

Why Epicurus Railed Against Atheists And Questioned Their Sanity

Post by "Bryan" of January 8, 2026 at 3:54 PM

To get started, let me add some quotes that we are discussing.

From Philodemus:

"...having proposed that we pay attention to the writings of our own men - Epicurus reproached all the madness of those who abolish the divine from existing things - just as, in the 12th [book]: he finds fault with Prodikos, Diagoras, Kritias, and others - saying that they are deranged and insane (παρακόπτειν καὶ μάλινεσθαι). He even likens them to those who go bacchating, commanding [them] to cause no trouble for us, and to not be irritating (ένοχλεῖν). Indeed, they rewrite the names of the gods - just as Antisthenes, insisting on the most general [conception of the gods], attributes the particular [conceptions] to an establishment [by human convention] - and prior to that [an establishment] through some deception."
[Philodemus (fl.c. 70 BCE), On Piety, 1.18.514 - 1.19.541]

*Prodikos, Diagoras, and Kritias were well-known atheists. Antisthenes (fl. 406 BCE) "began the Cynic way of life." He was known for "often" saying "**I would rather be insane than feel pleasure**" [Laertius 6.3]*

And from Epicurus, where he does not say that the Gods are detectible/manifest -- but only that our knowledge of them is:

"Gods, indeed, exist: for our knowledge (ή Γνώσις) of them is detectible (έναργής)." [123c]

And it is good to remember that Epicurus does not call the ideas people develop about gods "false anticipations" -- but instead he says:

"the assertions of the many about the gods are not anticipations (prolépseis) but **false suppositions (hypolépseis)**." [D.L. 124a]