

# For Gods There Are

Post by "Kalosyni" of August 14, 2022 at 9:00 PM

"For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest" (Letter of Menoeceus: Hicks translation).

In a recent [podcast the Epicurean understanding of gods was discussed](#).

And further questions came up for me, including the how to imagine why it might be that Epicureans held the gods to be important.

From [Wikipedia "Ancient Greek Religion"](#) "Ancient Greek theology was polytheistic, based on the assumption that there were many gods and goddesses, as well as a range of lesser supernatural beings of various types. There was a hierarchy of deities, with Zeus, the king of the gods, having a level of control over all the others, although he was not almighty."

Here is a website listing and describing the Greek gods (Olympian Gods, Titan Gods, Primordial Gods, Sea Gods, Underworld, etc.) <https://www.theoi.com/greek-mythology/greek-gods.html>

- 1) There was a common understanding of gods in ancient and hellenistic Greece
- 2) Epicureans saw the gods differently than what was commonly held - as not concerned or involved in the lives of humans, and as not something to fear.

It came to me that maybe the work of Jung or Campbell could help make sense of things -- specifically the idea of "archetypes". I've tried to find an online article which might explain the Jungian understanding of Greek gods, but haven't found one. (Joseph Campbell took the work of Jung further, and somewhere within his four volume book "The Masks of God" it might have something on Greek mythology - but will need to see if I can find it at the library.)

So to explain archetypes -- I pulled out my book by Carl Jung "Man and his Symbols" and on page 67 on The archetype in dream symbolism -- there is not a clear direct explanation so I will attempt to synthesize and explain:

---The mind (psyche) still has "archaic remnants" left behind from our earlier time of development in archaic man whose psyche was still close to that of the animal. These "archaic remnants" are what Jung calls "archetypes" or "primordial images" and these archetypes come to us through dreams.

----"The archetype is a tendency to form such representations of a motif---representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern."

----"They are, indeed, an instinctive trend, as marked as the impulse of birds to build nests, or ants to form organized colonies."

And now to make sense of the Greek gods -- that these were reoccurring archetypal images that came through dreams.

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of August 15, 2022 at 1:03 AM**

Archetypes are interesting to ponder from an ancient Greek framework. Are they ideal forms? Are they prolepsis/pre-conceptions/anticipations?

If they're the former, we're being sucked into Plato's world. The latter *might* find a place in an Epicurean worldview but I don't have a cohesive opinion on the matter. I spent a couple weeks reading about them at one point and by the end of my reading I thought that they weren't as compelling as I had anticipated they might have been. But there's lots to dig into, and analyzing them with respect to pre-conceptions could be fruitful, particularly since pre-conceptions seem to be intertwined with the understanding of [Epicurean gods](#).

The attached paper seems pretty pertinent, so much so that I almost posted it when I first read it. So much to discuss, so little time!

(Living with the Gods: On Beliefs and Peoples by Neil MacGregor is a book that I'd heartily recommend to anyone interested in an art historical take on gods, although I don't think that it deals with archetypes. It's a hefty book, but an enjoyable read.)

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### **Post by "Don" of August 15, 2022 at 4:09 AM**

I started reading the article [Godfrey](#) posted, more out of curiosity than anything. I thought a passing similarity between Jungian archetypes and [Epicurean gods](#) would be it, but, as I'm reading, this line jumped out at me:

#### Quote

we Jungians cannot go on basing our theory of archetypes on scientific assumptions which have been falsified by more recent research if we do not want to run the risk of becoming ridiculous in the scientific world. It is important that we stop arguing that

archetypes are transmitted genetically if we want to be taken seriously.

I would amend that first phrase as:

"we Epicureans cannot go on basing our theory of prolepsis on scientific assumptions which have been falsified by more recent research if we do not want to run the risk of becoming ridiculous..."

The use in paper of the word "innate" also seemed to echo the idea of the prolepsis in Cicero and other spots.

Seligman's paper may be interesting to look up for our purposes here.

Quote

Preparedness: Even Seligman (1972), a behavioural psychologist and certainly not a friend of analytical psychology, found a phenomenon which he called 'preparedness': it refers to the interesting fact that humans generally develop anxieties and especially phobias towards animals like snakes or spiders, even though they may never have had any contact with them, but usually not towards animals such as rabbits or cows. He explains this by a biologically based preparedness which has developed throughout evolution and serves the aim of protection against poisonous animals - otherwise it could be possible that one cannot learn from a first contact experience because one does not survive it.

I like the author's first line of the conclusion:

Quote

I must admit that, for now, there are more questions than conclusions...



Now, \*there's\* a direct parallel with the prolepsis of the gods!

Another interesting angle could be the cultural complex paper that the author referenced (Singer & Kimbles 2004) .

Okay, after reading I do see parallels between prolepsis and archetype, but I also think this author's perspective, attitude, and honesty is relevant to our search for understanding the conundrum of prolepsis, especially of the divine. I continue to insist that Epicurus found a correct understanding of the gods to be of vital importance to his philosophy. It is put first in several places, at least the PDs and the letter to Menoikeus plus he devoted sections of On Nature to the topic. He seemed to see it as a necessary thing to "get right" to be able to live a pleasurable life. Now, whether he saw this primacy in the context of his own time ("This is how I make sense of the way we can worship the gods in the culture in which we live...") or as

fundamental to his whole system of philosophy ("This is the way we MUST understand the gods if we are to have no fear of them! You must get this right FIRST!") can be argued. I lean toward the latter but not leaning so far as to fall over (to take that metaphor to its end).

So, for further rabbit-holing, I'm looking for:

- Seligman, M. E. & Hager, J. L. (Eds.) (1972). Biological Boundaries of Learning.

Appleton: Century-Crofts

- Singer, T. & Kimbles, S. (2004). 'Emerging theory of cultural complexes'. In Analytical Psychology: Contemporary Perspectives in Jungian Psychology, eds. J. Cambray & L.

Carter. Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge.

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## Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2022 at 6:30 AM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

---The mind (psyche) still has "archaic remnants" left behind from our earlier time of development in archaic man whose psyche was still close to that of the animal. These "archaic remnants" are what Jung calls "archetypes" or "primordial images" and these archetypes come to us through dreams.

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it certainly sounds at some point that we need a thread comparing and contrasting Jungian views of archetypes vs what some people might conclude about anticipations - especially what Velleius had to say about engraving and what Lucretius has to say about the origin of beliefs in gods.

I tend to doubt this thread is it, because this thread may be more exploratory, but it may be. If it is, or when someone tackles that, we probably need more quotes like this to give us a common framework for discussing it.

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## Post by "Don" of August 15, 2022 at 7:26 AM

As you'll see in the excerpt below, this author seems to dismiss Epicurus as arguing that the gods are "pure nonsense" which is off the mark. But the title is intriguing nonetheless.

### The Neurobiology of the Gods

Excerpt:

Gods, demons, angels . . . muses, spirits, ghosts . . . fairies, devils, imps, fauns, unicorns, dragons, poltergeists, ghouls, vampires, djinns, werewolves. . . saviors . . .

Have you ever wondered why humans have spent so much time writing and worrying about, praying to, running from, blessing, cursing, exorcizing, and placating these entities? If there is so little physical evidence that any of these things exist, why do we spend so much energy thinking about them?

Philosophers as early as Epicurus argued that they are pure nonsense, yet since the dawn of our existence humankind has been convinced of the power of these "spiritual" entities. Isn't this irrational? Illogical? Even potentially harmful? Why would such a propensity evolve, when clearly a more rational animal would never waste precious biological resources on self-sacrifice, burnt offerings, or self-mutilation in the name of a god?

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### Post by "Eikadistes" of August 15, 2022 at 9:14 AM

Epicurus' approach reminds me of an anthropology class I took a decade ago. Our textbook was called *Supernatural as Natural: A Biocultural Approach to Religion* by Michael Winkelman and John R. Baker. Among other things, the authors explored non-human animals' behaviors that anticipate human rituals. For example, monkeys intentionally eat fermented fruits to become intoxicated. Chimpanzees have been observed to enter "trance" states. Psychedelic chemicals are found throughout the natural world. Wolves howl without being sure that they will receive a response.

There is also a social basis underlying ritualistic behaviors. Fasting might seem abnormal, unless you contextualize it within periods of drought and food scarcity. Self-mutilation is cringe-worthy, *however*, bleeding a person was (until *very* recently) considered to be an effective medical procedure. The earliest Hebrew commandments were dietary and health restrictions based on their understanding of hygiene. All of these things come from a natural evolution.

Given all of this, let me say, *of course* knowledge of "the gods" is manifest (not "the gods" as in "what color is Zeus' beard" but "the gods" as in "the Persians also venerate idols in their minds"). Look to the abundance of ritualistic social behavior, psychedelic episodes, and experimental behavior found in non-human animals. Religiosity is, in some sense, universal to the natural world, beyond the perception that Religion is an isolated monolith that was uniquely invented by humans. The patterns of religious behavior seem to be grounded in our psycho-social evolution.

This, I think, might be an effective approach to understand Epicurus' position. He naturalized the religious experience in a way that is similar to the American pragmatist William James (specifically, I am thinking of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). Epicurus observed the various civilizations (absorbed by Alexander) had similar rituals, social bonding mechanisms, and wisdom traditions (*without* invoking the adventures of the Olympians), so there must be some part of the natural world that encourages animals to engage in rituals, speculation, and devotion.

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**Post by “Matt” of August 26, 2022 at 6:24 PM**

What in the good gods is going on here? ☐☐