

# Can Emotions be Trusted?

**Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 8:58 AM**

Epicureanism is unique among classical schools of philosophy in its regard for emotions as a source of guidance and wisdom, even over reason. From DeWitt, pg. 23, we have:

“...two opposing interpretations of the phrase “living according to Nature.” To the Stoics, who hitched their wagon to Plato’s star, it signified the imitation of the inflexible celestial order by a rigid unemotional morality. To Epicurus and the Epicureans, “living according to Nature,” though they never made a slogan of it, signifies living according to the laws of our being. Of this being the emotions were recognized as a normal and integral part, undeserving of suspicion or distrust.”

I’m struggling with the idea that emotions can be trusted as a clear guide towards what will confer the greatest pleasure/happiness. It seems to me we have all learned that we must use reason to overcome emotions constantly in order to avoid negative repercussions. There are so many instances of emotions that should not inform behaviour or decision-making, that I can hardly think of any that can be trusted. Our natural instincts are generally pretty dreadful, as evidenced by the mistakes of our youth! Think of the most emotional people you know. Are they also the happiest? Surely not.

My question is when, and in what sense, can our natural emotions ever be trusted as a guide for behaviour?

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**Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 9:05 AM**

Darn. How do I do insert an image?

And then how do I delete this after typing the quote in instead? ☐☐

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**Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 10:31 AM**

I am \*SO\* glad you started this thread. I've been meaning to address this too.

I'm slowly coming around to the following understanding which may or may not be shared by others on this forum.

The problem is the English words "feeling" or "emotion." The connotation of this is that we "go with our gut." If using "our gut" is the only criteria, that's not what Epicurus meant. We also don't use happy, sad, angry, contempt, surprised, etc.

The key term about the criteria in the original text from Diogenes Laertius's Lives (X.34), is pathē: "and they say the pathē are two: pleasure (hēdonēn) and pain (algēdona)." I've come to the understanding that a better translation would be "response" or "reaction" instead of "feeling" or "emotion". We can have two reactions - pleasure or pain - to all of our experiences. That reaction helps us make decisions to choose or reject a course of action. That reaction is not the only criteria of course. We need the evidence from our physical senses and our mental perceptions and prolepses.

That's a brief summary of my understanding.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 10:44 AM**

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Darn. How do I do insert an image?

And then how do I delete this after typing the quote in instead? ☐☐

I think you can only insert image from link issuing the "picture" icon in the second row. there's also the stack file option.

You can also do a lot using the first icon on the top row with the "</>" that allows you to see the html.

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### **Post by “Martin” of October 7, 2020 at 10:48 AM**

With respect to what is pleasure and what is pain, we trust our emotions. This does not create trouble because with respect to the decision what action to take, we use reason overriding emotions to produce results which we expect to be pleasure which is worth the pain we incur during or as a side effect of the action.

Anger is an emotion which I usually try to diffuse and will certainly override with reason when taking action. On occasion, anger may provide good motivation to take action, whereby the action is still decided upon by reason.

Love for trusted friends is an emotion which may sometimes guide my actions with reasoning reduced to sanity checks.

While drafting the paragraph, I did not notice Don's comment. But at first sight, there is no contradiction between his comment and mine.

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### **Post by “Martin” of October 7, 2020 at 11:06 AM**

If the image is from a webpage, you can open the image in a new tab, copy the link from that tab and paste it under link upon clicking the image icon in the top bar of the new comment box.

If you want to upload the image from your computer, create the comment first, than choose edit in the comment box and proceed with upload.

To delete parts of an already made comment, choose edit in the comment box and delete as in any electronic document.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 11:10 AM**

Quote from Martin

With respect to what is pleasure and what is pain, we trust our emotions.

The way that's worded, it sounds to me like you're adding another layer to the criteria of truth by saying "we trust our emotions." The reaction of pleasure and pain is precognitive. Our experience of pleasure or pain shouldn't be mediated by another layer of reason or anything else. The pathē are two. Period. Yes, we can take that initial "reaction" into account in our

determination of what to choose and what to reject, but the pleasure or pain reaction is not meant to be second-guessed.

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### **Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 11:17 AM**

Thanks, Don - that makes WAY more sense: decisions based on emotional reactions rather than emotional impulses. I obviously balked at the way DeWitt put it. You can't go by anticipated reaction either, until you have gained the wisdom of experience. So you could argue, the young are not good Epicureans, despite their hedonism, because they lack experience in what will reliably and safely confer pleasure or pain.

As you say, Martin, we use reason to make our best guesses until experience fills in the gap.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 11:23 AM**

#### [Quote from Susan Hill](#)

So you could argue, the young are not good Epicureans, despite their hedonism, because they lack experience in what will reliably and safely confer pleasure or pain.

And I think this is why Epicurus says in the Letter to Menoikeus that the one who is young can get the benefits of growing old by being fearless in looking ahead and weighing the consequences of their actions in the future, i.e., seeing themselves as being older.

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### **Post by “Martin” of October 7, 2020 at 11:25 AM**

By trusting our emotions I mean that we do not negate the precognitive reaction. In case of doubt what I mean, Don's more precise wording shall override what I wrote.

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### **Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 11:35 AM**

I will try your tips re inserting images, gentlemen. I actually did it once before, but that was on a laptop. It does not seem to be as straightforward on a cellphone.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2020 at 11:52 AM**

Susan images should work basically the same way on both desktop or cell, so let us know if you still have problems. I don't know that I have tried on a cell phone so you may have run into something we need to look into.

As to the merits, I think I am in agreement with most of what I have read here. I would analogize this to "trust your eyesight." You know that there are times that your vision is blurry or that there is fog or other reasons that can distort your vision, and require you to check and recheck over time what you are seeing. But sight, regardless, remains one of the canonical faculties and you "trust" it in the sense of "honestly reported" as by a witness in court, using DeWitt's analogy.

I think exactly the same applies to feelings. I think Don's point about reactions is valid but ultimately the words that we understand and apply include feelings, emotions, etc. The main point is that like sight and hearing, feelings are honestly reported to us. They are what they are, and they are to be dealt with accordingly.

Lot's of people advise us to be "in touch with our feelings" and that is a less revolutionary way to look at it but probably similar to what Epicurus was advising.

Probably the main thing to keep in mind is that Epicurus never promises that the canonical faculties, even the five senses, are some automatic and magical gateway to "truth." The opinions we form from our senses are quite frequently wrong at first thought, and maybe even wrong over a lifetime. The same observation applies to feelings. The Canon does not guarantee us omnipotence or omniscience. It is simply and factually the only thing we have that is an "ultimate" faculty for us with which to discover truth. No one guarantees us that we will in fact discover "truths" about everything we'd like to know. The canonical faculties are what are real to us, but that doesn't mean that we are going to use them intelligently.

Over time, and with experience and even training, emotional reactions can become much more accurate, at least for some people. Some people are even known to pay respects to the accuracy of something known as "a woman's intuition" about which I personally know nothing!



### **Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 12:21 PM**

Thank you for your reply, Cassius. I see the little picture icon that allows for a web link to an image, but I can't figure out how to upload an image from my phone.

About feelings being our best guide to truth... Is it the philosophy that Nature actively created the pleasure/pain faculty in us to guide us towards wise action (implying a kind of providence), or would Epicurus have actually seen it as modern evolutionary theory would: a byproduct of natural selection?

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### **Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 12:25 PM**

I'd say byproduct of natural selection. Providence has too much the ring of the supernatural to me.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 12:31 PM**

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

About feelings being our best guide to truth.

Now wait, i did not say THAT did I? 😊

That would probably be going too far. As I read what Epicurus was saying, they are one of the three legs of the canon of truth (and I say with DeWitt that Epicurus was right, and there are only three, not four). So it is important that they function together and one not be elevated as primary over the others, always keeping in mind too that "truth" is something that has to be carefully defined.

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

philosophy that Nature actively created the pleasure/pain faculty in us to guide us towards wise action (implying a kind of providence), or would Epicurus have actually seen it as modern evolutionary theory would: a byproduct of natural selection?

I go with DeWitt here and would say that it must be the latter -- that Nature did not "actively" or "intentionally" steer things in this direction for us. Nature as a whole has no consciousness or intent.

However, if you'd like to add a layer of "mystery" to this to compensate for the lack of "intent" by nature, I think that similar "mind-blowing" implications can be found in the doctrines of eternity/infinity. I do not think that Epicurus would say that there was ever a "first" intelligent life -- yes a first intelligent life on Earth, for example, but not in the universe as a whole. The implication is that intelligent life, like the universe itself, would have existed eternally in time. (And this is not even considering the category of "gods.") if so, I think it is entirely possible in fact likely that there are and have been and will be instances of intelligent life spreading through the universe from location to location, as we are about to do to the Moon, Mars, and hopefully beyond.

We always have to go on evidence rather than rank speculation, but I rule out nothing in that regard, and it's a pretty clear implication of the issues of isonomia and "nature never creates a single thing of a kind" which are noted in Lucretius and in the Epicurean part of Cicero's *On The Nature of The Gods*. But the main point is that I think we have to consider the implications of intelligent life being a category that has existed back infinitely in time, just like planets or star systems or other combinations of matter that we know, by the fact that they exist here, are possible.

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### **Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 1:05 PM**

Quote from Cassius

As I read what Epicurus was saying, they are one of the three legs of the canon of truth (and I say with DeWitt that Epicurus was right, and there are only three, not four).

Personally, I'm still not convinced that the prolepses and mental perceptions aren't the same "leg" of the Canon called by different names.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 1:22 PM**

Yes that's possible Don, and maybe Diogenes Laertius was just confused. Or maybe you can examine that sentence and find a way that it doesn't add up to their being four.

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### Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 1:35 PM

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

Yes that's possible Don, and maybe Diogenes Laertius was just confused. Or maybe you can examine that sentence and find a way that it doesn't add up to their being four.

Challenge accepted! 😁

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### Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2020 at 1:55 PM

Ha - be careful about how deep that challenge might lead. It is my understanding that most of the contemporary Epicureans in Greece are big fans of there being "Four" criteria of truth, so it may lead to an international conflict!

Just today, in my messenger:



### Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 2:55 PM

That's.... quite the cover photo. Now I \*really\* want to dig in 😊

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**Post by “Godfrey” of October 7, 2020 at 4:08 PM**

Great discussion!

@Susan Hill I add images from my phone or tablet using the paper clip icon (next to the emoji icon) below where I'm entering text and above the "reply" and "preview" buttons. It opens a dialog for attaching files; there is a maximum file size which you need to be aware of.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of October 7, 2020 at 4:12 PM**



In the dialog there's a "thumbnail" button to place it in the message like this.

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**Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 5:56 PM**

Don as to your comment on that book cover, I will follow up with "Babis" on this and get back to you.

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**Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 6:10 PM**

Oh, Babis is their name!! Babis the Epicurean! Now it makes sense! I was trying to figure out what a Μπάμπης was!

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**Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 6:47 PM**

If you understand how "Babis" is derived from that Greek word, please explain it to me! Elli tried to several times, but it never stuck with me. 😊

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**Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 6:49 PM**

Thanks, Cassius, re your comment about intelligence/consciousness being eternal and therefore intrinsic to the universe. Very interesting! I have encountered ideas like this - That the laws of physics are such that ever greater complexity is naturally and repeatedly produced, leading all the way up to consciousness. I'll chew on that one as I continue reading. 😊

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**Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 6:58 PM**

It has been a busy day and ever since I typed that I was concerned that I left out this important caveat: that of course we're not talking about individual consciousnesses having any continuance; that's specifically ruled out by other Epicurean theory -- what I am suggesting just applies to life forms as categories, not individuals.

And yes, in the way you stated it, all the way "up" not just to consciousness but to the state postulated to be that of the Epicurean "gods."

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**Post by “Don” of October 7, 2020 at 7:01 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If you understand how "Babis" is derived from that Greek word, please explain it to me!  
Elli tried to several times, but it never stuck with me. 😊

😊 I'll take that challenge too.

μπ mp is pronounced like "b" in modern Greek.

(β b is pronounced like "v" βιβλία biblia "vivlia)

η ē in Ancient Greek is now pronounced like I ("ee")

So, Μπάμπης Mrampes = "Babis"

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**Post by "Susan Hill" of October 7, 2020 at 7:14 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

of course we're not talking about individual consciousnesses having any continuance;  
that's specifically ruled out by other Epicurean theory

Didn't Epicurus outline a physics for immortal gods?

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**Post by "Susan Hill" of October 7, 2020 at 7:24 PM**

Godfrey, it is so odd - I do not have that paperclip icon anywhere anymore on laptop, iPhone, or iPad, except in the private conversations dialog. Instead, I have three buttons: "Smilies", "Settings", and "Poll". Maybe it is an administrator-set permission checkbox somewhere..

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**Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2020 at 7:34 PM**

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Didn't Epicurus outline a physics for immortal gods?

Yes you are right about that -- that's in the Velleius section of "On The Nature of the Gods." Once again I was not complete -- thanks for catching me - I need to ditch all my other activities so I can spend full time with this! 😊 I suppose there's a caveat there, too, however, in that DeWitt parses it to say that Epicurus himself did not directly claim the gods to be immortal, but only deathless, with the apparent distinction that they could die, if they stopped their regenerating activity for some reason.

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**Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2020 at 7:37 PM**

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Godfrey, it is so odd - I do not have that paperclip icon anywhere anymore on laptop, iPhone, or iPad, except in the private conversations dialog. Instead, I have three buttons: "Smilies", "Settings", and "Poll". Maybe it is an administrator-set permission checkbox somewhere..

That is weird, I have not noticed that before -- perhaps you are right it is a levels thing. I am going to move you to level 3, Susan, in just a moment -- so see if that fixes it.

You're now level three -- do you have the paperclip icon now? (spelled out as "Attachments" on the desktop)?

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**Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2020 at 7:45 PM**

Congratulations, Don! That is every bit as opaque to me as when Elli tried to explain it to me! 😊 That means your explanation is every bit as clear to me as that of a natural born Greek! 😊 I suppose I was raised on too many "It's Greek to me!" jokes! OK it is slowly dawning on me - maybe.

😊 I'll take that challenge too.  
μπ μπ is pronounced like "b" in modern Greek.  
(β b is pronounced like "v" βιβλία biblia "vivlia)  
η ē in Ancient Greek is now pronounced like I ("ee")  
So, Μπάμπης Μραμπές = "Babis"

This post has previous versions that are saved.

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### Post by "Susan Hill" of October 7, 2020 at 7:48 PM

Sweeeet... Look who's Level 3!!! <-----

(Notice attachment.)----->>[tenor.gif](#)

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### Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 7:51 PM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

of course we're not talking about individual consciousnesses having any continuance; that's specifically ruled out by other Epicurean theory

Didn't Epicurus outline a physics for immortal gods?

I've found it interesting in my work on the Menoikeus letter (and in KD1) that Epicurus uses "imperishable" specifically to describe the gods. He may use those terms elsewhere, but that's what I'm remembering right now.

You're welcome to see my post and errata on that in the other thread. Here's an excerpt:

Quote

ἄφθαρτον = aphtharton LSJ gives the definition of "incorruptible, eternal, immortal, uncorrupted, undecaying" and gives references to Epicurus, Philodemus, and Diogenes of Oenoanda. At its root, the word is α- "not" + φθαρτον "destructible, perishable." LSJ states φθαρτον is the opposite of αἰδιος = aidios "everlasting, eternal" (related to αἰεί "ever, always") which poses an interesting question: Why did Epicurus choose to use ἄφθαρτον instead of αἰδιος or ἀθάνατος? φθαρτον is related to θνητός = thnētos "liable to death, mortal, opposite: ἀθάνατος [athanatos]" (LSJ) φθαρτον is connected to the verb φθείρω = phtheirō "destroy, pass away, cease to be, perish." It seems that Epicurus didn't want to evoke that the gods were simply immortal or eternal but that he wanted to impress upon us the sense that they would not pass away or cease to be. This is in contrast to everything else composed of atoms and void. Everything else is subject to be φθαρτον; only the gods are ἄφθαρτον! How can this be? Could it be that they are ἄφθαρτον precisely because they are mental perceptions, because we do have a Prolepsis of them (More on this difficult term later!)

I'm also not entirely convinced that the gods exist as a mental perception only. That's why they'd be imperishable. Still working my way through that!

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## Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 7:51 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Congratulations, Don! That is every bit as opaque to me as when Elli tried to explain it to me! 😊 That means your explanation is every bit as clear to me as that of a natural born Greek! 😊 I suppose I was raised on too many "It's Greek to me!" jokes! OK it is

😊 I'll take that challenge too.  
μπ μπ is pronounced like "b" in modern Greek.  
(β b is pronounced like "v" βιβλία biblia "vivlia")  
η ē in Ancient Greek is now pronounced like i ("ee")  
So, Μπάμπης Μρampes = "Babis"

This post has previous versions that are saved.

LOL 😂

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**Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 7:56 PM**

Wow! Impressive detail! That's brilliant. Thank you, Don!

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**Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 7:58 PM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus uses "imperishable" specifically to describe the gods. He may use those terms elsewhere, but that's what I'm remembering right now.

Yep. There's just too many clear statements in the texts to think he was being totally allegorical.

As for immortal and imperishable I suppose part of the issue too is whether they were deemed "eternal" as having existed from the infinite past. I don't know anything clear on that . It's tempting to think that they too "evolved" over time, but we're faced with the same issue of time stretching back into the infinite past, with the implication that whatever is now, could/should have also existed somewhere in the infinite past as well, since there is no reason to postulate (and probably it's the reverse, in fact, many reasons NOT to postulate) a single "starting point" for them.

(Again, as a class, not necessarily as individuals.)

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**Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2020 at 8:07 PM**

What thread are we in? On trusting emotions, or discussing gods? 😊 Well anyway to extend the tangent, I think peoples' positions on the reality of [Epicurean gods](#) may relate to the [recent excursion I took into Frances Wright's views](#), where I see she extended her personal position on "no speculation" much further than I think Epicurus himself did.

~~quarrel with his neighbor, who perhaps only employs~~  
other words to express the same ideas. For myself, pretending to no insight into these mysteries, possessing no means of intercourse with the inhabitants of other worlds, confessing my absolute incapacity to see either as far back as a first cause, or as far forward as a last one, I am content to state to you, my fellow creatures, that all my studies, reading, reflection, and observation, have obtained for me no knowledge beyond the sphere of our planet, our earthly interests, and our earthly duties; and that I more than doubt, whether, should you expend all your time and all your treasure in the search, you will be able to acquire

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Some people (Frances Wright) are just not interested in speculating about life in the rest of the universe, since there is so little evidence on which to speculate. They don't see that as necessary or appropriate, and think that Epicurus would have felt the same way.

Other people (me included) think that responding to positions taken by religion are too important to take a total "I don't know and I don't care" attitude, so we extend what we see here on Earth to take a position on what we would expect to see in the rest of the universe, and we think it would be totally natural to find life elsewhere, and that humans are not the most advanced form of life.

I think those who take the position that gods are allegorical only are probably heavily weighted toward the Frances Wright point of view, which I can understand, but don't share. ( I refer here to the true fans of Epicurus, who agree with Epicurus on general but not on the gods. The anti-Epicureans who allege that he was just hiding from the anti-blasphemy rules are outside this analysis.)

I think Epicurus felt there were compelling reasons to take a position on issues about the place of earth and humanity in the universe as a whole. If that's true, then these positions on life on other worlds, and the existence of a class of a sort of "gods" were just the conclusions he reached based on his views of the probable implications of the physics. From my viewpoint, I would expect that Epicurus really didn't see those positions as stretches or overreaches at all, and that he was totally serious about them as the natural extension of his physics.

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**Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 8:43 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

### [Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus uses "imperishable" specifically to describe the gods. He may use those terms elsewhere, but that's what I'm remembering right now.

Yep. There's just too many clear statements in the texts to think he was being totally allegorical.

Oh, I don't think he was (necessarily) being allegorical. He clearly states in Menoikeus: θεοί εἰσιν. "Gods exist. There are gods."

But I'm not convinced that the general concept of gods within Epicurean circles was of living beings. Doesn't Sedley talk about the gods being mental constructs? I'm leaning more in that direction. Just because they're mental constructs doesn't mean they don't exist. Natural justice exists. Friendship exists. Why not the gods in the same way?

Talk about a tangent!!

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of October 7, 2020 at 8:54 PM**

Continuing on the tangent, the article that I linked to at the beginning of the thread [The Polytheism of the Epicureans](#) is a good and fairly brief presentation of the realist viewpoint. I've tended to follow the idealist take, but this got me thinking...🤔

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### **Post by "Don" of October 7, 2020 at 8:59 PM**

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Continuing on the tangent, the article that I linked to at the beginning of the thread [The Polytheism of the Epicureans](#) is a good and fairly brief presentation of the realist viewpoint. I've tended to follow the idealist take, but this got me thinking...🤔



I'm intrigued again [Godfrey](#) (Don runs off to read and re-read that article...)

## Post by “Joshua” of October 7, 2020 at 10:43 PM

Re: photos—I still have trouble embedding photos from Imgur when I'm using my cellphone. But that's mostly an Imgur problem. Much easier on the laptop!

Re: emotions—I like the distinction that Don is drawing between feelings/emotions and 'reactions'. But in a weird way, I can answer one of Susan's questions with a bit of a story. One of the most emotional people I've ever known seemed very happy.

He was a professor of Creative Writing and English Literature, as well as a musician, a poet, and a sort of hobby farmer. He was candid to a degree that was something formidable, bordering on gruff, and though clean-shaven, he looked as weathered as an old post. He had no time for bad writing; once when I was less wise but thought myself clever, I responded to a disagreeable essay assignment by writing it in Heroic Couplets—the most overwrought of verses. It was a cheap shot, which of course he saw right through. I received it back with copious notes, and a rubber-stamped, red ink heading at the top with these words: "**Are you sure you want to turn this in?**" I wondered how long it had been since he'd trotted that gem out. It didn't matter that I was among the best writers in my year. It was a bad essay, and we both knew it.

And yet, here's the thing; *good* writing was his claimed share of the food of the gods. It was what he seemed to live for, and when he found it, his haggard exterior quickened to a window into his soul. When I read Lucretius, where he writes that *the shape of ever-flourishing Homer arose and wept salt tears*, I see him still—intoning a few tender lines of poetry with a voice like a bassoon, as he clears his eyes by drying them.

### Quote

He will be more deeply moved by feelings than others, but this will not prove to be an obstacle to wisdom. Epicurus