

# Introductory Video on Epicurean Gods and the Three Responses

**Post by “Susan Hill” of October 29, 2020 at 7:07 AM**

I thought this video was a well-designed intro. Towards the end, it elucidates the approaches of the realist, the idealist, and the atheist positions.

<https://youtu.be/pmO-s9qkrGA>

---

**Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2020 at 7:47 AM**

Ha! That's a very logical thing to post, but you have hit upon a sensitive area that I want to immediately comment on even before watching this video (which I don't recall from memory).

Speaking for myself only, I've had significant back and forth discussion with Hiram (leader of the Society of Epicurus) for many years, and I consider him a friend within the broad meaning of that word. I wish him success in his Epicurean endeavors, but there are many important differences in the approach which Hiram has chosen to pursue vs what I and a number of the other core regulars have chosen to pursue. One way of getting a handle on those differences would be to review the very long thread here: [Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19](#)

I will need to watch the video before commenting further, but I think we all should be honest with ourselves and with each other about our own dispositions. I am personally not well disposed toward "eastern" philosophies or their cultural aspects, because I associate them in my mind with viewpoints about life which I find unattractive and which I think conflict with Epicurean philosophy at very basic levels. Obviously not everyone has the same associations and same reactions, and it's helpful to everyone to explore and understand differences so as to better understand the issues and what they think themselves.

I don't like to air my own dispositions any more than necessary, but I do so in this case because in past years there have clearly been different "camps" among our friends, consisting of those who are well-disposed toward "eastern cultural symbolism" and those who "are not" (to put it mildly). I am definitely not the only one in that camp but I probably ought not reference anyone but myself. So as a general principle of the forum I think our core people have had a consensus

to focus on Greco-Roman/Epicurean material as a means of building our own community, deemphasizing "eclecticism" in favor of first and primarily highlighting and understanding the Epicurean tradition.

I want to stress that these comments aren't directed at Susan for posting this or at Hiram for having the views and methods that he does, but just to set a reminder baseline of some background history.

---

**Post by “Don” of October 29, 2020 at 7:52 AM**

Oops! I don't find a link after your "here" above, [Cassius](#) .

---

**Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2020 at 7:55 AM**

That's because I was so furiously typing on this subject with comments i think are pretty important that I wanted to be sure to get in as the second poster! 😊

it's updated now.

---

**Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2020 at 7:58 AM**

Oh this is an August 2020 video so I have not seen it yet -- is that Alan's voice and is this primarily his video?

---

**Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2020 at 8:27 AM**

Did I hear it correctly at 1:58 that it is foolish to celebrate festivals "if gods are indifferent to us?"

That's way too ambiguous. As stated (if I heard correctly) it is a statement that gods take an interest in us. I feel sure that the texts (even Philodemus) don't say that, and that the point is rather more like "the issue of divinity is not a matter of indifference to us" which is a totally different point.

That's one precise point of the video we need to examine.

Edit 1: I want to be fair and say that a lot of effort went into the video and there are parts I think are good. I particular liked the graphic of the couple climbing the mountain as appropriate for what was said from about 3:00 to about 3:45

At the 5:00 minute mark or so there is a strong assertion that people "originally" had better anticipations of the gods than later. I question the accuracy of that statement.

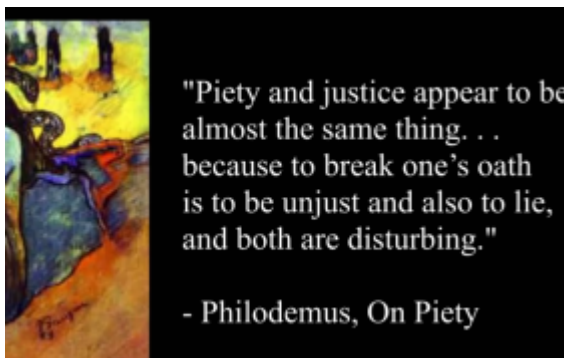
I think it's dangerous and not warranted to imply to close a relationship between Epicurus and Theodorus the Cyreniac.

At 6:50, a reference to natural selection in the development of the gods? I have to think that is a pure overlay on the part of the commentator and I don't know of any text reference that would support that (?), as it would be taking a position on whether gods have a beginning, which I don't recall there to be anything on (?)

At 7:26 Epicurus advised us to pray? Are we sure of that specifically?

At 8:00 he cites George Kaplanis, who is Elli's friends. I am not able to confirm immediately what George's views are but just making a note that knowing his more complete views would be useful for evaluating the quote.

At 9:22 the reference to "Epicurean justice based on social contract" is a loaded reference to a very controversial subject.



As to that, oh no - quoting very specific material like that without drilling down to the precise text to determine its context and what extent it is reconstructed vs trustworthy is very dangerous. This concern I have underlies everything about many of the texts of Philodemus,

which are except in rare instances in very poor condition. Maybe this particular translation is rock solid, but these texts don't deserve the same deference as Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, or some of the other core texts.

I would repeat that caution with much more force in regard to this quote about "doing no harm to anyone" and "make themselves harmless to everyone" and "make themselves noble."

"Those who believe our oracles about the Gods will first wish to imitate their blessedness, insofar as mortals can, so that, since it was seen to come from doing no harm to anyone, they will endeavor most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone as far as it is within their power, and second, to make themselves noble. . . "

- Philodemus, *On Piety*

Same caveat here and on every reference to "noble"

"The just person has noble expectations concerning the Gods, and at the same time exceedingly enjoys pleasures that are unalloyed and effortless."

- Philodemus, *On Piety*

At 11:47: "the true purpose of religion, which is to abide in pleasure." Making note of this as a very broad statement which may be easy to misinterpret.

At 12:50 it is suggested that the "realist" view of gods (a term i don't like) was the "original" view of the Epicureans, but that "some later" Epicureans adopted an idealist interpretations. Who is he referring to here as the "some later Epicureans"? I think he's probably referring to Hiram himself and current people now alive, because I am not aware that any actual ancient Epicurean from the ancient world and familiar with the texts took that position. That is a huge point and should not be glossed over. The "idealist" interpretation is not supported by any credible ancient Epicurean, so far as I know. If there are such examples it would be important to bring them forward and highlight them, because otherwise I think the inference from the evidence is that anyone who was actually an Epicurean and had access to Epicurean texts either followed Epicurus and considered them "real," or implied that Epicurus was lying about the whole thing.

---

**Post by "Susan Hill" of October 29, 2020 at 9:01 AM**

Oops, sorry, I didn't know. It sounds like there has already been a schism, of sorts. Nine pages in that thread regarding differences of view... That's pretty significant.

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of October 29, 2020 at 9:11 AM**

Yes there has, Susan, but I think it is critical to (1) not let personalities get in the way of understanding, and (2) that we find ways to continue cooperation and to work together even where there is not complete unanimity.

The most difficult issue is to decide when an issue rises to such a level that we can't accept anything less than totally separating ourselves from another person or approach.

And I don't think it is something that can be decided by statistics (a reference to another current discussion! 😊 ) We can be 98% in agreement with someone else, but if we find that 2% is critically important then we often ignore the sheer quantity of agreement.

What I find so frustrating is that I think THESE are the issues that are core to what Epicurus was teaching, and it's THESE issues (divinity, methods of inference, infinity and eternity and non-supernaturalness) that we need to focus on and understand. and I don't think modern discussion of Epicurus has even broken the surface of this.

Instead, the commentators are hyperfocused on "the greatest pleasure is the absence of pain" and they ignore all of these deeper issues which I think alone can allow someone to understand what Epicurus was saying about pleasure.

I am glad you posted the video because I don't think I was aware of it and this gives us the chance to review it. I regret that people coming across videos like this will think as a result of watching them that the statements made in them are absolutely correct and true to Epicurus, because many of them I don't think are correct at all. But in the end all that any of us can do is the best we can -- all we can do is present our positions and our reasons for taking those positions.

---

### **Post by "Don" of October 29, 2020 at 2:46 PM**

Through my work on the Letter to Menoikeus, I'm not convinced that the idealist perspective isn't plausible due to the ambiguity of some of the Greek.

---

## Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2020 at 3:50 PM

The issue there may be in how we are applying the terms realist and idealist, since those are our terms rather than based in the texts. I am thinking that the letter supports that Epicurus held both that they are real and that they serve as aspirational models, and that he saw no conflict between the two observations. Is that what you infer?

(Ha - I should not say "our" terms, because I don't like them and would never suggest that there is any reason to separate them.)

---

## Post by “Don” of October 29, 2020 at 7:17 PM

Okay, so here's the first draft of my notes on the section of Menoikeus to which I was referring. I apologize for the length! 123 refers to Diogenes's Book X:123.:

**123b. πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη,**

**μὲν** can stand in its own, as here, in which case it might mean "so, whereas, and so" but it can also be left untranslated.

The passage begins, appropriately enough, with **πρῶτον** = prōton "first."

The verb comes last - **νομίζων** = nomizōn - which means "believe, hold, consider." What are we to believe? That **τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον**.

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον = ton theon zōon aphtharton kai makarion

τὸν θεὸν is singular, but, singular or plural, this \*could\* refer to a god, the gods, the divine. However, Sedley in "Epicurus' theological innatism" places some significance on the singular construction. So, where the word is singular, I will translate it as such as to not obscure the semantics.

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον "a god (is a) ζῶον. But what is a ζῶον?

LSJ gives two primary definitions:

- living being, animal
- in art, figure, image, not necessarily of animals (or a sign of the Zodiac)

So, unfortunately, at this point in the Letter we can't necessarily resolve the question of what the nature of the gods were according to Epicurus. Some scholars think Epicurus believed the gods were material beings ("living being, animal"). Some think Epicurus believed the gods were mental representations or personifications of the concepts of blessedness ("figure, image, sign").

The Letter goes on to describe what kind of ζῶον the god is: ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον

These are the exact words used in the first Principal Doctrine (Κυριαὶ Δοξαί): **Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον** = To makarion kai aptharton "One who is blessed and imperishable." (Note, this is again singular.) The words held primary place in the [Principal Doctrines](#), and Epicurus chooses this as the first element of which to remind Menoikeus. Epicurus obviously placed a great deal of importance on this topic so it may behoove us to study it in-depth or to engage in some μελέτα.

**μακάριον** = makarion

The meaning of this word is "blessed, fortunate, wealthy, 'well-off.'" There appears to be no certain etymology of the root [makar] or the longer form [makarios/on]. It appears to possibly have something to do with being wealthy, either literally or figuratively. Taking Ancient Mythology Economically

By Morris Silver had a very interesting section on the origins of the word. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=sPCww...ymology&f=false> . This is yet another example of the inadequacy of using one word to translate from one language to another.

**ἄφθαρτον** = aptharton

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!) For now, let's move on to see if there are more clues.

**123b.ii: ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη,...** = hōs hē koinē tou theou noēsis hypegraphē,...

ὥς introduces similes or qualifies statements and so a good translation is something like "like, as, such as, so far as."

**ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις** = hē koinē "the common, the general understanding of the god"  
Note that this is also why we speak of the later evolution of the Greek language as "koine Greek" "the common Greek, the Greek spoken by a wide population across the Greek-speaking world." Is Epicurus talking here about the general understanding of Greeks among the general population? Or is he talking about the common understanding of the god among Epicureans? He does specifically talk about the wrong understanding of the "hoi polloi" below. Epicurus is writing to a fellow Epicurean. So, if he's referring to just ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις among Epicureans, how are we then to take that word ζῶον?

ὑπεγράφη "has been outlined, traced"

Epicurus is using the image of outlining or tracing an image to be filled in by another. The image of letters indicated by a teacher by an outline or tracing for the student to then follow. So the idea that the gods are imperishable and blessed is, basically, how the gods are commonly understood to be -- that is the general indication of the nature of the gods. Whether that is the general indication among just Epicureans or the general public remains a question.

**123c. μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε:**

After μηθὲν = mēthen "one, not even one, nobody", we find another μήτε... μήτε...:

**μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον**

**μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον**

τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον = tēs aphtharsias allotrion

μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον "neither the incorruption or immortality (is) foreign or strange"

μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον = mēte tēs makariotētos anoikeion "nor (is) the 'blessedness' foreign to or incongruous with"

ἀνοίκειον literally means "not of the family" or "not of the household" where οἶκος is the house or domestic sphere. Related to 123b.ii and the "common" understanding, ἀνοίκειον \*could\* refer to the "house/family" of Epicurus.

This line then finishes with αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε: = autō "(dative) to itself"

prosapte "You attribute to! You attach to, You fasten upon." (Imperative)

123c. μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε:

"Do not attribute anything foreign to the incorruptibility or incongruous with the blessedness of the gods!"

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of October 29, 2020 at 7:26 PM**

Thanks Don! So part of what you are saying as to singular / plural is that Epicurus seemed to be more referring to "divinity" (even, the "concept of divinity") rather than to a particular god or gods?

I tend to think that would be especially true in the [Principal Doctrines](#), in that my view of them, especially the first ones, is that they are more on the order of logical propositions about death, divinity, pain, and pleasure, than they are specific assertions about particular instances.

---

### **Post by "Don" of October 29, 2020 at 8:38 PM**

That's part of it.

My surprise came more at the ambiguous nature of the word ζῶον which is usually just translated animal or being. That second option seems to play right into the "idealist" perspective of the nature of a god/divinity.

---

### **Post by "Don" of October 29, 2020 at 10:11 PM**

The fact that Epicurus then uses ὑπεγράφη **hypegraphē** which has an etymology of tracing an image I find quite intriguing.