

Why Epicurus Railed Against Atheists And Questioned Their Sanity

Post by "Cassius" of January 7, 2026 at 10:23 AM

Those who don't dive deeper into understanding Epicurus' precise views of things are likely to be taken aback by the fact (reported by Philodemus) that Epicurus "railed against" and "questioned the very sanity" of atheists. (Quoted by Philodemus, Piet. col. 19, Obbink 1996, 142-143.

Many readers of Epicurus are atheists and don't like this position, and they are even willing to resort to the argument that Epicurus was "playing it safe" so as to avoid the fate of Socrates and Anaxagorus. I categorically reject that explanation and think it's insulting to Epicurus and to anyone who takes Epicurus seriously.

But it's also on its face insufficient to say that Epicurus held that "there are gods because everyone thinks there are." What is meant by "gods" and what is meant by "everyone thinks there are."

I'm starting this thread so we'll have a prominent place to collect references and arguments as to why, from Epicurus' point of view, those who flatly and totally deny the existence of all gods are essentially insane.

And if they are insane, in what constitutes sanity?

Although it doesn't focus on this issue there is a lot of good background information about this topic in David Sedley's ["The Atheist Underground"](#), which is what prompted this thread now.

Of course Epicurus' larger position on the nature of divinity is explained in greatest length by [Velleius in Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods,"](#) so pending further discussion that's the best source of the answer.

The earliest list of atheists

The standard ancient list of supposed atheists is in its earliest form attributed to Epicurus at the end of the fourth century BC, and includes the names of Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias. Epicurus is reported to have railed against them in Book 12 of his *On Nature*, questioning their very sanity.² It would be a mistake to assume, as many have done, that the