

# A line of questioning on Epicurean Theology

Post by “Joshua” of August 20, 2022 at 11:44 PM

## Quote

1. Epicurus believed there were real beings existing somewhere in the universe who were eternally blissful, who had bodies that didn't decay, and who took no interest or action in human affairs, and who did NOT create or maintain the universe.

Yes! Just today I read an article by the Catholic Herald from 2019 that uses this formulation: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

It called to my mind one of Hitchens' witticisms.

## Quote

He says that I am an ex-Trotskyist (true), a “popinjay” (true enough, since its original Webster's definition means a target for arrows and shots), and that I cannot hold a drink (here I must protest).

Deism is a precise word with a precise meaning. The [Epicurean gods](#) do not qualify. Epicurus' gods are, in fact, so non-essential in the cosmos that one could (and I do) leave them out entirely. Can we satisfy all of his ethical and epistemological claims without them? I suspect so-- but if not, this is the ethical *raison d'être* of the Idealist view which Don has described. It only remains to speak of epistemology.

There are two points under this heading:

First, the Letter to Menoikeus makes the intriguing claim that knowledge of the gods is "clear", or "engraved on men's minds", or else "plain to see", according to various translations. He seemed to think, like Montaigne, that atheism is "unnatural":

Quoth Montaigne:

## Quote

We are brought to a belief of God either by reason or by force. Atheism being a proposition as unnatural as monstrous, difficult also and hard to establish in the human understanding, how arrogant soever, there are men enough seen, out of vanity and pride, to be the authors of extraordinary and reforming opinions, and outwardly to affect the profession of them; who, if they are such fools, have, nevertheless, not the

power to plant them in their own conscience. Yet will they not fail to lift up their hands towards heaven if you give them a good thrust with a sword in the breast, and when fear or sickness has abated and dulled the licentious fury of this giddy humour they will easily re-unite, and very discreetly suffer themselves to be reconciled to the public faith and examples.

Were I to challenge Epicurus on this point, I would put it to him that he has allowed himself to become "enamored of the single cause", a tendency which he strives to reject in the Letter to Pythocles". That most humans in all times and places have believed in gods does not imply their existence--that is merely one explanation of the phenomena. In the absence of any sensory evidence, why shouldn't the best explanation be found in psychology? In pattern-seeking behavior, confirmation bias, and in our evolutionary tendency to infer agency? To Epicurus' credit, he does manage to avoid all of Montaigne's Platonist bigotry; *It is not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, who is impious, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them.*

And lastly, the second epistemological point that the gods appear to satisfy: the principle of isonomia.

#### Quote

This 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 forces of destruction are beyond count, the forces of conservation must also be infinite.

-Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods

I haven't got much to say about that proposition. I hope I haven't left anything important out, but others may supply my deficiency!