may be a numberless but not infinite number of shapes, and an infinite number of atoms of those different shapes, the possible combinations are NOT unlimited, as you will recall that Lucretius points out that certain things like Centaurs cannot exist. Also even at the very beginning of Lucretius, Epicurus is pointing out "whence he returns a conqueror **to tell us what can, what cannot come into being.**

So I don't think the Epicureans thought that the probability of any given thing existing in the universe would be 100%. **We** probably need to be very careful with this wording though - I guess the point would be that it is possible for us to "imagine" things that are physically impossible.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

chance is involved in the combinations of atoms.

I consider this to be a very difficult subject too, and not really possible to grapple with without getting to a definition of what "chance" really means. My go-to academic piece on this is the AA Long ["Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism"](#) and I super-highly recommend that on this point. With the basic point being that "the swerve" is not as sweeping a force as it may seem. Certainly in some areas it is of supreme importance, but it does not seem to carry through everywhere or even in "most" day to day situations not involving higher animals -- but I need to let Long explain his argument.... A short summary is "Why would ANYTHING be predictable if atoms were constantly swerving in an uncontrolled way? But we see that most things ARE predictable, so there has to be an explanation for when the swerve is controlling and when it is not. Long, I think, puts his finger on the answer very well.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

And how can "equitable apportionment" occur in a chance system?

Ah, THERE it is! Good question, and I think Long's essay answers it. The key is in the definition of "chance." The system is not at all "chance" in the sense of chaotic, but is governed by what amounts to "natural law" that arises from the properties of the atoms and the qualities of the bodies that they form. While we talk about the importance of the swerve in "free will" and in the original formation of the universe, it appears that Epicurus contemplated that the swerve really has very little day-to-day impact on the mechanisms of non-animate life. But again, Long has this much better than I do.

But Long's killer argument (for me) is this: If the swerve were such an important part of Epicurus' system that, in the end, nothing is really predictable, then Cicero (and others) would have MERCILESSLY attacked the inconsistency of such a system. How could Epicurus have thought that atomism explained ANYTHING if in fact the atoms were so haphazard? Answer: he didn't think they were haphazard. He doesn't even mention the swerve in his own summary letters. The swerve is important, but not like we (who drink of the Heisenberg theory) seem to think it is.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Is the reason for more gods than mortals because the forces of preservation must exceed the forces of destruction in an everlasting universe?

1 - I would say that that is definitely NOT the reason for that - gods have nothing to do with controlling forces of preservation . But 2 Did Dewitt say that there are MORE immortals than mortals?\

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I'm completely on board with his third premise of preservation exceeding destruction. My understanding, however, is that that would apply only to the atoms. All else is compounds and is subject to dissolution.

Well, isn't dewitt saying that the forces of preservation exceed the forces of destruction only on a "universe-wide" scale? Such that as you say all things that come together eventually come apart, but at the same time, elsewhere, new things are coming together? I gather that what he is really saying is that despite the constant change, the "forces of preservation" are sufficient to keep at least SOME things together all the time, so that the universe is not just a field of floating atoms that have no contact with each other. No doubt my wording there could be improved, because you are right in my view to observe that regardless of anything else, everything that comes together is thought to eventually come apart, with the exception of the bodies of the gods themselves, but in their case, only because they have perfected the science of somehow keeping their atoms together indefinitely.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 14, 2019 at 8:03 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The system is not at all "chance" in the sense of chaotic, but is governed by what amounts to "natural law" that arises from the properties of the atoms and the qualities of the bodies that they form.

This is what I was thinking, except I missed the point that the "natural law" arises from properties of atoms. Quite a big oversight on my part: I was imagining the "natural law" arising after the combinations of atoms.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Did Dewitt say that there are MORE immortals than mortals?

On double checking, he said "cannot be less than" the number of mortals. Can you explain his reasoning on this? This is one of the things that baffles me about isonomy.

I'm off to read Long now. 👍

Post by “Cassius” of October 14, 2019 at 8:49 PM

As to the natural laws possibly they do arise from the qualities too, but to the extent that the qualities are the things observed by us, which are transient, I think we are primarily talking about arising from the properties of the atoms.

As to the number of mortals vs immortals, we don't have much in the texts to go on, do we? I was presuming that Dewitt is inferring from the texts that they would be approximately equal, but on the other hand he does stress "equitable" doesn't he, and it is hard to know what "equitable" would mean here. But I guess it is somewhat clear from what we observe here on earth that we don't have the same numbers of all types of animals. So there may be some kind of parallel there -- we have a few more ants than people, if that tells us anything.

Post by “Hiram” of October 15, 2019 at 8:48 AM

I was never Able to make sense of isonomia or with how the gods fit into the canon of it is empirical.

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2014/10/15/the...epicurean-gods/>

Post by “Todd” of October 15, 2019 at 12:33 PM

I liked that article, Hiram.

For me, it all comes down to this line, that you quoted from Ilkka:

Quote

And the Canon has primacy in such matters!

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2019 at 1:26 PM

My commentary on how the canon would apply would include this:

Quote

24. If you reject absolutely any single sensation without stopping to distinguish between opinion about things awaiting confirmation and that which is already confirmed to be present, whether in sensation or in feelings or in any application of intellect to the presentations, you will confuse the rest of your sensations by your groundless opinion and so you will reject every standard of truth. If in your ideas based upon opinion you hastily affirm as true all that awaits confirmation as well as that which does not, you will not avoid error, as you will be maintaining the entire basis for doubt in every judgment between correct and incorrect opinion.

At the very "worst" I would say that the Epicurean theory of the existence of extraterrestrial gods "awaits" confirmation. But as far as I can tell the Epicureans stated their observational arguments on which they expected eventual confirmation, (boundless eternal universe, isonomia, nature never creates a single thing of a kind, anticipations) so my personal view is that it is clear error under the Epicurean canon to rule out the theory, since the argument against it (based on my understanding of what Hiram and some others argue) seems to be based solely on "we haven't seen any yet."

We didn't see atoms for thousands of years either, but it was the wrong bet to dismiss the theory of atomism, and the smart bet to accept the existence of atoms, even before a single man ever "saw" one through advanced technology.

In fact, much of the first book and other parts of Lucretius are devoted to arguing exactly that - the reasonableness of accepting an argument as to the existence of something for which there is no visible evidence, and no way of proof other than deduction.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2019 at 1:56 PM

The Long essay brings significant nuance to the discussion of chance and necessity. Key takeaways for me:

- Necessity for Epicurus is that certain conditions must be met in order for a given thing to happen, as opposed to the idea that the given thing must happen.
- The swerve has an exponentially greater impact on the atoms of the mind than on atoms of standard matter. This is because (as pointed out in today's Daily Lucretian) atoms composing mind are round, lightweight and quick to move as opposed to standard atoms which are rough, heavier and slow to move. This explains why we have free will while the universe is not in total chaos.

Makes perfect sense, but I hadn't made the connections before reading the essay.

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2019 at 2:00 PM

Yes those are huge points Godfrey. That essay is one of my favorites for making what I think are some excellent arguments about things that seemed easy to understand on the surface, but on further reflection needed deeper thought. "Necessity" and "chance" need to be closely considered.

With this HUGE Takeaway:

Quote

This explains why we have free will while the universe is not in total chaos.

Sometimes I get the impression that people who throw the "Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle" around in beginner philosophy classes need to think about that too! 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2019 at 2:20 PM

[Hiram](#), I was actually reading your linked essay, among other things, before starting this thread and was coming to similar conclusions as you did.

As I'm currently understanding the gods, there are several options, including:

- They're theorized from the hierarchy of beings and are probable advanced beings in an infinite universe
- We have a prolepsis of gods. But why couldn't this be simply a concept, similar to justice? To me, this prolepsis doesn't necessitate corporeality. Does a prolepsis mature through various stages (if I'm not mistaken this is DeWitt's take) and if so, wouldn't it be affected by culture?
- The gods are poetry.

None of these, to me, say that the gods are necessary. This goes to Long's idea that Epicurus' necessity is for proper conditions, not an end result. So some version of gods are possible given these conditions, even probable, but are not required.

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2019 at 2:31 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So some version of gods are possible given these conditions, even probable, but are not required.

Lots of these words have multiple meanings but to focus on "required" -- required for what?

Epicurus and Lucretius are very specific as to the need to avoid "thinking unworthily of the gods" as a means to the most happy life - for example here in Book 6:

Unless you purge your mind of such conceits, and banish them your breast, and forbear to think unworthily of the gods, by charging them with things that break their peace, those sacred deities you will believe are always angry and offended with you; not that the supreme power of the gods can be so ruffled as to be eager to punish severely in their resentments, but because you fancy those beings, who enjoy a perfect peace in themselves, are subject to anger and the extravagances of revenge: and therefore you will no more approach their shrines with an easy mind, no more in tranquility and peace will you be able to receive the images, the representations of their divine forms, that form from their pure bodies and strike powerfully upon the minds of men: From hence you may collect what a wretched life you are to lead.

And if "which version to accept" is the issue, then that is a matter of adhering to clear Epicurean texts, or going one's own way on them, since no one has formed a "club" with a "membership requirement list" requiring that any particular version of divinity be believed.

My personal bright line is mainly to rule out of court any version of the position that "Epicurus said things things because he was a hypocrite, just to save himself from the fate of Socrates." Because at some point if someone doesn't respect that the Epicureans were attempting to be honest on something as basic as this, on which they made repeated clear statements, then that person really has no sincere interest in being part of a group that respects Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Elli" of October 15, 2019 at 3:10 PM

And as Diogenis of Oinoanda also said : "The important point to take from the study of physics is that the universe did not arise at random from chaos, nor was it created, or is it controlled, by any gods. But do not take from this that we Epicureans are impious, or that we fail to have sympathy for those who have false opinions about the gods. Men who experience false visions, but who are unable to understand how they are produced, are understandably apprehensive, and they convince themselves that these visions were created by the gods. Such men vehemently denounce even the most pious men as atheists. As we proceed, it will become evident to you that it is not the Epicureans, who deny the true gods, but those who hold false opinions about the gods. For we Epicureans are not like those philosophers who categorically assert that the gods do not exist, and who attack those who hold otherwise. Nor are we like Protagoras of Abdera, who said that he did not know whether gods exist, for that is the same as saying that he knew that they do not exist. Nor do we agree with Homer, who portrayed the gods as adulterers, and as angry with those who are prosperous. In contrast, we hold that the statues of the gods should be made genial and smiling, so that we may smile back at them, rather than be afraid of them.

Let us reverence the gods, and observe the customs of our fathers, but let us not impute to the gods any concepts that are not worthy of divinity. For example, it is false to believe that the gods, who are perfect, created this world because they had need of a city, or needed fellow-citizens. Nor did the gods create the world because they needed a place to live. To those who say such naive things, we ask in turn: "Where were the gods living beforehand?"

Those men who hold that this world was created uniquely by the gods, as a place for the gods to live, of course have no answer to this question. By their view, the gods were destitute and roaming about at random for an infinite time before the creation of this world, like an unfortunate man, without a country, who had neither city nor fellow citizens! It is absurd to

argue that a divine nature created the world for the sake of the world itself, and it is even more absurd to argue that the gods created men for the gods' own sake. There are too many things wrong, with both the world and with men, for them to have been created by gods!

Let us now turn our attention from gods to men.

Many men pursue philosophy for the sake of wealth and power, with the aim of procuring these either from private individuals, or from kings, who deem philosophy to be a great and precious possession.

Well, it is not in order to gain wealth or power that we Epicureans pursue philosophy! We pursue philosophy so that we may enjoy happiness through attainment of the goal craved by Nature".

Post by "Todd" of October 15, 2019 at 4:14 PM

Quote

My personal bright line is mainly to rule out of court any version of the position that "Epicurus said things things because he was a hypocrite, just to save himself from the fate of Socrates." Because at some point if someone doesn't respect that the Epicureans were attempting to be honest on something as basic as this, on which they made repeated clear statements, then that person really has no sincere interest in being part of a group that respects Epicurean philosophy.

Agreed.

However...Epicurus also taught that the virtues (honesty, sincerity), and vices (dishonesty, hipocrisy) are not inherently good or bad, but only to the extent that they produce pleasure or pain.

It would be quite Epicurean to lie about your religious beliefs to people who are going to harm you if you tell the truth.

Lying to your students or fellow Epicureans would be a bit more problematic.

To be clear, I do not believe Epicurus was lying or trying to hedge his religious beliefs.

I just wanted to add a bit of nuance.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2019 at 5:41 PM

Quote

To be clear, I do not believe Epicurus was lying or trying to hedge his religious beliefs.

I agree with this as well.

As a non-philosopher, I'm working my way from a superficial understanding to a deeper understanding of the philosophy. The theory has been put out there that Epicurus was playing it safe on the gods, which is why I asked about that in my initial post. Now I can see the evidence is such that it puts the lie to that idea.

Quote

Lots of these words have multiple meanings but to focus on "required" -- required for what?

Required to exist.

Also in the interest of deepening my understanding of EP, I'm wrestling with the question of whether or not believing in gods is a necessary part of the philosophy. As an atheist from a culture that does not seriously recognize polytheism, it's challenging to adopt a belief in gods. Relating to what I said in my initial post, I think it's a serious question to consider the place of the gods in EP and some evidence of this is the amount of thought given to this by "professional" philosophers.

Diogenes is quite explicit in spelling out various misconceptions of the gods, and I think that these are readily acceptable to anyone practicing EP. And he and Epicurus both state that gods exist. As far as I have gone with this is that it is probable that godlike beings as generally described by Epicurus exist and that the "idealist" versus the "realist" interpretation makes the most sense to me.

Obviously this isn't a superficial topic. I'm finding this discussion very illuminating, apologize if I've offended anyone, and look forward to its continuing.

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2019 at 6:02 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

, apologize if I've offended anyone,

You certainly have not! You're going to have to try pretty hard to be "offensive" with this group, as we should always take things in good humor whenever possible!

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

it's challenging to adopt a belief in gods.

You don't need me to say this, but of course this isn't a belief in "gods" in the standard sense of that term at all - as you know.

As I see it even if you apply everything that Epicurus said literally, you are still talking about nothing more than the kind of reasonable speculations about alien life that you would find in most any Star Trek episode. It might even be better to talk about "divinity" as the subject matter rather than gods, because as I gather the drift, it really amounts to a discussion of "what would perfection look like in the real universe that we live in?" - Then applying those thoughts to the examples of life that we've come into contact with here on Earth to come up with reasonable speculation about how life forms that have mastered deathlessness would act anywhere in the universe.

Which I admit kind of frustrates me in some cases, as it appears that it can be difficult for some people to take the Epicureans at their word, and strip away all the omnipotence, omniscience, and universe-creating supernatural nonsense that religion insists on adding. Some people INSIST on using the standard definitions of gods, and so they insist that Epicurean explanation of "the gods" makes no sense and is unconvincing -- which indeed it WOULD be if you insist on clinging to the standard definitions of gods!

Godfrey I don't know how much additional reading you plan to do, but your discussion here has reminded me of what I think is an important supplement: Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" is devoted to the topic of how to make inferences when the data is not as clear as we would like, and when we should treat those inferences as valid or insufficient.

If you get interested in that part I highly recommend [this version at Archive.org by De Lacy](#). I do not recall that the part that survives addresses the gods at all, but it is some very interesting material about logic and the differences between Epicurus' approach and the Stoics and others. I do recall that it does have some specific examples of how we should reason about the way things are in countries that we have never visited, which is pretty obviously analogous to places in the universe that we have never visited. I have learned a lot by reading the Appendix in which De Lacy explains the context of all this, especially as to how even Aristotle had not broken entirely free of Platonism, so even if you don't get a chance to read the main text, I think you would find the Appendix is very worthwhile - especially parts 4-6.

in fact our discussion about this reminds me of the more general point that the reason I like to talk about this subject of the gods is not so much due to "the gods" at all -- but that this is, I think, an excellent test of whether someone sees how dramatically Epicurus departed from the Greek norm in developing his standard of truth. He tears away from faith in Logic and invests it in deductive reasoning based firmly in the senses, and that's the way of course he "proves" the existence of atoms. It seems to me that his position on "the gods" is just a small extension (maybe not an extension at all) of his method of reasoning about the atoms, applied to the stars and man's place in the universe.

Post by "Cassius" of October 15, 2019 at 6:16 PM

In fact, Godfrey, your discussion is really advancing my thought on this. Hopefully we will one day develop some kind of "course" or discussion on Epicurean "theology" and I just realized that the opening section of that should probably not be devoted to the statements of Epicurus on the gods or to the Epicurean section from on "On the Nature of the Gods" but probably to this [On Methods of Inference](#). If we don't first fix people's minds on the issue that Epicurus was dealing with the issue of how to think about something on which there is not a lot of "direct evidence" -- on the issue of how to deal with things that we cannot ourselves see -- then we may never be able to break through the conventional religious perspective to entertain that Epicurus had good reasons for what he was saying.

Much like the "size of the sun" issue -- it is ridiculous ever to simply say "Epicurus was wrong about the size of the sun" without explaining in the same conversation what the issues were that he confronted from competing positions, what evidence he enlisted in support of his conclusion, how he also maintained that alternative explanations which are possible should not be eliminated, and how he got right the issue that was probably more important - that the Earth is not the center of the universe. And in my reading of the details of what is left on that controversy, it is not even clear to me that Epicurus took a firm position on the measurement of the sun - the record I have seen is that Epicurus said that the sun was something like "more or less what it appears to be" and that in itself can be interpreted in varying ways. The bottom line is that it always irks me when people who are supposedly giving a neutral or even sympathetic portrayal of Epicurus cannot point out that the arguments against him may not be all that they appear to be.

Post by "Cassius" of October 15, 2019 at 6:21 PM

So whenever it is suggested to me that we should stop talking about "the gods" because it turns off people who might otherwise be interested in Epicurean philosophy, my response is to say that "Unless we DO talk about "the gods," and explain Epicurus' reasoning about them, then they will never understand the full depth of Epicurus' reasoning about proper reasoning (the canon) and humanity's place in the universe!

And that *bothers* me. But of course it doesn't really bother those whose interest in Epicurus starts and stops with *Epicurus was a hedonist, but a funny kind, because he held that the greatest pleasure is the absence of pain, and all we really need is bread and water and tranquillity.* (my summary, not a quote 😊)

It is a wonder that I have any teeth left, since I have to "grit" them so often!

(Added note:

In fact, even if Epicurus had never said the first word about pleasure, pain, and happiness, I think I would have found Epicurus to be one of the most fascinating figures in world history, just for his views on physics and the universe and this "divinity" issue.)

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2019 at 7:27 PM

Yes, the more we discuss various aspects of the philosophy, the clearer the ideas become. There's so much more than is initially evident and it gets more interesting the more I get into it.

And the gods are definitely a juicy topic with which to deepen one's understanding!

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2019 at 8:25 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

And the gods are definitely a juicy topic with which to deepen one's understanding!

Dare I suggest it, but being willing to give serious consideration to "the [Epicurean gods](#)" may be analogous to being willing to give serious consideration to about "pleasure" as the goal of life.

Are we brave enough to through off the chains of political and academic respectability, and *explore* whether Epicurus may have been onto something big, two thousand years ago, that we have fully and completely buried today, even in educated academic circles that are supposed to be Epicurean-friendly?

It's quite clear to me that significant numbers of people, even in the educated classes, are not willing, and will never be willing, to open their minds to that possibility. But it's the ones who are that I think are the key to revitalizing Epicurean philosophy. Which is not to say at all that we're going to agree on the same conclusions, but I do think we ought to be willing to give Epicurus the benefit of every doubt, and really consider his statements from every possible sympathetic angle before rejecting them.

Post by "Elli" of October 16, 2019 at 4:10 AM

I have the impression that Epicurus and the epicureans in general, on the issue of gods have realize it on the basis of social common affairs and specifically about the customs with celebrations concerning the gods. As we know any fiesta/party is something that produce pleasure to the people. If Epicurus would be against the customs and all the annual celebrations concerning the gods, and all these things that unite the people he would be against the social coherence of his polis Athens. Epicurus wants to eliminate from people the fears and superstitions for studying the Nature properly and living pleasantly. So, the clear image about the gods is such an issue that has to produce union, friendship, creative things and pleasure to the people of a society. And that's all.

Post by "Elli" of October 16, 2019 at 4:24 AM

Against the celebrations and the fiesta of life we have the opposite with this :

"On Sundays and in the feasts, neither you play nor you dance, because the games and the dances are works of Devil. The Hellenes (Greeks), the atheists and the deceived, were those who did not believe in God, they did not hope in the resurrection and Crisis, those were that did those things and they danced, and drunk and they enjoyed the games". Ioannis of Damaskos (A "holy father" of the orthodox christian church).

compensation. Without their kind, the atmosphere of this planet would have remained oxygen-poor and unable to sustain higher life. These structures were ancient beyond memory even when Pando was a sapling; the two elders have been trading oxygen and carbon dioxide with each other for over a thousand lifetimes of men.

Post by “Cassius” of October 16, 2019 at 8:24 AM

Fascinating: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_\(tree\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_(tree))

Post by “Hiram” of October 16, 2019 at 12:34 PM

I think the key problem I have with the theory of the [Epicurean gods](#) is their immortality. It doesn't pass the test of conceivability that we find in Philodemus' "Methods of Inference".

I can conceive of blissful, super-evolved beings, maybe ones who live for hundreds or for thousands of years.

But No species has ever been observed to be immortal.

And furthermore, no `_habitat_` has been observed to be eternal. All the stars are suns that, like ours, will eventually explode as supernovas. There are rogue planets with no sun in between the galaxies that are not vulnerable to these and gamma rays and other outbursts, but beings there would have to get their nourishment from the heated core of their home planet, which would have to have a frozen crust. This heated core energy would eventually exhaust. And there is nothing keeping a rogue planet from being captured by a star eventually

Post by “Cassius” of October 16, 2019 at 1:15 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

But No species has ever been observed to be immortal.

"Never before seen" was never a sufficient argument against atoms, and is itself not a sufficient argument against anything that can be conceived to potentially exist through deductive reasoning. Just as observing that "no one had ever seen an iphone" before this century was not a good reason to believe that they were impossible.

[Quote from Hiram](#)

All the stars are suns that, like ours, will eventually explode as supernovas.

And yes this is good current physics which I accept too (and Epicurus did too, since he said all that comes together eventually comes apart!), which is logically the probable reason that the Epicureans placed the gods in the "intermundia" between the cosmos, and not as residents of any single one.

The point here is that we can all come up with objections to why we personally may be skeptical about something, but to start and stop the discussion with our personal conclusion without even stating it in detail does no justice to the Epicurean argument.

The dismissal of the Epicurean argument as obsolete and unworthy of discussion not only hints at an "unseemly" disrespect to Epicurus' general approach, but it advances no one's thinking in understanding the Epicurean thought processes.

The thought processes applied to the gods touch on many other issues separate and apart from "the nature of the gods," not the least of which is the entire issue of reasoning based on analogy vs reasoning based on dialectical logic / ideal forms, which is in the same league of importance. Philodemus devoted his book to it and no doubt there was much other discussion about it, as this goes to the heart of Epicurean philosophy vs the Stoics and those who based their conclusions on "logic."

Post by "Joshua" of October 16, 2019 at 2:16 PM

In the main I don't think I find fault with those objections, Hiram; and at any rate, the value in such beings is not in their *being*, per se, but in the human frame of mind that *allows* for their being.

I, like Godfrey, am an atheist as I understand the term. I deny the existence of the God of theism, since by definition that God is creative and *supernatural* (an impossibility), intercessory (a contradiction with lived experience), and revelatory (a gross offense against the intellect of the common man).

And what is the desirable frame of mind I mention above? Simply this;

1. An alert and healthy sense of perspective.

While it is mean and petty and narcissistic to suppose oneself the exclusive beneficiary of divine revelation, and to announce oneself thereby as the inheritor and disposer of creation, it is cautious and magnanimous to imagine a rung of natural intelligence still higher up the ladder. Compare the Hymn to Venus in Lucretius with the following verse in Psalms; "The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's; But the earth He has given to the children of men." And behold whither this leads, in the following contemptible utterance of Anne Coulter; "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" Well, the earth is not ours. It was here for billions of years before our ancestors, and others will inhabit it for aeons after the last of our kind has died. We should not be nihilists, forever moaning the smallness of man in the dead emptiness of space. Neither should we be megalomaniacs.

2. A becoming and genuine intellectual modesty.

This is a related problem, and finds its distinction in the difference between Pyrrho and all Prophets. One claimed to know nothing; the other, to know everything. They were both playing false.

3. A reverence for life and its contingencies.

This goes a long way toward explaining why Epicurus attended the sacred rites. To express gratitude to Demeter is not to grant any meaning to the silly and fatuous myths that surround her; it is merely to recognize that our own common social existence depends upon the fecundity of Nature. As for the attendant virtue of civility, it is expressed best by Christopher Hitchens; "When I go into a Mosque, I take off my shoes. When I go into a Synagogue, I cover my head."

And why is this frame of mind desirable? Because it encapsulates the spirit of inquiry that is best able to delve into the nature of physics and ethics, as typified by the figure of Epicurus. That spirit of inquiry is essential to probing the nature of the good (pleasure), and the foundation of human happiness.

Post by "Cassius" of October 16, 2019 at 2:30 PM

I think Joshua's summary is a very good description of where most of "US" are - and it helps provide background to why this is not really an issue for those of us who have found our way to

a forum like this.

But we are a very small minority of the human race, and it is my view at least (not sure if anyone wants to argue this or not) that the great majority of human beings in the world ARE concerned with the issues of "whether there are higher beings" and if so "what is their nature and power" and "what is humanity's relationship to them."

The Epicurean system provides rational answers to the questions for people who are concerned about those issues. And also, again speaking only for myself, of course, I have no desire to limit discussion of Epicurean philosophy to people who see no need (for themselves) to consider the "divinity" issue. That may offend the professional atheists who see "atheism" as the center of their philosophical universe, and want to shut down all discussion other than ethics in the here and now, but I have never felt much affinity for that crowd myself, and I see it as a major error to approach philosophy in that way. If there was ever a use for the term "ivory tower" that is it, because I observe these issues to concern every "normal" person in my own experience - and the closer we get to death the more it concerns us.

For all we know, Epicurus himself might well have personally gotten to the point that the issue was not of paramount importance to him. Regardless of that, doubtless he knew how important it was to the many who were his friends, and to many who would be relevant to his life, whether or not they were his friends.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 16, 2019 at 2:52 PM

According to DeWitt, Epicurus never described the gods as "immortal" but as "incorruptible". He goes on to say:

"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."

This brings to mind images of animals wandering the savanna, nomadic tribes, space opera. Also images such as "two faces or a vase?" or "young lady or witch?"



Like many innovations of Epicurus, understanding his take on the gods involves a new way of seeing. Personally, I feel like I just got a new pair of glasses and am still tripping when I descend a staircase.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 16, 2019 at 3:07 PM

Actually, for us moderns, many innovations of Epicurus are common sense. So the ones that aren't (like the gods) uncomfortably challenge us perhaps in a way that he challenged his contemporaries.

Post by “Hiram” of October 16, 2019 at 3:28 PM

Re: incorruptible versus immortal, the Monadnock translation contains both the original Greek and the English, and translates "That which is blissful and immortal" from:

τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον

Which, if you pass it through google translate, refers to blessedness (makarion) and the other word has to do with death. Maybe a Native Greek can better translate ἄφθαρτον (autharton). My understanding is that "death" is Thanatos.

Post by "Joshua" of October 16, 2019 at 3:39 PM

Not "autharton" but "aphtharton". Incorruptible turns up in most entries, but so does immortal. In the New Testament the adjective is applied to God.

Post by "Cassius" of October 16, 2019 at 6:09 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

According to DeWitt, Epicurus never described the gods as "immortal" but as "incorruptible". He goes on to say:

I agree this is murky, but this is one of those areas where I think DeWitt's training as a classical language expert, rather than primarily a philosopher, may give him the edge over other expert/translators. But this ambiguity is definitely in the category of unclear, and as even DeWitt admits later Epicureans apparently did call them "immortal."

i would really like to ask Epicurus, "So you are saying they are deathless. Does that mean on the other end that they were never "born" either, or are you saying that over time they developed the ability to maintain their deathlessness?"

Which would be more consistent with the rest of the theory? I suspect that since eternity stretches backward infinitely without beginning, Epicurus would have been reluctant to say "there were never any deathless gods until point XX" which might mean that Epicurus would take the position that "deathless" gods have "always" existed as a class, if not individually.

Now we are talking angels dancing on pins, but i do think it helps understand a theory to consider how it might be taken to logical conclusions. I am pretty confident that Epicurus was saying that "life" as a "class" (not individual living things) have "always" existed somewhere in the universe (and probably a boundless number of places).

In an eternal and uncreated universe in which atoms combine over and over in accord with their properties, I am doubting that Epicurus would have seen a "first life" at any one single place in the universe. And so if life is evolving and "perfecting itself an infinite number of times and places, then that process of beings learning to become deathless would have also repeated itself and endless number of times.

Note: i am aware that in general, but not in detail) that the mormons take a similar position to their "gods." Which is why I gather current Mormons like Mitt Romney think that they can

become gods of their own planets, I gather. Someone can correct my mormon theology if I am grossly wrong, and of course that has little relevance here, expect maybe to the extent that whoever the creative theologians of early mormonism were (Joseph Smith himself?) it seems logical to be suspicious that they might have been reading some Lucretius. 😊

Post by “Joshua” of October 16, 2019 at 7:54 PM

Well as for Joseph Smith, he was living (and composing, to select a term advisedly) in the period during which it was generally suspected that the other immediate planets of the solar system might harbor life. Astronomy was sufficiently advanced by then to know what a planet was, but not advanced enough to know about what Mars and Venus were really like on their surfaces. This is the century that gave birth to science fiction (Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Mary Shelley)—unless we count Lucian and his *True Story*, which was 16 centuries ahead of its time.

Post by “Cassius” of October 16, 2019 at 8:19 PM

I apologize to Godfrey for going off topic with mormonism.... 😊 The more interesting issue is set of questions posed by eternity / infinity, which I think implies that since life appears capable today of evolving from non-life, then presumably it has also done so for an eternity in the past, which means that certain life forms have had an innumerable time within which to evolve to deathlessness.... all of which poses questions that ... very difficult ... but presumably no more so than the alternative - that a god work up one morning and created everything, or that spontaneously one morning everything flashed into existence from nothing.

Which is presumably why Epicurus advised spending time talking and thinking about infinity and related issues.

Ending of Letter to Pythocles:

And most of all give yourself up to the study of the beginnings and of infinity and of the things akin to them, and also of the criteria of truth and of the feelings, and of the purpose for which we reason out these things. For these points when they are thoroughly studied will most easily enable you to understand the causes of the details. But those who have not thoroughly taken these things to heart could not rightly study them in themselves, nor have they made their own the reason for observing them.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 16, 2019 at 9:25 PM

I had no idea that the Mormons believe such things!

Just from my reasoning it seems that the gods evolved, are born, and are quite smart about being blissful and staying alive. If they, individually, extend back an eternity then they'd have to be a separate class along with atoms and void, which doesn't seem to be the case.

"Immortal" is a perplexing word. I just Googled the definition and most sources define it as "deathless". This has no implication of extending back in time. But to cloud the issue, one online dictionary says "living forever", which seems ambiguous in this regard. Another definition is "one who's fame is lasting". But these are all definitions of the English word, not the Greek.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 16, 2019 at 10:00 PM

To focus on "immortal", VS 78 and the end of the letter to Menoeceus mention immortal goods. In the Greek text on Monadnock each of these as well as PD 1 have what appear to be slightly different spellings of the word. I'm clueless about Greek; does anyone know if these variations have any significance to the discussion? (I might not even be looking at the right words, please pardon my ignorance if that's the case.)

Post by “Joshua” of October 16, 2019 at 11:07 PM

PD 1 employs "*aphtharton*", as mentioned above. Perhaps this is Epicurus' preferred word when describing gods?

Vatican saying 78 uses "*athanaton*", speaking of immortal good.

The Letter to Menoeceus uses "*athanatois*", a slight variation of the same word. This change reflects the agreement of the word with the plural "*agathois*" (goods). "*Agathon*", singular, is used in the previous formulation.

Both relevant words, *aphtharton* and *athanaton*, are formed by prefixing the word stem with the negation "a-". Same here as in English; atheist, amoral, abiogenesis.

Phtharton is defined in the "Middle Liddell" (a scholarly lexicon of Ancient Greek) as "corrupted; decaying". *Aphtharton*, then, is uncorrupted, and undecaying.

Thanaton (-os), as Hiram mentions above, is death. *Athanaton* is immortal, or deathless. So there are evident shades of meaning between the two.

Post by "Cassius" of October 16, 2019 at 11:08 PM

Unfortunately we end up placing a lot of burden on [Elli](#) because she is the only one in command of the ancient (or modern) Greek, as far as I know, of those here.

As to the Mormon theology, you might find this "Godmakers" cartoon interesting : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuO2Ov_D08c It is certainly not intended to place the Mormons in a favorable light, but it is my understanding that the basic thrust of what they are saying about the theology is pretty accurate.

Back several years ago I was reading into this and was particularly fascinated with the words of "If You Could Hie To Kolob" - some of it seems right of Lucretius in terms of the infinite universe, gods infinitely existing, etc:

If You Could Hie to Kolob, 284 - William W. Phelps

1. If you could hie to Kolob In the twinkling of an eye,

And then continue onward With that same speed to fly,

Do you think that you could ever, Through all eternity,

Find out the generation Where Gods began to be?

2. Or see the grand beginning, Where space did not extend?

Or view the last creation, Where Gods and matter end?

Me thinks the Spirit whispers, "No man has found 'pure space,'

Nor seen the outside curtains, Where nothing has a place."

3. The works of God continue, And worlds and lives abound;

Improvement and progression Have one eternal round.

There is no end to matter; There is no end to space;

There is no end to spirit; There is no end to race.

4. There is no end to virtue; There is no end to might;

There is no end to wisdom; There is no end to light.

There is no end to union; There is no end to youth;

There is no end to priesthood; There is no end to truth.

5. There is no end to glory; There is no end to love;

There is no end to being; There is no death above.

There is no end to glory; There is no end to love;

There is no end to being; There is no death above.

Post by “Joshua” of October 16, 2019 at 11:41 PM

"Known for telling tall tales"...

Also known for multiple fraud convictions in Ohio and upstate New York ☐☐.

<http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/2003JRASC..97..158Z>

There's a good article on 19th century astronomy and the "extra-terrestrial" problem.

And one of my favorite Thoreau quotes is relevant;

Quote

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance, that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions.

Post by "Elli" of October 17, 2019 at 6:30 AM

With the usage of the words...

Sorry, but we must not cling in the accurate translations by the academicians like Bailey et.al., but we have to deepen into the whole of Epicurean philosophy as we go with the consistency of the Canon, Physics and Ethics just to realize how Epicurus used the greek words and how clarity they have.

Who said that "ἀφθαρτος" [aphthartos] has only the meaning of the immortal? There are synonym words that are used in greek language for [aphthartos]. What Epicurus meant when he used this greek word "ἀφθαρτος" that has the same synonym words in greek and in english ? And here is the whole point that Epicurus wants to point out.

greek : 1) "ἀδιάφθορος", the incorruptible, incorrupt

adj means the morally pure, the honest, the decent.

e.g. He is one of the few incorruptible politicians.

2) "ἀνέπαφος" , the untouchable something that can't be touched.

e.g. Nowadays, comedians seem to consider no subject untouchable i.e. something that can't be touched be judged and be discussed.

Here is how it goes the PD1 : The [makarion=blessed] and [aphtharton =the morally pure and the untouchable] being knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favor. For all such things exist only in the weak.

"Keep in touch" we say this phrase in english and greek, and means "keep our communication, our discussions etc".

The "untouchable" means that kind of a being that we are not able to have any touch/communication/discussions at all. Here is why Epicurus placed the gods between the Cosmoi.

And the incorruptible also means morally pure. Morally pure is that being that has achieved the pure pleasure, which means a being that has no similarity with humans' morals/customs and virtues, since due to our fear of god and death the corruption, the hatred, the pains and the fighting to each other, are issues till nowadays. 😊

And from Epicurus letter to Meneoceus we read : "And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many. For the

statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods. For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien".

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2019 at 7:23 AM

Wow thank you Elli!

So just to be clear, you are agreeing with DeWitt that the surviving texts of Epicurus himself do NOT call the gods deathless / immortal?

This is a huge point that no one other than DeWitt seems to have brought out.

And so the possibility is that if later Epicureans spoke more loosely, then they were deviating from Epicurus in an important way (although I would first presume that we may translation issues there too, plus the standard issues of fragmentary speculation on those texts that come from Herculaneum.)

And if this is true that would go a long ways toward removing another objection to the [Epicurean gods](#) being "unrealistic."

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2019 at 8:32 AM

Godfrey we may be trying to fit too much into a single thread - this thread is yours so you should steer it. We can open other threads on any of these issues.

But another aspect of this subject (to the extent it is the role of "the gods" in Epicurean philosophy) which we have not exactly touched on is the issue of "explaining how religion came to be and get control of so many people."

There are many passages in Lucretius, plus the reference in "on the nature of the gods" that talk about both how "anticipations" and "images" (which Dewitt thinks is different from the anticipations part) played a part in the rise of the viewpoint that there are such things as divinities in almost(?) every cultural/national group that developed over time.

It seems pretty clear that while some of the rise of religion was the result of corruption, the Epicureans were also pointing to natural reasons for its development, and that too is an area of interest for a lot of people that helps bring the big picture of "the role of religion in humanity" into focus. The issue of "images" floating through the air is to us today one of the least-discussed aspects of the Epicurean texts, but as with everything else I would not dismiss any of it without looking closely at it, especially since DeWitt argues that Epicurus seems to have been talking about the brain having the ability to sense certain kinds of "images" directly, and not through the eyes or other senses.

It's total speculation to try to make too much of that part of the images issue without more texts, but it seems to me that the best way to understand something is to try to reconstruct it as best possible. Then if we think something went off the rails somewhere we can separate out what we don't believe while still profiting from the part that seems to be well grounded.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 17, 2019 at 12:05 PM

If this is "my" thread I can only say that I'm learning as much or more than anyone from it and I'm quite grateful for and impressed by everybody's posts!

Both the rise of religion and the subject of "images" belong with this topic and I for one would like to pursue them. Maybe they could be split off into "part 2" and "part 3" threads, if only because this one is getting pretty long.

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2019 at 12:35 PM

Yes Godfrey I think this is in the general discussion forum so eventually I will move it to the one on [Epicurean gods](#), and we can start related threads there.

Also: i am out on my phone so this is clipped but notice also how the limited way we see here that Epicurus viewed gods seems inconsistent with the "why call him god" "riddle" that is attributed to Epicurus by Lactantius? The premises of that "riddle" are so different from what Epicurus himself wrote that there must be major garbling in attributing that to him.

To clarify: The "riddle" sounds much more like it was written against a Judeo-Christian view of an all-powerful god, and is effective because it takes their presumptions of omnipotence, omniscience, etc and points out that their god doesn't use those powers. It seems to me that

Epicurus would never have agreed to presume those attributes in his own definition of "god."

So my conclusion in making this comment that one of the most well-known statements of Epicurus about gods probably should be viewed with suspicion as coming from him at all. From later Epicureans maybe yes, but probably not Epicurus himself.

Post by “Elayne” of October 18, 2019 at 6:09 PM

Has been a busy week for me, catching up, but I want to thank Elli also for that help with the translation, which makes so much more sense!

Clarity of language is important, and because the word "gods" in English currently means supernatural, in English I am an atheist: I do not believe in the supernatural. I was raised atheist, in Alabama, and in English the word is used accurately for that specific meaning. I'm not going to use a different term in ordinary contexts, or people will think I'm a supernaturalist. It would be poor communication.

However, in Greek, and in regards to Epicurean philosophy, and among people who understand my words, I am not an atheist, because I know we've already taken the supernatural off the table. It seems entirely reasonable to suspect that in all of reality, there are likely beings which evolved to live pleurably to such a high degree that they would amaze me if I saw them. And if I think about how such beings would conduct their lives with each other, it helps me continue to choose that life myself-- not as an abstraction but as a practical, achievable process. We must believe a pleasurable life is possible or there would be no point trying. In this sense, I am a believer.

Post by “Garden Dweller” of October 18, 2019 at 7:03 PM

Perhaps some texts refer to how the student of Epicurus should see the world of nature, and other texts are about how one would interact with those who believe in gods?

Post by “Cassius” of October 18, 2019 at 7:54 PM

Yes I agree that the texts are so fragmentary that we're constantly in a position of trying to make the best possible sense of them, and that means that what they appear to mean in one context may not at all be the case.

And add to that that they seem to have had a very good sense of humor, so it's hard to say what could be joking and what could be deadly serious.