

Must an Epicurean believe in gods?

Post by “Joshua” of April 15, 2025 at 7:32 PM

For the six years I've been active here, I've always tried to hold myself to the following two precepts:

- For as long as I stand under Epicurus' banner, I will make a good-faith attempt (given the surviving material) to understand his philosophy as it was understood by his successors.
- When I present his philosophy, I will make a good-faith effort to present it as best as I can understand it. When I am offering my own opinion, I will try to make it clear that that is what I am doing.

I am confident that Epicurus really did accept the existence of 'natural gods', and that he rejected the claim that there were gods (or anything else, for that matter) outside of nature. My understanding is that he believed that gods existed in nature, and as physical beings made of matter. This is what we call the "realist view" of the gods. There is a competing theory, the "idealist view", which holds (again, to my understanding) that Epicurus spoke of the gods as useful thought constructs; images of the good life that we can call to mind, in the same way that we can call the image of Epicurus himself to mind as a goal to strive for.

The idealist view is probably a minority interpretation, but it has distinguished defenders. I believe David Sedley is the chief living proponent of this view. I might be mistaken! [Don](#) might have more to say about this.

We do have a fragment (collected by Usener in his *Epicurea*) in which Epicurus is said to have rejected Atheism;

Quote

[\[U152 \]](#) (link to the Attalus site)

Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Vol. Herc. 1, V.2, fragment VI: he will be frank with the one who has erred and even with him who responds with bitterness. Therefore, Epicurus too, when Leonteus, because of Pythocles, did not admit belief in gods, reproached Pythocles in moderation, and wrote to him {i.e., Leonteus, though Usener renders "Mys"} the so-called "famous letter," taking his point of departure from Pythocles...

With all of that said, my own view is that a good-faith effort to *a.*) understand the information, and *b.*) present the information accurately, does not amount to a requirement to accept everything in it. I do not think the gods exist. It pleases me to think of the Earth itself as a second mother (*alma mater*, "nurturing mother", a phrase first appearing in Lucretius), and the

idealist view of the gods likewise appeals to me. But that's as far as I can get.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Do we disregard this as a mere product of its time or does it play some vital role within epicurean philosophy?

The major problem with casting the gods aside is that doing so challenges Epicurus' view of the anticipations (*prolepsis*) as a canonic or epistemological faculty parallel to the senses (*aisthesis*) and feelings (*pathe*). These three are (for Epicurus) how we acquire knowledge about nature, including human nature, with confidence.

The gods also play a role in our understanding of *isonomia*, the equitable distribution of things in nature. The fact that the atoms *can* come together to bring this world into existence means that there is no bar to them bringing other worlds into existence, and the fact that there living beings on this world means we should expect to find them elsewhere as well. I'll let Norman Dewitt take it from here so that I don't misstate the case;

Quote

It was from this principle [*i.e. of the infinity of the universe in matter and space*] that Epicurus deduced his chief theoretical confirmation of belief in the existence of gods. It was from this that he arrived at knowledge of their number and by secondary deduction at knowledge of their abode. He so interpreted the significance of infinity as to extend it from matter and space to the sphere of values, that is, to perfection and imperfection. In brief, if the universe were thought to be imperfect throughout its infinite extent, it could no longer be called infinite. This necessity of thought impelled him to promulgate a subsidiary principle, which he called *isonomia*, a sort of cosmic justice, according to which the imperfection in particular parts of the universe is offset by the perfection of the whole. Cicero rendered it *aequabilis tributio*, "equitable apportionment." The mistake of rendering it as "equilibrium" must be avoided.

Epicurus and His Philosophy, page 271

Edit; it seems I cross-posted with Godfrey, I agree with what he said!