

# **Epicureans and the Ancient Greek Gods (Imagery of "Gods" / "Gods Among Men")**

**Post by "Eikadistes" of February 18, 2019 at 2:02 PM**

Typically, religious imagery is symbolic, and the actual elements of the image aren't considered to be expressive of objective reality. Shape, contour, and color are removed from their natural orientation, and repurposed for the purely symbolic. For example, the picture of Lakshmi depicts a goddess clothed in gold, representing wealth and prosperity (who knows if such a being would have actually preferred yellow tones). We also observe that--though clearly human in form--she has four arms, representing the four, possible aims of life (as identified in Hindu philosophy), being Kama (Sensual Gratification), Artha (Economic Success), Dharma (Spiritual Fulfillment), and Moksha (Transcendental Liberation). Her depiction expresses ideas, and not atoms.

Epicurus warns us against explicitly mythologizing our experience, so attempting to express the 'Ideal Epicurean Being' as an image is incredibly difficult. Like the creator of the image of Lakshmi, we, too, are tasking ourselves with encoding meaning through shape, contour, and color, which requires that we mythologize our experience rather than express it at the atomic level. Thus, we run into frequent discussion about 'the gods' without being able to describe their specific qualities (not generalizations like 'they're made of atoms' or 'they represent the ethical ideal', but specifics like, 'here is a description of their evolutionary history, their location in spacetime, and the biochemical means by which they are capable of maintaining constant pleasure).

It may not be the case that there are any universal images that can adequately express the character of 'the [atomic] gods'. Epicurus doesn't seem to have written any hymns, prescribed prayer rituals, or dedicated any of his writing to Hellenistic deities like Lucretius later did, so I question if Epicurus personally viewed 'the gods' as anything but 'symbolic mental imagery that most people seem to rely upon to orient themselves toward pursuing satisfaction'. I sometimes wonder if Epicurus simply appropriated the symbolic imagery of 'God' as a teaching tool when attempting to instruct religious-minded students, sort of like when atheists rhetorically invoke the Ten Commandments to traditionally-minded Christians to justify their progressive position (like being against Capital Punishment).

In general, I think it might be more appropriate to dig into the imagery of our own experiences if we're trying to find 'the gods'. For some Epicureans, it may have been Epicurus; for other Hellenists, it may have been giant, intergalactic beings who accidentally communicate through dreams; for Nietzsche, it may have been the Ubermensch; for contemporary American youth, it may be superheroes; for contemporary atheists, it may be astronauts; for many of us, it may be parents, mentors, or teachers who provide powerful examples that we can strive to emulate. All

of these people become characters in our mind that allow us to reflect upon the choices we make. Maybe those mental ideations are the same tangible entities that Epicurus called 'the gods'.