

Episode One Hundred Thirty-Five - The Letter to Menoeceus 02 - On The Nature of the Gods

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Since we are going to tackle the thorny issue of the nature of the [Epicurean gods](#) in this coming podcast episode, it would probably be a good idea to post some of the most central additional references we have on this topic:

[PD01](#) The blessed and immortal nature 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.

Velleius from Cicero's "On the Nature of the Gods"

Quote

Hereupon Velleius began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus! "I am not going to expound to you doctrines that are mere baseless figments of the imagination, such as the artisan deity and world-builder of Plato's *Timaeus*, or that old hag of a fortuneteller the *Pronoia* (which, we may render 'Providence') of the Stoics; nor yet a world endowed with a mind and senses of its own, a spherical, rotatory god of burning fire; these are the marvels and monstrosities of philosophers who do not reason but dream.

"What power of mental vision enabled your master Plato to descry the vast and elaborate architectural process which, as he makes out, the deity adopted in building the structure of the universe? What method of engineering was employed? What tools and levers and derricks? What agents carried out so vast an undertaking? And how were air, fire, water and earth enabled to obey and execute the will of the architect? How did the five regular solids, which are the basis of all other forms of matter, come into existence so nicely adapted to make impressions on our minds and produce sensations?

"It would be a lengthy task to advert upon every detail of a system that is such as to seem the result of idle theorizing rather than of real research; but the prize example is that the thinker who represented the world not merely as having had an origin but even as almost made by hand, also declared that it will exist for ever. Can you suppose that a man can have even dipped into natural philosophy if he imagines that anything that has come into being can be eternal? What composite whole is not capable of

dissolution? What thing is there that has a beginning but not an end?

“While as for your Stoic Providence, Lucilius, if it is the same thing as Plato's creator, I repeat my previous questions, what were its agents and instruments, and how was the entire undertaking planned out and carried through? If on the contrary it is something different, I ask why it made the world mortal. and not everlasting as did Plato's divine creator?

“Moreover I would put to both of you the question, why did these deities suddenly awake into activity as world-builders after countless ages of slumber? For though the world did not exist, it does not follow that ages did not exist—meaning by ages, not periods made up of a number of days and nights in annual courses, for ages in this sense I admit could not have been produced without the circular motion of the firmament; but from the infinite past there has existed an eternity not measured by limited divisions of time, but of a nature intelligible in terms of extension; since it is inconceivable that there was ever a time when time did not exist. Well then, Balbus, what I ask is, why did your Providence remain idle all through that extent of time of which you speak? Was it in order to avoid fatigue?

“But god cannot know fatigue; and also there was no fatigue in question, since all the elements, sky, fire, earth and sea, were obedient to the divine will. Also, why should god take a fancy to decorate the firmament with figures and illuminations, like an aedile? If it was to embellish his own abode, then it seems that he had previously been dwelling for an infinite time in a dark and gloomy hovel!

“And are we to suppose that thenceforward the varied beauties which we see adorning earth and sky have afforded him pleasure? How can a god take pleasure in things this sort? And if he did, he could not have dispensed with it so long. Or were these beauties designed for the sake of men, as your school usually maintains? For the sake of wise men? If so, all this vast effort of construction took place on account of a handful of people. For the sake of fools then?

“But in the first place there was no reason for god to do a service to the wicked; and secondly, what good did he do? Inasmuch as all fools are beyond question extremely miserable, precisely because they are fools (for what can be mentioned more miserable than folly?), and in the second place because there are so many troubles in life that, though wise men can assuage them by balancing against them life's advantages, fools can neither avoid their approach nor endure their presence.

“Those on the other hand who said that the world is itself endowed with life and with wisdom, failed entirely to discern what shape the nature of an intelligent living being could conceivably possess. I will touch on this a little later; for the present I will confine myself to expressing my surprise at their stupidity in holding that a being who is immortal and also blessed is of a spherical shape, merely on the ground that Plato

pronounces a sphere to be the most beautiful of all figures. For my own part, on the score of appearance I prefer either a cylinder or a cube or a cone or a pyramid. Then, what mode of existence is assigned to their spherical deity? Why, he is in a state of rotation, spinning round with a velocity that surpasses all powers of conception. But what room there can be in such an existence for steadfastness of mind and for happiness, I cannot see. Also, why should a condition that is painful in the human body, if even the smallest part of it is affected, be supposed to be painless in the deity? Now clearly the earth, being a part of the world, is also a part of god.

“Yet we see that vast portions of the earth's surface are uninhabitable deserts, being either scorched by the sun's proximity, or frost-bound and covered with snow owing to its extreme remoteness. But if the world is god, these, being parts of the world, must be regarded as limbs of god, undergoing the extremes of heat and cold respectively.

“So much, Lucilius, for the doctrines of your school. To show what [the older systems] are like, I will trace their history from the remotest of your predecessors. Thales of Miletus, who was the first person to investigate these matters, said that water was the first principle of things, but that god was the mind that molded all things out of water—supposing that gods can exist without sensation; and why did he make mind an adjunct of water, if mind can exist by itself, devoid of body? The view of Anaximander is that the gods are not everlasting but are born and perish at long intervals of time, and that they are worlds, countless in number. But how can we conceive of god save as living for ever? Next, Anaximenes held that air is god, and that it has a beginning in time, and is immeasurable and infinite in extent, and is always in motion; just as if formless air could be god, especially seeing that it is proper to god to possess not merely some shape but the most beautiful shape; or as if anything that has had a beginning must not necessarily be mortal.

“Then there is Anaxagoras, the successor of Anaximenes; he was the first thinker to hold that the orderly disposition of the universe is designed and perfected by the rational power of an infinite mind. But in saying this he failed to see that there can be no such thing as sentient and continuous activity in that which is infinite, and that sensation in general can only occur when the subject itself becomes sentient by the impact of a sensation. Further, if he intended his infinite mind to be a definite living creature, it must have some inner principle of life to justify the name. But mind is itself the innermost principle. Mind therefore will have an outer integument of body. But this Anaxagoras will not allow; yet mind naked and simple, without any material adjunct to serve as an organ of sensation, seems to elude the capacity of our understanding. Alcmaeon of Croton, who attributed divinity to the sun, moon and other heavenly bodies, and also to the soul, did not perceive that he was bestowing immortality on things that are mortal.

“As for Pythagoras, who believed that the entire substance of the universe is penetrated and pervaded by a soul of which our souls are fragments, he failed to notice that this severance of the souls of men from the world-soul means the dismemberment and rending asunder of god; and that when their souls are unhappy, as happens to most men, then a portion of god is unhappy; which is impossible.

“Again, if the soul of man is divine, why is it not omniscient? Moreover, if the Pythagorean god is pure soul, how is he implanted in, or diffused throughout, the world? Next, Xenophanes endowed the universe with mind, and held that, as being infinite, it was god. His view of mind is as open to objection as that of the rest; but on the subject of infinity he incurs still severer criticism, for the infinite can have no sensation and no contact with anything outside.

“As for Parmenides, he invents a purely fanciful something resembling a crown—*stephanè* is his name for it—an unbroken ring of glowing lights, the sky, encircling the sky, which he entitles god; but no one can imagine this to possess divine form, or sensation. He also has many other portentous notions; he deifies war, strife, lust, and the like, things which can be destroyed by disease or sleep or forgetfulness or lapse of time; and he also deifies the stars, but this has been criticized in another philosopher and need not be dealt with now in the case of Parmenides.

“Empedocles again among many other blunders comes to grief most disgracefully in his theology. He assigns divinity to the four substances which in his system are the constituent elements of the universe, although manifestly these substances both come into and pass out of existence, and are entirely devoid of sensation. Protagoras also, who declares he has no clear views whatever about the gods, whether they exist or do not exist, or what they are like, seems to have no notion at all of the divine nature. Then in what a maze of error is Democritus involved, who at one moment ranks as gods his roving ‘images,’ at another the substance that emits and radiates these images, and at another again the scientific intelligences of man! At the same time his denial of immutability, and therefore of eternity, to everything whatsoever surely involves a repudiation of deity so absolute as to leave no conception of a divine being remaining! Diogenes of Apollonia makes air a god; but how can air have sensation, or divinity in any shape? The inconsistencies of Plato are a long story.

“In the *Timaeus* he says that it is impossible to name the father of the universe; and in the *Laws* he deprecates all inquiry into the nature of the deity. Again, he holds that god is entirely incorporeal (in Greek, *asomatos*); but divine incorporeity is inconceivable, for an incorporeal deity would necessarily be incapable of sensation, and also of practical wisdom, and of pleasure, all of which are attributes essential to our conception of deity. Yet both in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* he says that the world, the sky, the stars, the earth, and our souls are gods, in addition to those in whom we have been taught to believe by ancestral tradition; but it is obvious that these propositions are both

inherently false and mutually destructive.

“Xenophon also commits almost the same errors, though in fewer words; for in his memoir of the sayings of Socrates he represents Socrates as arguing that it is wrong to inquire about the form of god, but also as saying that both the sun and the soul are god, and as speaking at one moment of a single god and at another of several: utterances that involve almost the same mistakes as do those which we quoted from Plato.

“Antisthenes also, in his book entitled *The Natural Philosopher*, says that while there are many gods of popular belief, there is one god in nature, so depriving divinity of all meaning or substance. Very similarly Speusippus, following his uncle Plato, and speaking of a certain force that governs all things and is endowed with life, does his best to root out the notion of deity from our minds altogether. And Aristotle in the Third Book of his *Philosophy* has a great many confused notions, [not] disagreeing with the doctrines of his master Plato; at one moment he assigns divinity exclusively to the intellect, at another he says that the world is itself a god, then again he puts some other being over the world, and assigns to this being the role of regulating and sustaining the world-motion by means of a sort of inverse rotation; then he says that the celestial heat is god—not realizing that the heavens are a part of that world which elsewhere he himself has entitled god.

“But how could the divine consciousness which he assigns to the heavens persist in a state of such rapid motion? Where moreover are all the gods of accepted belief, if we count the heavens also as a god? Again, in maintaining that god is incorporeal, he robs him entirely of sensation, and also of wisdom.

“Moreover, how is motion possible for an incorporeal being, and how, if he is always in motion, can he enjoy tranquillity and bliss? Nor was his fellow-pupil Xenocrates any wiser on this subject. His volumes *On the Nature of the Gods* give no intelligible account of the divine form; for he states that there are eight gods: five inhabiting the planets, and in a state of motion; one consisting of all the fixed stars, which are to be regarded as separate members constituting a single deity; seventh he adds the sun, and eighth the moon. But what sensation of bliss these beings can enjoy it is impossible to conceive.

“Another member of the school of Plato, Heraclides of Pontus, filled volume after volume with childish fictions; at one moment he deems the world divine, at another the intellect; he also assigns divinity to the planets, and holds that the deity is devoid of sensation and mutable of form; and again in the same volume he reckons earth and sky as gods. Theophrastus also is intolerably inconsistent; at one moment he assigns divine pre-eminence to mind, at another to the heavens, and then again to the constellations and stars in the heavens. Nor is his pupil, Strato, surnamed the Natural Philosopher, worthy of attention; in his view the sole repository of divine power is

nature, which contains in itself the causes of birth, growth, and decay, but is entirely devoid of sensation and of form.

“Lastly, Balbus, I come to your Stoic school. Zeno's view is that the law of nature is divine, and that its function is to command what is right and to forbid the opposite. How he makes out this law to be alive passes our comprehension; yet we undoubtedly expect god to be a living being. In another passage, however, Zeno declares that the aether is god—if there is any meaning in a god without sensation, a form of deity that never presents itself to us when we offer up our prayers and supplications and make our vows. And in other books again he holds the view that a ‘reason’ which pervades all nature is possessed of divine power. He likewise attributes the same powers to the stars, or at another time to the years, the months and the seasons. Again, in his interpretation of Hesiod's *Theogony* (or “Origin of the Gods”) he does away with the customary and received ideas of the gods altogether, for he does not reckon either Jupiter, Juno, or Vesta gods, or any being that bears a personal name, but teaches that these names have been assigned allegorically to dumb and lifeless things. Zeno's pupil Aristo holds equally mistaken views. He thinks that the form of the deity cannot be comprehended, and he denies the gods sensation, and in fact is uncertain whether god is a living being at all.

“Cleanthes, who attended Zeno's lectures at the a time as the last-named, at one moment says that the world itself is god, at another gives this name to the mind and soul of the universe, and at another decides that the most unquestionable deity is that remote all-surrounding fiery atmosphere called the aether, which encircles and embraces the universe on its outer side at an exceedingly lofty altitude; while in the books that he wrote to combat hedonism he babbles like one demented, now imagining gods of some definite shape and form, now assigning full divinity to the stars, now pronouncing that nothing is more divine than reason.

“The result is that the god whom we apprehend by our intelligence, and desire to make to correspond with a mental concept as a seal tallies with its impression, has utterly and entirely vanished.

“Persaeus, another pupil of Zeno, says that men have deified those persons who have made some discovery of special utility for civilization, and that useful and health-giving things have themselves been called by divine names; he did not even say that they were discoveries of the gods, but speaks of them as actually divine. But what could be more ridiculous than to award divine honors to things mean and ugly, or to give the rank of gods to men now dead and gone, whose worship could only take the form of lamentation?

“Chrysippus, who is deemed to be the most skillful interpreter of the Stoic dreams, musters an enormous mob of unknown gods—so utterly unknown that even imagination cannot guess at their form and nature, although our mind appears capable

of visualizing anything; for he says that divine power resides in reason, and in the soul and mind of the universe; he calls the world itself a god, and also the all-pervading world-soul, and again the guiding principle of that soul, which operates in the intellect and reason, and the common and all-embracing nature of things; also the power of Fate, and the Necessity that governs future events; beside this, the fire that I previously termed aether; and also all fluid and soluble substances, such as water, earth, air, the sun, moon, and stars, and the all-embracing unity things; and even those human beings who have attained immortality. He also argues that the god whom men call Jupiter is the aether, and that Neptune is the air which permeates the sea, and the goddess called Ceres the earth; and he deals in the same way with the whole series of the names of the gods. He also identifies Jupiter with the mighty Law, everlasting and eternal, which is our guide of and instructress in duty, and which he entitles Necessity or Fate, and the Everlasting Truth of future events; none of which conceptions is of such a nature as to be deemed to possess divinity. This is what is contained in his *Nature of the Gods*, Book I.

“In Book II, he aims at reconciling the myths of Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, and Homer with his own theology as enunciated in Book I, and so makes out that even the earliest poets of antiquity, who had no notion of these doctrines, were really Stoics. In this he is followed by Diogenes of Babylon, who in his book entitled *Minerva* rationalizes the myth of the birth of the virgin goddess from Jove by explaining it as an allegory of the processes of nature.

“I have given a rough account of what are more like the dreams of madmen than the considered opinions of philosophers. For they are little less absurd than the outpourings of the poets, harmful as these have been owing to the mere charm of their style. The poets have represented the gods as inflamed by anger and maddened by lust, and have displayed to our gaze their wars and battles, their fights and wounds, their hatreds, enmities and quarrels, their births and deaths, their complaints and lamentations, the utter and unbridled license of their passions, their adulteries and imprisonments, their unions with human beings and the birth of mortal progeny from an immortal parent. With the errors of the poets may be classed the monstrous doctrines of the magi and the insane mythology of Egypt, and also the popular beliefs, which are a mere mass of inconsistencies sprung from ignorance.

“Anyone pondering on the baseless and irrational character of these doctrines ought to regard Epicurus with reverence, and to rank him as one of the very gods about whom we are inquiring. 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.

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