

Scientism, Atheism, And The Admissibility Of Spiritual Experience

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 1, 2020 at 12:58 PM

SCIENTISM, ATHEISM, AND THE ADMISSIBILITY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

I started this essay with the intention of outlining the differences between Science and Scientism, but I realized I could not possibly do a better job than this short article by Thomas Bernett on the American Association for the Advancement of Science website, entitled “What is Scientism?”

Please take a moment to read it, as it so clearly outlines the problems of trying to apply the scientific method and mindset to every realm of human experience:

<https://www.aaas.org/programs/dialo.../what-scientism>

Two quick excerpts:

“Observations themselves are partly shaped by theory (“theory-laden”). What counts as an observation, how to construct an experiment, and what data you think your instruments are collecting—all require an interpretive theoretical framework. This realization... undermines the positivist claim that science rests entirely on facts, and is thus an indisputable foundation for knowledge.”

Key to our discussion is what counts as an observation.

Further, “It is one thing to celebrate science for its achievements and remarkable ability to explain a wide variety of phenomena in the natural world. But to claim there is nothing knowable outside the scope of science would be similar to a successful fisherman saying that whatever he can’t catch in his nets does not exist. Once you accept that science is the only source of human knowledge, you have adopted a philosophical position (scientism) that cannot be verified, or falsified, by science itself. It is, in a word, unscientific.”

Topics that science has trouble approaching include morality, rational intuition, and the contents of other people’s minds, including spiritual experience. It is not the case that our failure to find a way to make a repeatable-on-demand experiment for an experience of the divine, means that any such experience is delusional. It is not a matter that every observation is either scientific OR religious nonsense. Science is just not the best tool for learning about divinity because the scientist cannot make God jump on cue. Instead, we can only work with experiential perceptions, even if not everyone can have these experiences.

Luckily, these experiences are not rare, with for example, between a third and half of the population of the UK having had what they would describe as a religious experience of one kind or another.

From a paper given by Professor Paul Badham, director of the Religious Experience Research Centre

(<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/research/human...arch-centre-/>):

“A variety of surveys over the past thirty years showed that between 31% and 49% of British people claimed to have had direct personal awareness of ‘a power or presence different from every day life’. Interestingly however, some of the most recent surveys claim much higher figures. For example, in 2001 Dr. David Hay found that as many as 76% of the population now claim an awareness of a transcendent reality.”

According to Pews Research (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017...-not-religious/>), 54% of US adults describe themselves as religious and 75% as spiritual. Worldwide, more than 8 in 10 identify with a religious group. Among the religiously unaffiliated, many still profess belief in a God or higher power.

There is much to be said about the “core” elements of a spiritual or religious experience that could elucidate a minimalist theology like Epicurianism posits. But first we would have to agree not to dismiss every spiritual perception people have out of hand.

In “Philodemus: On Methods of Inference” by Phillip and Estelle DeLacy, Epicureanism is said to have used “inconceivability” as a method of inference:

“An inference from signs is valid if it is inconceivable that the sign exists when the thing signified does not.... Inconceivability is an empirical criterion, based on past experience; hence, inference from particular signs may be empirically derived.” (pg. 14)

This may be how Epicurus derived his belief that our innate Prolepsis for the divine proves the existence of gods. It could be argued that since the majority of people throughout history have had an “anticipation”, or else an experience of the divine, then it is inconceivable that there should be nothing in the universe that fits that description.

Another argument for treating spiritual experiences seriously is called the “Argument from Religious Experience”. It says that if sensory experiences are excellent grounds for beliefs about the world, then why not religious experiences, as they are also sensory experiences?

According to DeWitt, Epicurus believed that there was a “sense” that perceives the divine:

pg. 255: “So far as vision is concerned, Epicurus denied that the gods were visible to the physical eye, though he did think them visible to the mind when operating as a supersensory organ of vision.”

However, he did limit the amount of knowledge we can confirm from this sense as only hinting at the nature of the gods. Its other function was to awaken the Prolepsis of the gods' perfect happiness and incorruptibility.

DeWitt further writes that it is this Prolepsis that is the prime evidence for the existence of the gods. This is also consistent with the problem of religious diversity – keeping only to the core of the experience.

There are important differences between ordinary sense-experience and religious experience, like clarity, and amount of information, but that is not enough to disqualify all spiritual experience, everywhere, through all time.

This is why Epicurean Theology is intentionally minimalistic. Its “religion” consists only in piously imagining blissful, virtuous beings with no identifiable wants or motives. Religious rituals may be enjoyed, but do not reflect anything real in the Epicurean belief system other than the gods being worthy of reverence and emulation.

It would be of great value to review the literature as to the nature of the core/ innate features of the spiritual experience around the world and to see how that may relate to the anticipation/prolepsis of the divine.

But in the meantime, religious folk should be cut some slack. After all, a large percentage of them have had a personal experience of the divine that was so impactful that they looked to religion to try and make sense of it. They did that because the answers from science describing it as a “brain event” or delusion are decidedly unsatisfying. They hope to not only understand what they experienced, but to repeat it. Science does not offer any guidance on how to do this since it inherently devalues these experiences. Religion at least attempts to offer a way of connecting to the divine.

Interestingly, it is not true that most scientists are atheists, as revealed by the first worldwide survey of religion and science:

<https://phys.org/news/2015-12-w...0Ecklund%20said>.

“The study's results challenge longstanding assumptions about the science-faith interface. While it is commonly assumed that most scientists are atheists, the global perspective resulting from the study shows that this is simply not the case.

"More than half of scientists in India, Italy, Taiwan and Turkey self-identify as religious," Ecklund said. "And it's striking that approximately twice as many 'convinced atheists' exist in the general population of Hong Kong, for example, (55 percent) compared with the scientific community in this region (26 percent)."

There are even scientists that are vocal about the limitations of their methods, such as Marcelo Gleiser:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/atheis...physicist-says/>

“Atheism Is Inconsistent with the Scientific Method, Prizewinning Physicist Says:

In conversation, the 2019 Templeton Prize winner does not pull punches on the limits of science, the value of humility and the irrationality of nonbelief.”

Approached from a different perspective, we might ask if Epicurus’ theology (or perhaps some other theology) can bring us the greatest pleasure. Isn’t that the ultimate Epicurean test? Or would your average person know greater pleasure as an atheist?

This is actually not a difficult question. Spirituality will never be replaced by science, because the reliance on scientific facts simply does not have the same emotional appeal. Spirituality feeds a deep-seated human need. People return to it again and again, despite difficulties, because it provides pleasures that science cannot. Ask anyone with a spiritual bent if they would get more enjoyment from an activity that made them feel more connected to God, or from reading a scientific paper. Facts don’t cut it. Experience does.

Ask those same people how they would feel if someone actually managed to convince them that there is nothing remotely resembling God or a higher consciousness in the universe. I think you would find you have a lot of very depressed people on your hands, myself included.

Recently posted in the forum, was the comment: “We have some loose observations about people in predominantly atheist countries – that they are less anxious. Do all of them understand physics or do they just trust the physicists?.”

A quick google search show that the science says otherwise:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/streams-of-con...-american-mind/>

“Can Atheists Be Happy? And Other Answers from Scientific American MIND:

Time and again, studies have shown that people who have a religious faith are more likely to be healthy and happy than those who lack one. Religious people may even live longer. Go to church and you could outlive your atheist friends by a good seven years, as we report in this issue.”

Throughout history, people have had euphoric spiritual experiences that are often considered among the most significant and meaningful in their lives. Those experiences demand to be integrated into some sort of explanation that does not dismiss their reality or validity, or else those powerful feelings become deeply disturbing.

Books like “Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis, edited by Stanislav Grof, address the issue of what happens when experiences like these occur to an individual who has no references to process the information. They may succumb to messages telling them that they are crazy and cannot trust their fundamental perceptions, even when

those perceptions say that what they experienced was MORE real than everyday experience – a common report.

For example, they may read that a spiritual experience is simply caused by a “brain event”, psychodynamic tensions (Freud), or even economic forces (Marx), but this does not address the claim of the experienter. It is simply looking for another explanation for something that is deemed to be unreal. To say that there is a brain state associated with an experience does not mean that the experience was not real, or else all sensory experiences would also be delusional, since everything is accompanied by a brain state.

Specifically, it has been argued that if stimulating a certain part of the brain induces a religious experience, then it proves that those experiences are not real. But you can also stimulate the brain to induce the smell of something burning. That does not mean that if you ever smell something burning, you are experiencing an illusion, or having a stroke.

Epicurus shows that our feelings are to be our guide to what is good. Spiritual experience is ecstatic, blissful, intensely pleasurable, and ineffable, but in the absence of a belief system that validates them, they are made unintelligible, or worse, condemned as illness or delusion. This is highly inimical to not only pleasure, but to the mental health of the individual trying to integrate the event.

Of course, we know some of these experiences ARE delusional and harmful, depending on how they are interpreted, but it does not follow that there is nothing real about any of them. This is why the minimalist approach of Epicurus is so helpful. He acknowledges that some perceptions of the divine are real and valuable, but is extremely wary of extrapolating anything to a plethora of ideas or convictions about what the gods want. Instead, he appeals to a belief system based on the common core of human theological instinct, and nothing else.

As Joshua recently and astutely pointed out: “A large measure of our project then, must be to mark that boundary. If the study of the divine starts to lead where the philosophy cannot and should not go, we have to say as much.”

Or from Elayne: “If they spent their time worrying about punishments from supernatural gods,... that would be an unwise decision for their pleasure.”

It need not be a huge problem to determine where the line should be drawn in how much we can make theological doctrine, because the final litmus test is, once again, pleasure. We know that fear of the gods is painful, so we have no doctrine that makes us fearful. We know beautiful gods are more pleasing than ugly ones, so why not let them be beautiful? We know that many people derive great pleasure from worship services – so why not let them worship? And finally, we know that people get tormented by trying to influence the gods or appease them, therefore we do not teach that the gods require anything from us.

In Godfrey's words: "Epicurus didn't do away with the gods but felt that he had reasoned out their nature. Since his reasoning began with the conception of the gods current in his time, and he saw value in religion, he felt no need to re-imagine the common worship, although he did reinvent the mental content."

People long for some way of connecting with the divine. If there are practices that offer this type of pleasure without harm, like some mild forms of meditation, or spiritual reading, or singing songs, or celebrating holy-days, why look down our noses at that? Perhaps it involves a little bit of the "idealism" approach, using a "mind-hack" to gain pleasure, but there is nothing inherently dangerous about that.

In summary, I would say look closely to see if your own theology, or its absence, best serves your pleasure. If it does, enjoy! But if your pleasure lies in rejecting the divine altogether, at least don't forbid the very great and meaningful pleasure it gives to others.

Post by "Don" of November 1, 2020 at 4:01 PM

I've liked your post and think you've argued your case strongly. I also always appreciate references, as [Cassius](#) is aware. I do have some thoughts on your points, both pro and not so pro, and I'll try to share those asap.

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2020 at 4:12 PM

Like Don I want to think and then comment further. There is much in what you have written Susan that I think I can agree with, but I am not yet comfortable that the issues are clear enough. That's much what I would say about the Scientism article-- I read it and I THINK I know where he might be going, but I am not yet clear what lines he is willing to draw.

So of course what comes to my mind immediately is the letter to Menoecus:

First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods

of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many. For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, **but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods.** For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien.

It seems to me that the field of what most people seem to be talking about when they discuss religious experiences is very clearly over the line in what would be "false suppositions," according to the test of what I think are many Epicurean texts that the nature of a true god is entirely blissful and independent on others, which excludes them from liking or disliking any particular humans. It would be on that basis that I would exclude the great majority of what most people in my experience have called "religious experiences" - because those in my experience have always been shorthand ways of saying that these people have direct communications and special revelations resulting from them.

Just on general experience I would suspect that the author of the Scientism article is probably going in that way too, which I say just on the statistical basis that I have never seen someone in public argue from an Epicurean views of divinity such as is expressed in the Epicurean texts.

But I don't yet want to lump you in with that, Susan, because I simply don't know specifically what you are talking about as "spiritual experiences." I think it is perfectly possible that experiences of awe such as I think Don and Joshua have referenced could be experienced in many different ways, with many different levels of intensity, prompted by many different phenomena. But I don't expect that Don or Joshua are implying "communication" in a sense that would amount to a special revelation about some special truth.

And again, I am at this point just coming at this from the point of view of applying the Epicurean texts as I understand them, not from the point of view of wanting to make sweeping statements of what is and what is not possible.

So for now my comments are I think pretty much what I have said before: the texts are what they are, and they are pretty clear about the benefits of experiencing "images" of divinity. The remaining texts are ambiguous, however, and it's easier to say what they "must not" mean, when reading them in context of other core principles, than it is to say what the "do mean."

So right now I'll close with repeating your quote from Joshua, which I think sums up where I understand us to be:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

As Joshua recently and astutely pointed out: "A large measure of our project then, must be to mark that boundary. If the study of the divine starts to lead where the philosophy cannot and should not go, we have to say as much."

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2020 at 4:22 PM

I went back and reviewed the Scientism article. Here's my problem with it -- I think I agree with the direction he is going, but THIS is his conclusion?

Quote

Distinguishing Science from Scientism

So if science is distinct from scientism, what is it? Science is an activity that seeks to explore the natural world using well-established, clearly-delineated methods. Given the complexity of the universe, from the very big to very small, from inorganic to organic, there is a vast array of scientific disciplines, each with its own specific techniques. The number of different specializations is constantly increasing, leading to more questions and areas of exploration than ever before. Science expands our understanding, rather than limiting it.

Scientism, on the other hand, is a speculative worldview about the ultimate reality of the universe and its meaning. Despite the fact that there are millions of species on our planet, scientism focuses an inordinate amount of its attention on human behavior and beliefs. Rather than working within carefully constructed boundaries and methodologies established by researchers, it broadly generalizes entire fields of academic expertise and dismisses many of them as inferior. With scientism, you will regularly hear explanations that rely on words like "merely", "only", "simply", or "nothing more than". Scientism restricts human inquiry.

It is one thing to celebrate science for its achievements and remarkable ability to explain a wide variety of phenomena in the natural world. But to claim there is nothing knowable outside the scope of science would be similar to a successful fisherman saying that whatever he can't catch in his nets does not exist (15). Once you accept that science is the only source of human knowledge, you have adopted a philosophical position (scientism) that cannot be verified, or falsified, by science itself. It is, in a word, unscientific.

Isn't this just an **assertion** that scientism is wrong, without any explanation of what he believes the correct position to be?

I agree that there are severe criticisms to be leveled at people who think too narrowly that what they believe has been established by "the experts" is worthy of deference simply because "they are the experts." I believe that "the experts" can have just as many prejudices and predispositions and political positions as anyone else, and that every claim has to consider the possibility of corruption, with the most sweeping claims given the most scrutiny.

But this article really isn't saying that, is it? This seems to be saying simply that "nothing is knowable outside the scope of science" and that ends up being circular, because he's never defined what "science" really is. If he is wanting to say that "the five senses are not all there are" or something else specific, then he should say so, but I don't see that he has been clear as to what he is criticizing, with the result being that he opens the barn door wide to all sorts of claims that have no verifiability whatsoever. Am I reading that wrong?

I personally am probably open to a lot more possibilities than the average traditional "empiricist" might be willing to admit, but even so I would demand repeatability and verifiability in some way, or else the claim would have to remain entirely personal and of very limited relevance to anyone else. Correct?

Post by "Don" of November 1, 2020 at 7:41 PM

FYI I admit I haven't read the whole article here, but here's the Wikipedia article on Scientism with 65 references and several external links <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientism?wprov=sfla1>

Post by "Don" of November 1, 2020 at 10:51 PM

Here are some thoughts:

I have no doubt that there is something people experience that can be called a "religious" or "spiritual experience."

I have no doubt that this can be felt to be profound and life-changing.

I have no doubt that one can feel overwhelming senses of awe and something that can be termed reverence in certain circumstances. I've felt it myself.

There is ample evidence that expressing "spiritual" feelings in a community setting or through individual practices can be fulfilling. This seems to be at the root of some "Religion for Atheists" movements or secular spiritual communities or even some Unitarian Universalist congregations.

However, I don't think that interpreting a religious experience as evidence of a connection with a divine entity or consciousness is the only interpretation that places value on the experience. I think specifically of research done with highly skilled meditators:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1697747/>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140813103138.htm>

<https://www.livescience.com/buddhist-monk-...tion-brain.html>

While medicine and science may have things to say about these studies, the monks involved in them see their meditation as a spiritual practice, a way to connect to their own Buddhmind. It is an expression of their religion, and furthermore this practice, it appears, brings them pleasure and well-being (daresay I mention eudaimonia).

I think you're absolutely right, @Susan Hill, that denigrating or dismissing the experience as a delusion or "merely" a "brain event" is not useful. But the event did happen in the brain as evidenced by those studies I referenced.

You mentioned:

Quote

Throughout history, people have had euphoric spiritual experiences that are often considered among the most significant and meaningful in their lives. Those experiences demand to be integrated into some sort of explanation that does not dismiss their reality or validity, or else those powerful feelings become deeply disturbing.

I have no problem saying that those experiences are real and valid as experiences. But what would make them disturbing? Just to be clear: Are you saying that dismissing them or denigrating them or calling them "merely a brain event" is what leads to the person experiencing them to be disturbed? Is the person coming at this experience from a context of fear of God? If so, that's a problem that Epicurus addresses. This is the problem with near death experiences of hell. These can also be spiritual/religious experiences with negative effects:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6173534/>

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the...rent-seeing-it/>

Additionally, I'm finding it difficult to reconcile the Epicurean definition of a god with the idea that a person could have "communication" with them unless I'm misconstruing where we're going. By definition, the gods in Epicureanism are not concerned with us, aren't motivated by gratitude or anger, and what benefit we receive "from" them is due to our own reverence and emulation of their bliss. It's not a reciprocal relationship.

Susan, you also said:

Quote

People long for some way of connecting with the divine. If there are practices that offer this type of pleasure without harm, like some mild forms of meditation, or spiritual reading, or singing songs, or celebrating holy-days, why look down our noses at that? Perhaps it involves a little bit of the “idealism” approach, using a “mind-hack” to gain pleasure, but there is nothing inherently dangerous about that.

Now, this I have no problem getting behind. I'm just not sure I am fully behind the wording of "connecting with the divine." I'm working through that, and it depends on how we define that phrase. But practices like say mindfulness meditation, I have no problem seeing that integrated into an Epicurean practice. I'm still reading through Sedley's translation and commentary on Epicurus's On Nature, Book 28, but at the end he writes:

Quote

"try ten thousand times Over to commit to memory what I and Metrodorus here have just said."

Epicurus stressed the need to memorize his works, to have them ready at hand (well, mind). That's a form of meditation - deep study, repetition, etc. I wouldn't even popularize it by saying "mind-hack." I do think most humans have a need to connect to something "bigger than themselves" but that doesn't need to be the divine in the sense of an outside entity or consciousness. Epicurus - and also Lucretius - showed a way to see the evanescence of life itself, in the play of atoms in the void, as something to be in awe of. To take pleasure in our very existence. To see the gods - whether "real" or "idealized" - as worthy of emulation and as being able to have a life as "worthy of the gods."

I apologize if I've misunderstood or misconstrued any of your points. I do sincerely see this as a very important topic to discuss.

Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2020 at 8:19 AM

I just noticed something additional I want to add to the mix.

Our other and similar thread was entitled "Reverence and Awe in Epicurean Philosophy." I think the words "reverence" and "awe" are fairly self-explanatory and not subject to too much likelihood of confusion. They convey "feelings" or "emotions" which do not presume anything about what is causing them.

The title of this thread however is "Scientism, Atheism, And The Admissibility Of Spiritual Experience." To some extent each of those terms is more subject to confusion.

While I think I have a decent idea, the term "scientism" does not have a clear meaning in my mind. I'll exhibit my tendency to hubris by saying that if it isn't clear to me, it is likely not clear to many others and therefore dangerous to use in common conversation without further definition.

"Atheism" is someone more clear for common conversation, but as discussed here before, in Epicurean terms it is a more ambiguous term. However we've covered that a lot recently so I doubt that ambiguity will retard this discussion.

"Spiritual evidence" however is a term, even more so than "scientism," that I don't think has a consensus meaning. I think it is a term that implies something significantly more, to most people, than "reverence" and "awe." I hardly know even where to begin to define it - it could start with something as minimal as "a firm conviction of the existence" but extend all the way up to "God promised to me and my descendants that we are his chosen people and that he will destroy our enemies and make us master of the world."

My reading of the Epicurean texts is that Epicurus held that the evidence, however we break it down, supports "a firm conviction of the existence" but that anything beyond that is speculation which cannot be verified and therefore has to be treated with the greatest care.

I am reading in this thread many things being stated with considerable conviction, but I am presently still of the mindset that there is nothing that we necessarily have to read in Epicurus' position that is necessarily disproven by modern science. The criticisms I am reading are of positions that I do not believe are necessarily entailed in the texts. I understand why they are being suggested, but I think the texts can be read in multiple ways, and I choose to read them in a way that does not require them being labeled "wrong" in this department.

So for that reason I don't see how any contention that "Epicurus was wrong about XXX" or conversely that "Epicurus' position supports YYY" can be held as established without first being more clear both about what we are contending Epicurus' position was, and what we are seeking to prove or disprove. The Epicurean texts are full of general warnings and denunciations of supernatural religion, so I do not believe that any reading of particular passages should be read as contradictory without compelling reasons to do so, which I am personally still not seeing.

So to repeat the main point of this post, I find the term "spiritual experiences" without further definition to be an obstacle to further clarity here.

Post by "Don" of November 2, 2020 at 9:07 AM

Quote from Cassius

So to repeat the main point of this post, I find the term "spiritual experiences" without further definition to be an obstacle to further clarity here

I think I see your point. To muddy the water even more 😊, i would say that (1) these are real experiences felt by persons and that (2) the experiences themselves are typically described using religious language. The only vocabulary available to people for much of history to describe these overwhelming and transformative experiences was language of a religious nature. The experiences were sometimes brought on by or the result of religious practice: intense prayer, deep meditation, etc. Although they could also be brought on spontaneously (e.g., Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus). Human nature has the natural capacity to experience these kinds of experiences. These are experienced as unusual, extraordinary, or significant. As such, humans try to incorporate them into an existing paradigm to make sense of them. The very significance of them calls for a significant explication. The only vocabulary that rises to the level of the overwhelming power of these experiences to the individual in most cultures is religious or spiritual vocabulary. The religious practitioner can replicate the experience with regular practice. I'm thinking specifically of the Tibetan monks or the Sufi dervishes. They believe and sense that they are communing with the divine. This brings them pleasure. I personally don't believe they are communing with a divine *presence* but they*are* experiencing a genuine sensation of [bliss](#). Isn't bliss (μακάριον blissfulness, blessedness) a defining characteristic of the [Epicurean gods](#)? Is this the same bliss experienced by dervishes and monks? If the religious practitioner is experiencing pleasure and bliss, do we tell them "No, you're not actually experiencing pleasure and bliss. You're doing it wrong!" If they don't have fear of their God, are they doing it wrong? I don't know, but that's my food for thought off the top of my head for now.

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2020 at 10:25 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

If the religious practitioner is experiencing pleasure and bliss, do we tell them "No, you're not actually experiencing pleasure and bliss. You're doing it wrong!" If they don't have fear of their God, are they doing it wrong?

"Doing it wrong" is difficult to say. However if they are leaving open the possibility that these experiences are based on presumptions that would leave the path open to a supernatural god

having created the universe and manipulating human experience and all that follows from that, I think it would be fair to say that these people are creating conditions that in all likelihood would lead them down paths that would cause significant pain to them later on. That is what comes to mind from the caveats in this passage from Torquatus:

"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

There's also that other passage for which I always forget the cite, which is to the effect that those who turn their attention to the stars and start the investigation but do who leave open the possibility of supernatural creation are as bad off or worse as those who never start the investigation. Seems to me that this investigation of divinity has the same pitfall - if it opens doors to possibilities that would undermine the foundations that have been previously established, then it is dangerous for the person who is on that path without keeping the premises in mind.

Post by "Don" of November 2, 2020 at 12:03 PM

I'll admit I was being deliberately provocative with "doing it wrong."

So, from what I'm reading there in your post, [Cassius](#) (and correct me!):

You're not discounting the idea that humans have experiences for which they feel they can only describe using culturally-derived religious or spiritual language.

These experiences can be personally profound and potentially life-changing.

However...

If the experiences are still tied to or interpreted through "empty opinions" they have the potential to reinforce negative religious activities or perspectives.

These "empty opinions" would include:

- an eternal soul existing independently of the body
- an eternal soul susceptible to eternal reward or punishment
- a creator god outside of the cosmos
- the ability to propitiate the gods by prayer or sacrifice

My question would be then: Can Epicurus's teachings provide an alternate framework within which to interpret these real experiences without denigrating or belittling the person who experiences them? These experiences seem to me to be part of the way humans would come into contact with the meaning of the quote of Epicurus: "θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν." Literally, "On the one hand, gods exist (or there are gods)" [but not as the hoi polloi believe]

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2020 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

You're not discounting the idea that humans have experiences for which they feel they can only describe using culturally-derived religious or spiritual language.

Well that reminds me of Lucretius talking about the poor depth of Latin in comparison with Greek! I am not sure I would agree with that, though, I think we're talking about experiences which can or should be able to be put into words. You may be correct that people who are interested in religious and spiritual matters have refined the terminology in ways that isn't common, but I would still expect to be able to communicate in normal words about the experience.

As for this:

[Quote from Don](#)

Can Epicurus's teachings provide an alternate framework within which to interpret these real experiences without denigrating or belittling the person who experiences them?

Yes, that's what I think we are talking about. We have some pretty interesting Epicurean texts on the subject, but they are not clear on the details of the experiences they are talking about,

and for all we know the experiences that today fit under the term "spiritual experience" might or might not be totally foreign to what they were referring to.

I think my best comment is to continue to say that we're flying blind unless we discuss particulars.

Here are a couple of other related thoughts in the form of questions:

1) In this discussion are we suggesting that there are characteristics or hypothetical interactions with us which are in any way excluded from "scientific" examination? Is anyone suggesting that this area is prima facie off limits to "science?" If so, how can we even engage in conversation about them, so I presume the answer to this is no?

2) If we agree that what we are talking about can be systematically studied, would there be a way to eliminate the possibility that the experiences we are talking about are coming from within the brain rather than from outside?

3) I personally hold open the possibility that there are all sorts of "natural" phenomena that are not yet recognized, just like radio and X-rays were at one time not recognized, and (to my understanding "[gravity waves](#)" are accepted to exist but are still not understood.) However if we accept for the sake of argument that such a phenomena might be involved here, should we not presume that such phenomena will at some point be just as capable of being studied, analyzed as accurate or distorted, as the other phenomena we are currently familiar with? No one is suggesting that there is completed information/opinion being deposited directly in the brain in fully-formed completion, correct?

Post by "Susan Hill" of November 2, 2020 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems to me that the field of what most people seem to be talking about when they discuss religious experiences is very clearly over the line in what would be "false suppositions," according to the test of what I think are many Epicurean texts that the nature of a true god is entirely blissful and independent on others, which excludes them from liking or disliking any particular humans. It would be on that basis that I would exclude the great majority of what most people in my experience have called "religious experiences" - because those in my experience have always been shorthand ways of saying that these people have direct communications and special revelations

resulting from them.

But I don't yet want to lump you in with that, Susan, because I simply don't know specifically what you are talking about as "spiritual experiences." I think it is perfectly possible that experiences of awe such as I think Don and Joshua have referenced could be experienced in many different ways, with many different levels of intensity, prompted by many different phenomena. But I don't expect that Don or Joshua are implying "communication" in a sense that would amount to a special revelation about

Regarding Scientism, this article does a much better job of providing specific examples:

<https://blog.apaonline.org/2018/01/25/the...with-scientism/>

I completely agree that there is a lot more that goes along with most people's experiences of divinity, but I am only sticking to the two things common to all: blessedness and immortality. Epicurus says that is all we get that is reliable, and indeed, if you compare the evangelical Christian who thinks she is talking to Jesus, to the Vedantic monk feeling that he has achieved awareness of oneness with Brahman, than maybe this is the only similarity. It seems to me that both would say they were aware of something that was itself aware, rather than inert like a rock. I'm pretty sure Epicurus intended blessed and immortal gods to have some form of intelligence, however different it may be from our own, but I'm not suggesting we know anything more than that and as we all keep pointing out, we quickly get into difficulties if we start imagining that they want anything from us.

I take "communication" off the table too, and so did not mention it in the essay. I mused at one point that if there was information (images) travelling both to the gods from us, and from the gods to us, that wasn't that a sort of communication by definition? But maybe not.

Thanks for your input!

Post by "Susan Hill" of November 2, 2020 at 4:01 PM

Hey [Don](#), thank you very much for your input and concerns.

Re Buddhist meditators: All the large Buddhist organizations I am aware of also practice puja – worship to dieties. This is interesting, since there really isn't anything in their philosophy of liberation that would require that.

If a practitioner gets in touch with their own Buddha-Nature or Buhhha-mind, that is also the universal Buddha-mind. From the wikipedia on Buddha-Nature:

“Buddha-nature may refer to, among others, the luminous nature of mind,[3][4][5] the pure (visuddhi), undefiled mind,[3] "the natural and true state of the mind";[6] sunyata, an emptiness that is a nonimplicative negation (Madhyamaka);[4] the alaya-vijñāna (store-consciousness)(Yogacara)”

So it is still blissful mind/consciousness, and immortal in the sense that it never disappears. It is always there. I think it can still fit.

Regarding people have trouble integrating intense spiritual experiences, here is link. I read the first half and it seems to be on-track with what I am talking about. It's true, I am not sure how highly negative experiences as of hell or evil entities would fit in to this:

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-science...piritual-crisis>

It's true when I use "connecting with the divine" I am thinking of something that has a form of intelligence, however far removed from our own. Epicurus though there was some sort of contact insofar as he received images of the gods. I'm not trying to push it any farther than that, and as I said, I am ok with taking "communication" off the table.

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 2, 2020 at 4:47 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So for that reason I don't see how any contention that "Epicurus was wrong about XXX" or conversely that "Epicurus' position supports YYY" can be held as established without first being more clear both about what we are contending Epicurus' position was, and what we are seeking to prove or disprove. The Epicurean texts are full of general warnings and denunciations of supernatural religion, so I do not believe that any reading of particular passages should be read as contradictory without compelling reasons to do so, which I am personally still not seeing.

So to repeat the main point of this post, I find the term "spiritual experiences" without further definition to be an obstacle to further clarity here.

Yes, I think some people are still saying that I am promoting something more than Epicurus insisted upon. So really the bare-bones theology is that gods exist, humankind has a prolepsis/anticipation for them, that we receive some very minimal impression of them that he

calls images, that they are blessed and immortal, and whatever can be concluded from them being blessed, which Epicurus states.

We are far more familiar in the West with a mono-theistic God than Epicurus' godS, but like he said, Nature never makes only one of anything, so alrighty, then. 😊

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 2, 2020 at 4:53 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'll admit I was being deliberately provocative with "doing it wrong."

So, from what I'm reading there in your post, [Cassius](#) (and correct me!):

You're not discounting the idea that humans have experiences for which they feel they can only describe using culturally-derived religious or spiritual language.

These experiences can be personally profound and potentially life-changing.

However...

If the experiences are still tied to or interpreted through "empty opinions" they have the potential to reinforce negative religious activities or perspectives.

These "empty opinions" would include:

- an eternal soul existing independently of the body
- an eternal soul susceptible to eternal reward or punishment
- a creator god outside of the cosmos
- the ability to propitiate the gods by prayer or sacrifice

My question would be then: Can Epicurus's teachings provide an alternate framework within which to interpret these real experiences without denigrating or belittling the person who experiences them? These experiences seem to me to be part of the way humans would come into contact with the meaning of the quote of Epicurus: "θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν." Literally, "On the one hand, gods exist (or there are gods)" [but not as the hoi polloi believe]

Display More

Yes! 😊 Where do I sign?

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 2, 2020 at 5:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

1) In this discussion are we suggesting that there are characteristics or hypothetical interactions with us which are in any way excluded from "scientific" examination? Is anyone suggesting that this area is prima facie off limits to "science?" If so, how can we even engage in conversation about them, so I presume the answer to this is no?

2) If we agree that what we are talking about can be systematically studied, would there be a way to eliminate the possibility that the experiences we are talking about are coming from within the brain rather than from outside?

3) I personally hold open the possibility that there are all sorts of "natural" phenomena that are not yet recognized, just like radio and X-rays were at one time not recognized, and (to my understanding ["gravity waves"](#) are accepted to exist but are still not understood.) However if we accept for the sake of argument that such a phenomena might be involved here, should we not presume that such phenomena will at some point be just as capable of being studied, analyzed as accurate or distorted, as the other phenomena we are currently familiar with? No one is suggesting that there is completed information/opinion being deposited directly in the brain in fully-formed completion, correct?

How could you create a science experiment to measure something you do not have a tool other than a mind to measure? Also, you can't reliably repeat a "peak" experience like this on demand. There are some fascinating things coming out of "the neurology of meditators", but lit-up areas of a brain don't really tell us a whole lot about the actual experience of the meditator, or how he got into that state.

What if it is "something happening within the brain" that results in our being able to perceive real things that one would not normally not be aware of? Simply "paying attention" falls into this category. The husband is not quite aware of what his wife is saying until he decides to pay attention. 😊 So sometimes an event does not register until the brain is able to receive it. You can't receive calculus before you have done arithmetic.

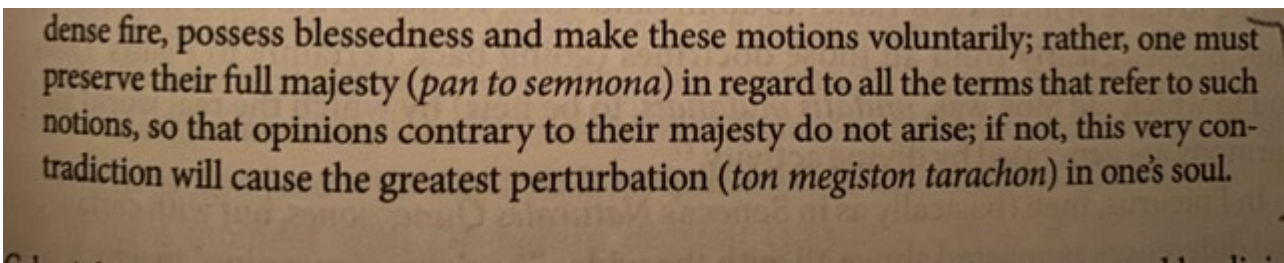
I think it is both the case that we will increase our ability to measure and prove things scientifically, and that there will always be things that we will not - like the physiology of a bug on a planet a billion light years away... No, we will never know everything. Physicists still like to

theorize, and sometimes we manage to find a way to test these things scientifically. Some things are presently untestable with present tools, and some things we have no clue how to test. Some things we just have no clue about. They can be real without a human validating their existence.

Epicurus may have the minimalist theology that validates the human instinct towards honoring the divine, while setting limits on speculation that leads us to think we can in any way control it.

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 2, 2020 at 7:25 PM

[Don](#), I just read this passage from the second half of The Letter to Herodotus #77. It says that if the gods are thought of in terms contrary to their majesty (i.e. as delusion nonsense), then, indeed, it does lead to the greatest perturbation in one’s soul - possibly just like the spiritual crises I was taking about!



Post by “Godfrey” of November 2, 2020 at 11:19 PM

Quote

Moreover, when it comes to meteorological phenomena, one must believe that movements, turnings, eclipses, risings, settings, and related phenomena occur without any [god] helping out and ordaining or being about to ordain [things] and at the same time having complete blessedness and indestructibility; 77. for troubles and concerns and anger and gratitude are not consistent with blessedness, but these things involve weakness and fear and dependence on one’s neighbours. Nor again can they be in possession of blessedness if they [the heavenly bodies] are at the same time balls of fire and adopt these movements by deliberate choice; rather, we must preserve the

complete solemnity implied in all the terms applied to such conceptions, so that we do not generate from these terms opinions inconsistent with their solemnity; otherwise, the inconsistency itself will produce the greatest disturbance in our souls. Hence, one must hold the opinion that it is owing to the original inclusion of these compounds in the generation of the cosmos that this regularly recurring cycle too is produced.

Here's the complete paragraph as translated by Inwood and Gerson.

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 3, 2020 at 4:53 AM

Hmm this is much more confusing. Is it saying - don't be confused about what is blessed because if you think the planets are, then you'll get all perturbed?

The quote I took was from the Oxford Handbook of E&E, chapter on the gods, in which blessedness seems to be talking directly about the gods.

Here is a translation by Robert Drew Hicks:

“Nay, in every term we use we must hold fast to all the majesty which attaches to such notions as bliss and immortality, lest the terms should generate opinions inconsistent with this majesty. Otherwise such inconsistency will of itself suffice to produce the worst disturbance in our minds. Hence, where we find phenomena invariably recurring, the invariability of the recurrence must be ascribed to the original interception and conglomeration of atoms whereby the world was formed.”

So in this one, it seems to talk about the importance of not confusing blissful and immortal things with things that are not of this nature. Don't confuse planets with gods, but also don't confuse gods with more regular phenomena, or you will have a disturbed mind.

Is it too much of a push? If so, I withdraw the suggestion!

Post by “Don” of November 3, 2020 at 7:51 AM

That's how I read it. If you look at the last lines of "verse" 76, Epicurus is talking about the μετεώροις (meteōrois) "astronomical phenomena in the heavens above" so stars, planets, etc. No being controls or ordains them because those beings are blessed and incorruptible and that control is counter to those characteristics. And the planets don't take these movements up themselves under their own control. We must believe that their motion is a result of their "agglomeration" of matter during the "birth-process" of the universe: ἐν τῇ τοῦ κόσμου γενέσει (en tē kosmou genesei) literally, "during the genesis of the cosmos". I find some poetry in Epicurus's words there 😊

Post by "Cassius" of November 3, 2020 at 8:14 AM

I would add to this part of the exchange that it is my understanding that Epicurus was indeed specifically fighting against the idea that the stars and planets are themselves gods. Might be in Timeaeus but I am not sure.

Post by "Cassius" of November 3, 2020 at 9:51 AM

In regard to the planets / stars actually being gods, somewhere along the lines I got the impression from a commentator somewhere that this probably factored in to Epicurus' position on the size of the sun - that he was likely reluctant to embrace the idea (without further proof) that the sun was immense in size because of a concern that that would play into those who suggested the sun was a god. That's likely to be just more speculation, but I do think that arguing against the stars/planets as gods was probably a theme of the texts, and that's probably also something that factored into his commentary on life on other worlds, etc, as that also de-mystifies the nature of the stars/planets and would help people realize that they are actually something graspable as potentially familiar, like the moon.

Post by "brett" of November 18, 2020 at 11:21 AM

Hi folks,

I've been reading some of the divinity posts and it got me to thinking. The below is PURELY personal and isn't a dogmatic stance on my part.

End of the day, I personally am far more interested in the ethical (read: way of living) aspects of EP, especially how it applies to everyday human pressures.

While I just returned to the forum, I've been coming to the realization for the last year that EP is far superior to stoicism and any other philosophy of life in the practicality and psychological acumen.

I'm a person who likes ideas and beliefs and practices to be as simple as possible and as complex as necessary. Even when i was in grad school studying philosophy for a PHD (I never finished) I was drawn to the simpler more existentially focused philosophers and philosophies.

So with that said, for me at least and with respect to the divinity issue specifically, I have no need to go beyond the "Don't fear the gods" assertion. Probably because I've not feared the gods for 20 years, but much beyond that is just speculation.

That said, I enjoy the focus on what Epicurus said about the subject as I of course find that interesting.

Those are my 2 cents.

Post by “Don” of November 22, 2020 at 9:52 PM

In re-reading this thread, I began to wonder if the experiences referred to as peak, religious, spiritual, etc. are one way that people can get a taste of the gods' existence.

I am **firmly** in the Sedley "idealist" camp when it comes to Epicurus's gods. I am (mostly) convinced by his arguments, so i do not believe there are actual beings living in the intermundia. But I come back to 2 points:

1. "There are gods" but "they are not as the hoi polloi believe them to be"
2. BUT people **do** have religious, blissful experiences.

How to reconcile these? Maybe those experiences allow some to actualize the existence of those idealized gods in a physical manifestation and literally, for a short time, to feel as if they live as gods. While experiencing the pleasures of blessedness (makarios) one also experiences a sensation of timelessness which feels like incorruptibility. I fully realize this could be going well beyond the opposit pale, but i wanted to at least throw it out there. It's **one** way to reinterpret those real experiences in an Epicurean context.

Post by “Elayne” of November 22, 2020 at 10:57 PM

[Don](#) , the times I have had those experiences, they have not been what I would call cognitive but more ineffable. In my experience it requires a significant degree of backing away from the peak before any sort of explanatory stuff gets piled on, and the words as _explanations_ are superfluous and baseless... but as evocative communication, words have some use.

It's when people come away from the peak that they incorporate their beliefs into what happened. So people who are fully grounded in a physical universe vs supernaturalism are not going to add religious interpretations. The experiences retain their full poetic quality. It's a bit ironic to me that the scientists are the ones who seem best able to sustain the poetic approach towards these feelings, rather than being concrete, lol.

It baffles me why imagination is seen as somehow insulting or inferior, vs having a literal image from a literal being... I find the human imagination to be astonishing and marvelous! A godlike feature, indeed.

I could certainly see the point in using hyperbolic language to communicate the intensity and ineffability of what people feel... a problem these days is that too many take that language literally, as explanation instead of as a description of feeling. They take it as pseudoscience instead of as poetry.

But DeWitt said Epicurus was opposed to poetry. So Idk what that means when it comes to his statements about gods.

Post by “Don” of November 23, 2020 at 7:08 AM

[Elayne](#) , I honestly can't tell whether you're open to what I posted or not. 🤔 Sorry.

Just to clarify:

Quote

It baffles me why imagination is seen as somehow insulting or inferior, vs having a literal image from a literal being.

That's what I was trying to convey, possibly clumsily. In my contextual reinterpretation here of "religious experiences", there are no literal beings. The "idealist" approach honors Epicurus's "there are gods" in the sense of imaginative archetypal concepts of blessedness and incorruptibility. The "images" are generated by humans "toward" the gods.

Those peak experiences - and as you say even you have experienced them - need to be accounted for and placed in a context once one "comes down" from them. "What was that all about?" My offering here is to say those experiences are what it would feel like to be a "god" - the ineffable sensation of pleasure during such an experience is what it would "feel" like to be a god. You're not God or a god, but that's a genuine experience of what it might feel like to embody the blessedness and incorruptibility of what Epicurus wrote. It's a physical manifestation of an archetypal concept using an Epicurean "theological" vocabulary.

I might even go so far as to suggest that that experience itself is the prolepses Epicurus talked about since those experiences seem so widespread.

Post by "Elayne" of November 23, 2020 at 8:49 AM

[Don](#) Oh, sorry, I was unclear-- I do agree with you, at least partially! I was siding with you against a purely literalist interpretation.

I think your idea about the answer to "what it was about" is definitely interesting, and although I don't interpret the experiences that way, the idea of other Epicureans doing so doesn't create any objections for me.

For me, I prefer to add as little as possible, interpretation-wise-- I find that leaving it un-analyzed retains the pleasure of the memory more intensely.

I mean this in a different way from looking at the evolutionary and neurological basis-- there are mechanisms, but that is different from what you are talking about. Discussing mechanisms doesn't dent the experience for me.

Ok, I've just realized why I don't do what you describe-- that would be an instrumental process. Using the experience to accomplish another goal. Which for me automatically downgrades the pleasure of the primary experience.

Writing a poem about it doesn't have the same effect, because in that case I'm just trying to evoke the memory of those feelings.

Thank you for triggering that insight-- I haven't really put words to that before.

This is one of those things where I think it depends on the individual, so people can experiment with whether they want to use such experiences instrumentally or leave them as they are-- whichever brings them the most pleasure.

That could be said about a literalist interpretation too, except in this philosophy, if such an interpretation clashes with findings on material reality, it seems to me it would be booted... I'm just not sure how to support doing so without more of Epicurus' writings. I don't think he would cling to saying the things about elementary particles that are now clearly wrong-- but is there anything in the text to back me up on that? Something to suggest "if I find an error in what I've said here, I will change my mind." If so, the same line could be applied to literal images from outer space.

I see no clear bright line, if we take any non-sense/feeling evidence as factual-- anything a person or group of people experiences as strongly and definitely communicated straight to their brains from outer space or wherever would have to be regarded on the same basis as repeated measurements of a physical item. Nobody here is saying that, but what establishes a limit? Are we going to say we are limited to whatever Epicurus said? Are we limited by logic (egads)? Are we limited by baseline commonality of experience, and if so, why would that line be drawn to exclude atheists who don't attach supernatural meaning but also to exclude those who say it is fundamentally supernatural-- such a position would still be a minority position.

I also think the literalist interpretation is material in name only, because it doesn't admit the possibility of sensory falsifiability. There's always a material god of the gaps to retreat to, if a person decides in advance or against sense evidence that the gods are literally a source of images in the brain, based on inner certainty. It is like slapping a word "material " on a supernatural paradigm. I don't think Epicurus would be pleased-- but I can't prove it. I hope I am missing some way of doing so.

Post by “Elayne” of November 23, 2020 at 9:11 AM

[Don](#) I'm curious why you would say "even you have experienced" peak experiences-- why the "even"? Aren't these just part of being human? I guess there are some people who don't have

them but I thought most of us did.

I don't think any religious orientation at all is required for these human experiences... I don't think a person's mind needs to be "prepared" by having any sort of beliefs. There may well be a type of preparation involved, but I think it would be of a different sort and maybe would involve openness to new experience. Willingness to be surprised... willingness to experience intense sensations. Perhaps practice at being fully present and savoring?

As I write this, it occurs to me that perhaps the intensity may be somewhat lessened or moderated, made more manageable, by putting them in a narrative or other framework, including a literalist one. I am able to enjoy them sans overlay, but maybe that's too wild and frightening for many people. I think that is why meditators are encouraged to have a framework and a teacher, because some will be derailed by the uninterpreted experience. There have been cases of psychosis.

So perhaps I should be careful saying the framing isn't necessary, just because I haven't needed it. I guess my frame is that I have confidence in the flexible functioning of my brain and have no fear that peak experiences will disrupt anything-- rather, they enhance pleasure of ordinary life. I hope that a science education would reduce fear for others. It would be interesting to know if psychotic reactions were more common in those who had less confidence in science.

Post by “Don” of November 23, 2020 at 10:35 AM

Quote

I'm curious why you would say "even you have experienced" peak experiences-- why the "even"? Aren't these just part of being human? I guess there are some people who don't have them but I thought most of us did.

[Elayne](#) , I certainly didn't mean any insult or anything derogatory. I sincerely apologize if that was conveyed! That was not my intention!

That "even" was put in for emphasis to show that this is a widespread - possibly universal - phenomenon. One doesn't need to be religious or spiritual.

I now realize I should have used different verbage to get that idea across.

Post by “Susan Hill” of November 24, 2020 at 8:43 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

My offering here is to say those experiences are what it would feel like to be a "god" - the ineffable sensation of pleasure during such an experience is what it would "feel" like to be a god. You're not God or a god, but that's a genuine experience of what it might feel like to embody the blessedness and incorruptibility of what Epicurus wrote.

It's not my personal experience of “the Other” but it sounds like a valuable and pleasing technique. In fact, a form of “Deity Yoga”!:

From Wikipedia: “Deity yoga engages creative [visualization](#) as a skillful means of personal transformation through which the practitioner ([sadhaka](#)) visualizes a chosen deity ([yidam](#)) ...in order to transform their experience of the appearance aspect of reality.... Self-generation is the practice in which one imagines oneself as the deity. This is held to be more advanced and accompanied by a degree of spiritual risk.”

Interesting! It doesn't say why it's risky. 😊

Post by “Don” of November 24, 2020 at 12:20 PM

I think the risk is to start to believe you actually are a god. That would certainly be using your imagination!

Just to be clear: I am NOT advocating Epicurean Deity Yoga! I am not going down that kind of syncretic rabbit hole! 😊 Just trying to contextualize that peak experience in an Epicurean framework.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 24, 2020 at 3:00 PM

Quote

It's not my personal experience of "the Other"...

Susan would you be comfortable elaborating on this? I'm wondering if that could be helpful in defining what exactly we're discussing.

Post by "Susan Hill" of November 24, 2020 at 3:17 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Quote

It's not my personal experience of "the Other"...

Susan would you be comfortable elaborating on this? I'm wondering if that could be helpful in defining what exactly we're discussing.

It gets a bit more complicated if you are talking about Eastern philosophies where you can realize your self (atman/ jiva) as being one with God/Brahman/Perusha etc., but in most cases, an experience of the divine is of something not identical to oneself. It is of a separate consciousness, being, or intelligence.

Post by "Don" of November 25, 2020 at 8:06 AM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Quote

It's not my personal experience of "the Other"...

Susan would you be comfortable elaborating on this? I'm wondering if that could be helpful in defining what exactly we're discussing.

It gets a bit more complicated if you are talking about Eastern philosophies where you can realize your self (atman/ jiva) as being one with God/Brahman/Perusha etc., but in most cases, an experience of the divine is of something not identical to oneself. It is of a separate consciousness, being, or intelligence.

I've always found Eastern philosophies intriguing, especially their contrast to traditional Western religions. And what you said in some ways strikes at the idealist vs realist debate within Epicureanism. Two essential elements, however, are (1) There is no supernatural creator of the cosmos (The cosmos began and is sustained by the interplay of atoms and void), and (2) The gods have no interest in "governing" the cosmos nor in having interaction with humans. If a realist position is favored, humans can have a prolepsis of the gods, the divine, but it's not a two way street. If idealist, we can use the gods as exemplars of the potential of the Epicurean path. That's a very boiled down summary but those 2 elements, in my understanding, are essential to any form of Epicureanism.

Post by “Cassius” of November 25, 2020 at 8:47 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

(1) There is no supernatural creator of the cosmos (The cosmos began and is sustained by the interplay of atoms and void), and (2) The gods have no interest in "governing" the cosmos nor in having interaction with humans.

Since I seem to be doing my best to extend and prolong minute details, here is another such comment:

I fully agree with item one and think it is very clear with no real room for ambiguity or confusion. Everything in Epicurean philosophy points to that conclusion and the philosophy would be nothing without that conclusion.

As to item two, I agree but would state these caveats:

First, I think we always have to be careful with the term "the gods" because (1) the Epicurean definition is very contrary to modern prevailing understanding of the attributes of such beings, and (2) we don't have as much information as we would like to be sure what they did mean. Did

they consider Zeus and Venus and Mars to be the actual beings who are supposedly in the intermundia, or not? I think there's a good chance that they considered Zeus and Venus and Mars to be figments of human imagination rather than actual examples of the gods they thought lived in the intermundia, while at the same time holding that their versions of gods do in fact exist in the intermundia, just like they specifically held life to exist in other parts of the universe besides earth.

Second, yes it would have to be true that the gods in the intermundia have no interest in governing the cosmos or having interaction with humans, and yes it remains true that there are no supernatural creators over the universe of any kind. I don't think however that rules out by any means that there may be other phenomena/beings that are currently undiscovered that we may come into contact with who are not supernatural, and not "gods" by our Epicurean definition, but who are essentially space aliens or other phenomena such as we would appear to life on other planets. So I personally leave open the possibility that there are lots of other undiscovered phenomena, but in order to consider them as reasonably possible the suggestion would need to be "verifiable" in some ordinary way over time and between numbers of people and perhaps other criteria to eliminate fraud.

Post by “Don” of November 25, 2020 at 11:27 AM

Oh, I have no qualms about Epicurean aliens! I think this is one philosophy that wouldn't even blink if life on another planet was found. "Duh," said the Epicurean. 😊 "That's cool, but we expected that all along." Plus any alien could understand, I'd bet, pleasure and pain so we'd just have to get past the language barrier to explain it.

The gods, on the other hand, are supposed to "live" in the intermundia/metakosmia between worlds. There *may* be beings who could maintain their atomic integrity and live lives of total pleasure, but *personally* I think it more likely that the gods are mental archetypes of the completed Epicurean life.

Lucretius does a good job of conveying that we can talk about Ceres, Bacchus, et al as long as we know we're personifying metaphorically grain and wine etc. Which, in my opinion, bolsters an idealist conception of "the gods" writ large in Epicureanism.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 12, 2023 at 2:21 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So to repeat the main point of this post, I find the term "spiritual experiences" without further definition to be an obstacle to further clarity here.

I recall that the outspoken atheist and neuroscientist Sam Harris, in his book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, insisted that we do not have a better term that "spirituality" at hand -- and he went to some lengths to provide a coherent definition. Unfortunately, I don't recall it offhand. 😞

Post by "Pacatus" of April 12, 2023 at 2:56 PM

I was recently thinking of the debates on [Epicurean gods](#) (whether real or archetypes of some sort - e.g. Don -v- Cassius?). I thought it best to read back through some earlier threads, so I can avoid just repeating.

~ ~ ~

I have always been in the idealist camp. But I am trying to flesh out in my own mind the possibility of a naturalist realism that does not essentially "remove" the gods to distant, inaccessible *intermundia* in such a way as to make "theistic" realism - in practical terms - indistinguishable from an idealist view.

A **first** question might be: If there is no communication (no information passed) between/among various *mundi* (including their interstices), how can one have a proleptic intuition of their existence? (I want to note that I agree with Elayne's affirmation of imagination: can that also be, in terms of brain function, related in some way to prolepsis? I am reading, in my piecemeal way, a scientific treatise on imagination that seems to support the possibility.*)

Second: If the gods are beings of nature, part of nature, why should their natural characteristics not be perceivable (again, perhaps *proleptically*) in nature as we perceive it - i.e., also in our world. [I am not thinking of an animist view, such as "The tree - or the wind, or the sun, whatever - is a god; or inhabited by some god-being.]

Third: If one grants the possibility raised in the second question, then it seems reasonable to say that we - in some way - relate to the divine when we relate to nature around us. This need not entail the kind of transactional reciprocity that Epicurus rejected.

Fourth: If, e.g. using our imagination, we can assign archetypal personalistic features to an idealized divinity (e.g. Lucretius with Venus, under the idealistic view), why should that be beyond the pale in the context of a thoroughly naturalized theistic realism? In that sense, it would seem to be a useful way of relating – according to the nature of our own minds – to a *proleptically* apprehended reality. It would also support (non-transactional) Epicurean piety and prayer, without any implied pretense of putting imaginary flesh on a projected abstraction – which I seem to recall was an accusation levelled at Epicurus by Stoics and Skeptics (Cicero?).

At bottom, it would mean imaging (or borrowing from ancient imagery) a naturalized real divine nature (*proleptically* apprehended) according to our individual proclivities, in order to enhance our ability to relate.

Note: I realize I am using the concept of “naturized real divinity” in a very general – itself somewhat abstract sense. That is something that might be sensed, but difficult to relate to. Hence the need for personal, *imaginal*** renderings (e.g. Zeus, Apollo, Athena).

A (very) rough analogy might be that Hinduism – with its 33 million gods – in which followers are encouraged to choose their own *Ishtadevata* (preferred god), which might not be any of the major god-figures (such as Vishnu, Krishna, Parvati, Lakshmi, etc.).

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* Jim Davies, *Imagination: The Science of Your Mind's Greatest Power*.

** I am using the word “imaginal” here roughly in the sense of Henry Corbin (who coined the term): an aspect of reality that can only be grasped by the imagination – which, again, as I see it, could relate to *prolepsis*.

Post by “Cassius” of April 12, 2023 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

I have always been in the idealist camp. But I am trying to flesh out in my own mind the possibility of a naturalist realism that does not essentially “remove” the gods to distant, inaccessible intermundia in such a way as to make “theistic” realism – in practical terms – indistinguishable from an idealist view.

Lots to digest in your post and I should say my comment relates only to a small aspect of it. I am still thinking as of today that the bright line between "idealism" and "realism" is mainly in one direction. From my perspective there is no contradiction, and that the existence of [Epicurean gods](#) serves as both (1) as an "ideal" to which to aspire in the abstract (in terms of total pleasure combined with no pain) but also (2) as a firmly-held expectation of real existence. The analogy I would draw is that just like it appears to me that Epicurus held that if we could go far enough "out" in our rocket ships, we would pass by numberless additional solar systems and places between them with numberless additional life forms of which some of those life forms have succeeded in living deathlessly in pure pleasure.

So I have no problem from my perspective believing that gods are both real and ideal, but the division occurs in that some members of the "idealist" camp firmly object to the idea that any such deathless and painless beings really exist. I gather that they think that "modern science" has disproved their existence, which is a position I do not find persuasive, for the same reason that I do not personally find persuasive contentions that the universe as a whole is limited either in size or age.

I remain of the belief that Epicurus held that "the gods" both serve an important function as an ideal (in the same way that we reverence wiser men) but that "the gods" also really exist as part of the logical conclusions of Epicurean physics, for the same reason that many of us (I gather) have no problem believing that there are numberless planets in the universe both like and unlike Earth.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 12, 2023 at 5:11 PM

[Cassius](#)

Yes, the term “idealism” can be confusing - in that some claim, under that label, that the gods are at best mental fabrications to represent (archetypally) certain ideals.

I am exploring the possibility that there:

- 1) can be a natural (not supernatural) “divine” (for lack of a better word) reality; that
- 2) is proleptically grasped (but I should not have excluded logical inference from that); but that
- 3) even a proleptic apprehension requires some contact; and that

4) recognition of a natural divine reality makes more sense if it is not removed from our own natural world.

I find it difficult to relate to something that may be the result of logical inference, but is not part of my life (like, say, quantum mechanics) – even if I think it is likely true. If that is the case, then I think there is some justification in the criticism I mentioned of Epicurean piety and prayer. And, as I said, I don't see how that “realist” position differs, practically, from the “abstract idealist” position. At that point, practices of piety and prayer have no more meaning than, say, backgammon. A game I play because I enjoy it. Or a jigsaw puzzle perhaps (which I do not enjoy, however).

With that said, meditation and contemplation might still be philosophically relevant – as is simply contemplating the beauties of nature, and feeling awe.

Anyway, I am trying to explore a third position between the options of real gods thoroughly removed from our everyday natural reality, and gods that are solely ideal mental fabrications.

Thanks for the reply! 😊

Post by “Pacatus” of April 12, 2023 at 5:20 PM

EDIT to my last post: I am implicitly, in my exploration, treating that "natural divine reality" as having the kind of ideal characteristics that Epicurus had in mind -- e.g. harmony and blissfulness -- that we can tap into, as it were, by recognizing it.

Sorry for the late edit.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 12, 2023 at 6:17 PM

Given my use of the word “prolepsis” here, I revisited a paper by David K. Glidden. The following are just brief – but I think relevant – excerpts:

“Given Epicurean epistemic realism, these claims on the character of some thing or state must be seen as claims on the world, so that *prolepsis*, like *aisthesis* for a realist, is ambiguous between the psychological act of apprehension and the content discerned, some feature of the world. In the case of prolepsis what is discerned should be some abiding character in things, as

opposed to some temporary appearance. ...

“Such **recognitions** are part of the evidence, not part of our inferences. And prolepsis, it seems, constitutes such **recognitions**.” [My emphasis]

<https://orb.binghamton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=sagp>

There is a link and some discussion of Dr. Gliddens' longer paper as well, here:

Thread

[**Dr. David Glidden's "Epicurean Prolepsis"**](#)

Thanks to Don's hard work and to the generosity of Dr. Glidden himself, we have obtained a copy of Dr. Glidden's 1985 paper "Epicurean Prolepsis."

As many of you know we have been discussing Anticipations in our two most recent podcast episodes, and Dr. Glidden came to our attention through [a shorter work which we found very interesting](#). Dr. Glidden developed that shorter work into the longer article which was published in 1985 in the Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy.

While we decide the...



Cassius

March 3, 2023 at 7:34 PM

Post by “Godfrey” of April 12, 2023 at 8:41 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

With that said, meditation and contemplation might still be philosophically relevant – as is simply contemplating the beauties of nature, and feeling awe.

Anyway, I am trying to explore a third position between the options of real gods thoroughly removed from our everyday natural reality, and gods that are solely ideal mental fabrications.

One version of a third option is suggested by the two sentences in this quote, and relates to the hymn to Venus by Lucretius. It is to contemplate the life force or evolutionary forces and/or processes by which the universe has come to be in its current state, with us in it.

Does pleasure drive a seedling that grows roots and reaches for the light?

True piety is for a man to have the power

To contemplate the world with quiet mind.

Lucretius 5-1203 (Melville translation)