

# The Epicurean Gods As A Standard To Which To Aspire

Post by "Cassius" of July 13, 2018 at 10:53 AM

Recently (July 7th) MK posted the following as part of a post on whether the Epicureans were in fact "atheists." The part I'd like to focus on is: "The gods are integral to Epicurean ethics as a standard to aspire to of absolute ataraxia." Without getting into the debate about what "ataraxia" means, I think there is another important point here. We may or may not agree with them, but it seems clear that to the Epicureans the "gods" were not simply abstractions - from the texts we know that they had a form/appearance "similar" to humans, a language "similar" to humans (Greek), and presumably other real attributes which allowed Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans to participate in public ceremonies without considering themselves to be ludicrous. We can add Lucretius' "hymn to Venus" as Roman example, and also cite Cicero, as did Martin, for the point that Epicureans were firmly convinced of their speculations on many of these aspects of divinity.

My question is this: Are we today overlooking an important (integral? critical?) component of Epicurean philosophy when we fail to articulate and identify concrete examples of the ultimate standards to which we should aspire? It sounds like the ancient Epicureans were quite comfortable in referencing Venus and / or Zeus and similar entities in ways that were consistent with their philosophy. By failing to consider this part of Epicurean philosophy, are we failing to identify in concrete terms the standard to which we should aspire, and leaving our standard at a useless level of abstraction?



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Post by "Cassius" of July 14, 2018 at 9:11 AM

Here we ought to consider whether Epicurus should be thought of as a god himself. In addition to Epicurus' own "gods among men" comment, probably the most important reference is the

<p>T. LUCRETII LIB. V.</p> <p><b>Q</b>UIS patris et dignam polleat pectore carmen Covisere, pro rerum investigata, digna reperit? Quisve voluit verba latini, qui funderet laudes Pro meritis Epae possit, qui tanta nitui Pectore parva suo, quosvisque precantia liquid? Nemo (at quis?) nisi aequali corpore creatus. Nemo si, ut ipsa patris majestas exoptata ravata, Diceretam? : Deo ille fuit, Deo, incante Memmi, Sibi Princeps vix rationem invenit eam, que Nunc appellatur Sapientia : qui per artem lo Phidias i tantis nitui, tantisque laudibus, In tam tranquillo, et tam clara luce lucetis. Cujus ratio Divina aliorum aequa reperita, Navaque Ceres fertur fruges, Liberque liquoris Fragora laetitia succulenta effudit in Cum tanta his patris sua tanta Vix videret : Ut famam aliam alicui videret videret. At hoc non patet sua pure pectore vixi, Sed magis hic meritis videret Deo est videret, Ex quo vixi alicui per videret dicitur gaudet Dulcia perveniret alicui filia videret.</p>	<p><b>Brown 1743:</b> Who can, with all his soul inspired, compose fit numbers, worthy the majesty of so great things, of these discoveries? Or who, in words alone, can sing his praise, and equal his deserts, who from the labour of his mind has left such benefits, and bestowed rewards so glorious on mankind? No mortal man alive, as I conceive, for could I raise my verse to reach the dignity of things he knew, he was a god, my noble Memmius, a god he was, who first found out that rule of life which is now called true wisdom; and who this human life, so tossed with storms, and so overwhelmed in darkness, has rendered by his art so calm, and placed in so clear a light.</p> <p>Compare the benefits long since found out by those who now are gods. Ceres, they say, discovered first the use of corn, and Bacchus gave to me the knowledge of the vine and its sweet juice. Yet men might still have lived without both these, as many nations, we are told, do now. But no true life could be, without the mind easy and free, and therefore with better right is he to us a god, whose gentle rules, received throughout the world, bestowed on men tranquility and peace.</p>	<p><b>Mann 1886:</b> Who is able with powerful genius to frame a poem worthy of the grandeur of the things and these discoveries? Or who is so great a master of words as to be able to devise praises equal to the deserts of him who left to us such prizes won and earned by his own genius? None, methinks, who is formed of mortal body. For if we must speak as the acknowledged grandeur of the things itself demands, a god he was, a god, most noble Memmius, who first found out that plan of life which is now termed wisdom, and who by trained skill rescued life from such great billows and such thick darkness and moored it in so perfect a calm and in so brilliant a light.</p> <p>Compare the godlike discoveries of others in old times: Ceres is famed to have pointed out to mortals corn, and Liber the vine-born juice of the grape; though life might well have subsisted without these things, as we are told some nations even now live without them. But a happy life was not possible without a clear breast; wherefore with more reason this man is deemed by us a god, from whom came those sweet solaces of existence which even now are distributed over great nations and gently soothe the men's minds.</p>	<p><b>Bailey 1936:</b> Who can avail by might of mind to build a poem worthy to match the majesty of truth and these discoveries? Or who has such skill in speech, that he can fashion praises to match his deserts, conceived and sought out by his own mind? There will be no one, I think, born of mortal body. For if we must speak as befits the majesty of the truth now known to us, then he was a god, yea a god, noble Memmius, who first found out that principle of life, which now is called wisdom, and who by his skill saved our life from high seas and thick darkness, and enclosed it in calm waters and bright light.</p> <p>To set against this the heaven-sent discoveries of others is the days of old. Ceres is fabled to have taught to men the growing of corn, and Liber the liquid of the vine-born juice; and yet life could have gone on without these things, as tales tell us that some races live even now. But a good life could not be had without a pure mind, and so we have the more justification for deifying a god by us, thanks to whom now sweet solaces for life soothe the mind, spread even far and wide among great peoples.</p>	<p><b>Smith 2001:</b> Who possesses the powerful inspiration to compose a poem worthy to match the majesty of my theme and these discoveries? Who has the command of language needed to devise praises proportionate to the merits of him who has bequeathed to us such rich treasures, sought and acquired by his own intellect? No one, I think, who is of mortal birth. For if we are to speak as the majesty of his revelations demands, a god he was, a god, illustrious Memmius, who first discovered that principle of life which is now identified with wisdom, and who by his genius saved life from such mighty waves and such deep darkness and moored it in such calm water and so brilliant a light.</p> <p>To but compare with his gifts the divine discoveries of others in ancient times. Ceres, according to legend, introduced corn to mortals, and Liber the liquor made from the juice of the grape; and yet these things are not essential to life: indeed it is reported that some peoples even now live without them. But a good life could not be had without a pure mind, and so we have the more justification for deifying the author of the sweet consolations of life that, disseminated throughout mighty nations, even now are soothing people's minds.</p>	<p>serious, or just comparing</p>
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**Post by "Cassius" of July 14, 2018 at 9:19 AM**

If I have picked up the right section of the Greek, here is the original and the Bailey translation of the "gods among men" reference:

Ταῦτα οὖν καὶ τὰ τοῦτοις συγγενῇ μελέτῃ πρὸς σεαυτὸν  
ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς πρὸς (τε) τὸν ὁμοίαν σεαυτῷ, καὶ οὐδέποτε  
οὐθ' ἔπαρ οὐθ' ἄναρ διαπαραχθήσῃ, ζήσεις δὲ ὡς θεὸς ἐν  
ἀνθρώποις. οὐθὲν γὰρ εἰσικε θνητῷ ζῆφι ζῶν ἀνθρώπος ἐν  
ἀθανάτοις ἀγαθοῖς.

Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself, and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like to a mortal being

**Post by "RogerAlyn" of July 14, 2018 at 4:17 PM**

I agree. From what I am reading right now they are considered Humanists or like Deists in that they consider there may or may not be gods but that if so, the gods are unconcerned with human affairs.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of July 16, 2018 at 10:29 AM**

A poster at Facebook wrote on this topic:

I have wanted to say something since seeing the notification, but did not want to gloss so serious a subject. I have time at the minute though, so here I go!

Reflex reaction: yes. Dispensing with all talk of the [Epicurean gods](#) is certainly to lose sight of something central to the school.

Face value, the answer is simple. To be an authentic Epicurean requires a firm grounding in the classics.

This is fairly obvious to me anyway. How you can know who Epicurus is but not Zeus would be beyond me.

Anybody actually interested must know who or what Lucretius or Philodemus speak of when writing. You cannot meaningfully read the Epicurean literature outside the classical context, really.

To claim the Olympians are culturally irrelevant or incomprehensible is ridiculous. Why are you reading an ancient Hellenic thinker at all anyway then?

As for the non-intervention of deities equalling the non-existence of them - it's a patently poor argument. Epicurus himself saw a definite difference. Don't think much of his reasoning powers: why are you here?

In the original comment quoted I provided two ways in which Epicurus insisted on the gods' importance to his thought: anthropological aetiology and top standard of ataraxia.

They are complimentary sides to a single coin. We can aspire to perfect equanimity because we are physically and mentally like the beings that already live it. Take away the latter, the former becomes a sizably trickier task.

Are we fitted for that state? Or is it a superhuman impossibility engendered in the same way as superhuman beings by the brain of primitive homines sapientes? An Epicurean's top task becomes a mimetic delusion à la Dawkins.

As for the factual existence of the gods, I wouldn't like to go to war for them on this front. Still, a religious quality of commitment to atheism is at least as narrow-minded as an Abrahamic monotheism.

Most educated people in Western societies today tick "Spiritual but not religious" when asked. I don't know that it is helpful to be dismissive of the ubiquitous human experience here. Particularly with such crushing and uncomprehending condescension.

What one senses staring out from Delphi or up at the ceiling standing in the centre of the Pantheon, has precisely fuck all to do with knowing what makes thunder.

An ideal Epicurean would see the legitimacy of mythos, and the gods in them as powers personified, for education and reflection, poetic and philosophical. The same could be said of the ideal applicant to Oxford or Cambridge 70 years ago. Couldn't read Greek, need not apply. Sad the state of affairs presently in academia.

Finally, so far as I can tell, nobody has engaged with Epicurus' argument for that there are in very fact gods. I outlined it in the relevant earlier comment.

If you are a thoroughgoing materialist, it is tremendously difficult to account for the universal scale of the human experience here. Where the concept comes from, why it is not culturally confined, its persistence across literally all recorded time.

If you face facts and the only explanations allowable are material causality: how do you escape his conclusion that they must have some basis in physical reality?

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## **Post by "Cassius" of July 17, 2018 at 8:26 AM**

More comments:

NB: I think it's crucial to deconstruct "belief" as we typically employ it. With respect to Martin K., I think that the "gods" part of his statement is on the money, BUT, "belief" in our society tends to indicate 'faith', with a connotation of 'dogmatic' or 'blind faith' in a supernatural sense. This wouldn't jive with Epicureans from any age.

We may translate Epicurus in 'Letter to Menoecus' as recommending "belief" in a natural "God", but we can confirm that Epicurean epistemology does not accept 'faith' as a reasonable criterion of knowledge. In other words, we don't need to "believe" in something with which we have direct experience.

Therein, I think, lies the key: \*whatever\* he was talking about is grounded in natural experience. Whether we're discussing happy space beings, or the prototype of a superhuman ubermensch, or Star Trek-ish energy beings of pure pleasure, or preconceptions experienced in dream states, 'belief' is not required.

Cassius Amicus: " BUT, "belief" in our society tends to indicate 'faith', with a connotation of 'dogmatic' or 'blind faith' in a supernatural sense. This wouldn't jive with Epicureans from any age." I COMPLETELY agree with you Nathan, and in my humble opinion I think Epicurus would to - as I think Martin Kalyniuk probably does too.

MK: Spot on! Epicurus doesn't think faith is a valid vehicle to knowledge.

His argument for thinking there are gods is that we have such a deeply chiseled impression of them on our minds as human beings.

Any concept we have must have come somehow from outside us from something materially real. Therefore there are really gods.

For Epicurus - as for Aristotle - the senses are always substantively correct. Mistakes are made in the interpretation of the knowledge they yield to us. But if all men claim to see substantially the same thing, say, "white" or experience something, perhaps, "being cold." They might misinterpret the details or the how and why, but not the phenomena itself.

Atheism for Epicurus would be at bottom an attack on the reliability of sense perception.

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 17, 2018 at 8:32 AM

"Atheism for Epicurus would be at bottom an attack on the reliability of sense perception."

That's an aggressive way of stating it, but I don't really disagree. Certainly Epicurus wrote first principles of the good life. First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness : but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision.