

On the nature of a god

Post by “Michael” of November 2, 2019 at 10:47 AM

To a modern person most familiar with Christianity and kindred religions, [Epicurean gods](#) can seem very odd. Defining characteristics given to a god by Christians and others are lacking in those of the Epicureans. They are not omnibenevolent, omniscient nor omnipotent. In fairness, this makes them far more defensible as being real. Yet it also raises the question as to just what distinguishes gods from mortals. An obvious attribute that is shared with the Abrahamaic God is their immortality. Their eternal blissfulness might be another, though the Abrahamaic God seems less than this in many depictions. Regardless, it seems that a human or other mortal being could in theory also achieve this state. After all, the gods in Epicureanism were formally mortal or at least descend from them. For my part, I think if beings like this exist, as seems quite possible elsewhere in the vast universe, there is little use in worshiping them. I don't know precisely what the Epicureans might be worship though. Was it merely holding them as an ideal to look up to? That at least could be sensible, though I don't know that it's what everyone would call "worship". There is also the issue of whether such beings should be called "gods" and not blissful, immortal space aliens. Perhaps that is a semantic issue, though I'd favor not labeling them gods because there is no clear dividing line between them and other beings, since they too are material, while coming from mortal origins. However, to those who aspire for that state they (or the idea) can serve as an ideal. I personally do not aspire to that, and in any case all of us here doubtless will not live to see such an achievement.

P.S. Please correct me if I've gotten any aspect of the Epicurean view on the gods incorrect here.

Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2019 at 11:31 AM

Good to hear from you Michael! Couple of comments:

[Quote from Michael](#)

After all, the gods in Epicureanism were formally mortal or at least descend from them.

I don't say this to disagree, necessarily, but I don't think this is necessarily supported by the texts either explicitly or inferentially. The texts seem clear about the origin of life on earth, but I am not sure that that necessarily translates into the origin of "the gods" in "the intermundia." I

don't have a proposed explanation but I think the first step in being clear in tracking down Epicurus is to be sure not to bring our own conventional dispositions to the game. If the universe is indeed eternally old as Epicurus said, then I am thinking that it is going to be incorrect to think that there would be a "first" to a natural process, except within a limited scope of observation. "First on Earth" makes sense, but does "first in eternity?"

[Quote from Michael](#)

use in worshipping them

As you point out the definition of "worship" is going to be the key. I get the impression from most all of the texts that the Epicurean attitude is one of "admiration" as much as anything else, but more like we would admire someone who is a paragon of excellence in their field, rather than someone we would fall down before and "worship" as you and I probably think of it.

[Quote from Michael](#)

should be called "gods" and not blissful, immortal space aliens

Yep the terminology issue is always there with us. I am not fluent enough with the Greek to have much insight into the precise words that were chosen, or what they meant to the ancient Epicureans. The Greek concepts of "gods" is probably about as foreign to us today as is the Epicurean concept of gods, so maybe we need to look at it from that point of view, since we really aren't completely comfortable calling Athena or Zeus "gods" either from our modern point of view, but yet we're pretty much used to putting aside our terminology objections in relation to the Roman and Greek gods.

Post by "Michael" of November 3, 2019 at 7:28 PM

That's a fair point on the gods' origins. I guess the inference was mine, thinking the Epicureans would have thought they had a mortal past or ancestors. However, what you say also makes sense in their philosophy.

As for worship, that makes sense as well.

I guess that there will never be one distinct definition of gods. While those of the Epicureans (and other Greeks) may not really qualify by modern standards touched with the Christian view, they did have some attributes of what we'd commonly call divine beings nonetheless, as I mentioned in my post.

Post by “Cassius” of November 3, 2019 at 8:25 PM

Good points. It is hard to get one's mind wrapped around what the implications of "eternal universe" really are, but then it's hard (and I think Epicurus would say much **harder**, since we see things happening in a continual progression all around us, but we never see things pop into existence from nothing) to wrap one's mind around a universe that springs into existence from nothing!

Post by “Hiram” of November 4, 2019 at 10:28 AM

From some of our previous discussions together on the subject. Also notice the link to a "third interpretation to the [Epicurean gods](#)" (the atheist interpretation), which was initially posited by Ilkka in his Menoeceus blog.

<http://societyofepicurus.com/for-there-are-gods/>

<http://societyofepicurus.com/dialogues-on-the-epicurean-gods/>