

# "The Polytheism of the Epicureans" by Paul T. M. Jackson

**Post by "Godfrey" of October 2, 2020 at 9:13 PM**

This paper hit my inbox this week, and it's a worthwhile read presenting a case for the "realist" interpretation of the [Epicurean gods](#). It also has some discussion of the proleptses, as is appropriate when considering the gods:

[The Polytheism of the Epicureans](#)

However the reason that I'm posting this is because of some of the references included. On pages 30-31, he includes the text of a letter purportedly written by Epicurus and found in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri [([wikipedia](#)) and ([google books](#))], with which I'm totally unfamiliar. The source of his reference is an essay by A.J. Festugière, 'Épicure et ses Dieux,' in a 1946 collection *Mythes et Religions*, edited by P.E. Couchoud, publisher Presse Universitaires de France-Paris. Apparently this is translated into English in *Epicurus and His Gods* by C.W. Chilton.

In addition to thoughts on the article, is anybody familiar with any of these sources? I'm curious where else they might lead....

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**Post by "Don" of October 2, 2020 at 10:00 PM**

Thanks for this lead! *Epicurus and His Gods (1955)* by C.W. Chilton is available on Internet Archive for borrowing. Chilton mentions that Festugière used some details from Norman DeWitt's "new" book *Epicurus and his Philosophy* in compiling the life of Epicurus in his book.

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**Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2020 at 3:00 AM**

Yes thank you for this Don! I had the pdf in my collection but can't recall if I have read it. Might as well clip and paste the key letter here. It certainly seems to me to be consistent with Epicurus, though I have no way of commenting on whether it was Epicurus himself who wrote this, or another Epicurean:

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<It is no proof of piety to observe the customary religious obligations – through the offerings of sacrifices> on suitable occasions may be, as I have said, in keeping with nature – nor is it, by Zeus, when someone or other goes about repeating, ‘I fear all the gods, and honour them, and want to spend all my money in making sacrifices, and consecrating offerings to them’. Such a man is perhaps more praiseworthy than other individuals, but still it is not thus that a solid foundation for piety is laid. You, my friend, must know that the most blessed gift is to have a clear perception of things: that is absolutely the best thing that we can conceive of here below. Admire this clear apprehension of the spirit, revere this divine gift. After that, <you should not honour the gods because you think thus to gain their favour>, as people will think when they see you performing acts of piety, but only because, in comparison with your own happiness, you see how the condition of the gods is infinitely more august, according to our doctrine. And certainly, by Zeus, <when you practise> this doctrine – the doctrine most worthy of belief, <as your reason should tell you – it is of course open to you to offer sacrifices to the gods. By doing so you perform> an act which gives confidence and is a pleasure to see, if it is done at the proper time, because you honour your own doctrine by enjoying those pleasures of the senses which befit such occasions and besides you conform in some sense to religious traditions. Only be careful that you do not permit any admixture of fear of the gods or of the supposition that in acting as you do you are winning the favour of the gods. For indeed, in the name of Zeus, [as men affect to say] what have you to fear in this matter? Do

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you believe that the gods can do you harm? Is not that, on any showing, to belittle them? How then will you not regard the divinity as a miserable creature if it appears inferior in comparison to yourself? Or will you rather be of the opinion that by sacrificing thousands of oxen you can appease god if you have committed some evil deed? Can you think that he will take account of the sacrifice and, like a man, remit at some time or another a part of the penalty?

No doubt men tell each other that they should fear the gods and honour them with sacrifices, so that, restrained by the tribute they receive, the gods will not attack them; as a result they think that if their sacrifice is correct they will altogether escape injury and if it is not, all will be well because they pay homage to the power of the gods. But if these close relations <between gods and men were really to exist it would be a great misfortune, for the effect would make itself felt even beyond the grave>, after the funeral ceremonies, as soon as a man was cremated. For then men would suffer injury even beneath the earth and everyone would have to expect punishment. Moreover, I need not describe how men would have to beg for signs of favour from the gods in their fear of being neglected by them (for they would think to induce the gods in this way to communicate with them more readily and come down into their temples), any more than I can tell of the methods they would employ because of their fear of harm and so as to guard against punishment. For to speak the truth all this seems pure illusion of these people when compared with the doctrine of those who think that a life of happiness exists for us in this world and do not admit that the dead live again – a marvel not less unlikely than those which Plato imagined.

This kind of argument seems very sincere to me as a logical extension of his views. Discussion like this is a large part of the reason that I think Epicurus was serious about this view, rather than just creating a screen to protect himself from sanctions against blasphemy.

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## Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 7:42 AM

I've added the citation to the Diels translation of the Oxrhynchus (spelling?) Papyrus to that letter in the Chilton book. Never heard of this letter, but will be hunting for Diels. Wish I could read German!

Where did you get your clip from, [Cassius](#) ? I saw your footnote 77 at the end of yours, but mine were different.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 9:33 AM

Hmm-- I clipped that off the version that I had downloaded some time ago. Looks like I downloaded it in 2016 but I confess I can't remember where I got it! [pasted-from-clipboard.png](#) I went through a period downloading a lot from Jstor, but this looks more like a version from Academia because I don't see any identifying markings on my original.

As for German, I know Martin has limited time, but he's been very helpful with some translation work in the past.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 9:38 AM**

Here's my Archive link: <https://archive.org/details/epicur...age/71/mode/1up>

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 9:50 AM**

Don I hope I have not misunderstood your reference. I have a PDF of the Polytheism article where the clip above comes from, but I do also have A PDF of the Chilton translation of Festugière, and a hard copy of Chilton's book on Diogenes of Oinoanda, so I may have botched my reference above.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 10:34 AM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Don I hope I have not misunderstood your reference. I have a PDF of the Polytheism article where the clip above comes from, but I do also have A PDF of the Chilton translation of Festugière, and a hard copy of Chilton's book on Diogenes of Oinoanda, so I may have botched my reference above.

No problem 😊 I just didn't want to be missing some juicy tidbit.

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## Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 1:22 PM

Check out the actual *Oxrhynchus papyrus* here:

<https://archive.org/details/oxyrhy...age/30/mode/1up>

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 4:55 PM

Thank you Don! I always appreciate the thoroughness of sources that reprint a facsimile of the text itself so we can see visually how much fragmentation and how much reconstruction is involved.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of December 14, 2024 at 3:28 PM

I just revisited the essay linked by [Godfrey](#) in the opening post.

One of the considerations that seems to get shunted aside in discussions of the [Epicurean gods](#) (especially from a realist perspective, but also from an idealist one) is that the Athenian gods that Epicurus venerated (like the gods of other polytheisms) “embodied” (or at least represented) various, specific associations in their personae. Dionysus was the god associated with wine, viticulture and theater (especially *comedia*); Hestia was guardian of the hearth, hospitality and home fires (and public fires maintained for religious purposes); Gaia personified this earth; and on and on ...

If they become no more than muddled signifiers for some vague notion of blissful divinity (whatever that is!), living in the intermundia – they become little more than blurry abstractions, far removed from either the Greek pantheon (even with superstitious flaws removed by Epicurus) or psychological archetypes.

Personally, I am in the idealist camp – but I am hesitant to project that back onto Epicurus. In any event, ghostly “divinities” – with little even metaphorical “flesh” – abiding in some intermundia seem thoroughly uninteresting. I wouldn’t even know how to consider them from a psychological/archetypal/meditative point of view, absent those very specific associations.

Archetypal personae, with specifically defined associations – whether physically real or not – are another story ...

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 14, 2024 at 4:16 PM

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

One of the considerations that seems to get shunted aside in discussions of the [Epicurean gods](#) (especially from a realist perspective, but also from an idealist one)

I agree that needs more attention. Many people seem to take it for granted that [Epicurean gods](#) equate to Zeus and his crowd, and I doubt very much that that is a good assumption at all.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of December 14, 2024 at 4:30 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Many people seem to take it for granted that [Epicurean gods](#) equate to Zeus and his crowd, and I doubt very much that that is a good assumption at all.

Color me - totally unsure at this point, one way or the other. At least in terms of archetypes that Epicurus would have been familiar with. 🤔

But some abstracted notion of “blissful divinity” (again, whatever that might mean?!) seems - to put it mildly - unsatisfying and unrelatable. From either a realist or idealist perspective. Absent specific associations, merely pluralizing “divinity” would seem to be a semantically empty “difference without distinction.”

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## Post by “Pacatus” of December 14, 2024 at 4:54 PM

BTW, here is a link to David Konstans' chapter, "Epicurus on the gods," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, edited by [Jeffrey Fish](#), Baylor University, Texas, [Kirk R. Sanders](#), University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign:

[https://www.academia.edu/48868154/Epicurus\\_on\\_the\\_gods](https://www.academia.edu/48868154/Epicurus_on_the_gods).

I know it's been discussed on here before. (Maybe I'm just catching up ... 😞 )