

# Article: The Ethical Implications of Epicurus' Theology by Stefano Mecci

Post by “Godfrey” of September 26, 2023 at 4:22 PM

The attached article showed up in my inbox this morning. I think it's worth reading, although Mecci seems to have relied too much on The Great Obfuscator (that would be Cicero) and, perhaps, Wikipedia. Particularly for his presentation of pleasure. However as he gets further into his article his take on the gods seems reasonable to me: what I would call a combination of the realist and idealist viewpoints.

There are copious footnotes, but I didn't dig into them.

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Post by “Don” of September 26, 2023 at 4:26 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The Great Obfuscator



Post by “Joshua” of September 26, 2023 at 6:37 PM

Unfortunately the subject of the gods is the one about which we have the greatest lack of source material. DeWitt (the Great Hypothesizer?) suggested that Lucretius' "lost" seventh book dealt with the gods at length. Epicurus wrote a scroll on the same, which really is lost, and we have two books from Philodemus on the [Epicurean gods](#).

Diogenes Laertius does not record that Metrodorus wrote on the question specifically, but he did write a response to Plato's *Euthyphro*, a dialogue in which Socrates attempts to understand the meaning of Piety.

Lucretius, meanwhile, does give us in Book V a definition of *Pietas* which he contrasts with the *Religio* of Agamemnon in Book I;

Quote

O unhappy race of men,  
when they ascribed such actions to the gods  
and added to them bitter rage! What sorrows  
they then made for themselves, what wounds for us,  
what weeping for our children yet to come!  
There is no piety in being seen  
time and again turning towards a stone  
with one's head covered and approaching close  
to every altar, and hurling oneself  
prostrate on the ground, stretching out one's palms  
before gods' shrines, or spreading lots of blood  
from four-footed beasts on altars, or piling  
sacred pledges onto sacred pledges,  
but rather in being able to perceive  
all things with one's mind at peace.

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**Post by “Joshua” of September 26, 2023 at 6:56 PM**

Thank you [Godfrey](#), that one is worth saving. There are points in it that I might have emphasized differently, but it's not bad so far as it goes. It would take a reading knowledge of five languages to go through the author's sources, with a heavy reliance on Italian and German. Scholarship that lies, unfortunately, beyond the reach of most of us!

## Post by “Godfrey” of September 26, 2023 at 9:24 PM

You're welcome [Joshua](#) ! BTW that Lucretius quote is one of my favorites 👍

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## Post by “Don” of September 27, 2023 at 6:37 AM

That's a good one.

One of my favorite lines (in addition to Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum) is:

"Si falsum est, accingere contra."

"si tibi vera videntur, dede manus, aut, si falsum est, accingere contra"

if things seem true to you, yield to them; but if they are false, equip yourself against them (2.1042-1043)

I actually use that line on my PowerPoints when I'm teaching reference service to library staff.



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## Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 8:03 AM

I am slow to read this but have now started. Other than his labeling of katestematic pleasure as "authentic" pleasure, to which I would strongly object, what is this?

In this sense, the divine is the representation of happiness according to the philosophy of Epicurus. Therefore, the philosopher of Samos, far from diminishing the importance of the divine, places it as the highest example of a happy, indeed blessed entity. Such bliss, however, as has been mentioned, presupposes an absolute lack of activity, which, if it did not exist, would in fact constitute, for Epicurus, a debasement of the divine nature.

WHAT? Of course, no activity in regard to HUMANS, but where in the world does he get the contention that the gods are totally inactive in their own sphere?

I hope he returns to that later in the article but I would find that to be totally unacceptable as an Epicurean view of the gods or the best life or, as Epicurus might have said, of any being of any intelligence whatsoever.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 8:07 AM**

I'll have to come back to this but I remember that deWitt has citations against this position, to the effect that there are reliable cites that Epicurus held that the gods must act to maintain their deathlessness:

"On the contrary, divine happiness is immediate, effortless and perennial. The gods must not even «hope» to continue to remain in the state of bliss, as happens to men: they are always in this condition, without any effort."

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 8:09 AM**

I am not familiar with the cite to a text by Atticus on page 203 - that would be interesting to explore.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 8:17 AM**

I agree with his conclusion and think it is well worded. A proper attitude toward divinity has a very important impact on the way we live. But I will say as to the earlier parts of the article that no prolepsis or anticipation or logical deduction or image or anything else can in my world lead to a divinity which is totally inactive in its own sphere.

The idea that an "inactive" divinity should be a model for humans could not in my mind be reconciled with a philosophy that would not know the good but for the pleasures of the senses. I would pinpoint his problem as being that once you start identifying katastematic pleasure as the only "authentic" kind of pleasure, inactivity is the kind of distorted end-point at which you

arrive. I would go so far to say that I think Epicurus would consider this position as blasphemous and unworthy of the gods as the reverse position, that they spend their days pushing around the stars and counting the feathers on birds and watching for the animals to tell them when to change the seasons. Inactivity in their own sphere is as unworthy of the gods as is burdensome work.

But to close the post on a positive note i do think this is correct here:

#### Quote

In conclusion, Epicurus, with his vision of divinities, unique in the Greek religious tradition, and of all the philosophical systems of Antiquity, leads neither to atheism nor to crypto-atheism, that is total disinterest in the divine, but to a healthy relationship with the divinities. This new relationship does not eliminate the traditional prayers and rites, rethought by Epicurus in a manner and perspective strictly in line with his philosophy. In this way, the gods represent the image of complete happiness. This image represents an important stimulus for men, because it shows the true purpose of human life: all humans continue to live a mortal life, but they can achieve a bliss comparable to that of the immortal gods.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 9:21 AM**

Just for reference from "On The Nature of the Gods" --

“If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshipping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine Power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

“For the divine form we have the hints of nature supplemented by the teachings of reason. From nature all men of all races derive the notion of gods as having human shape and none other; for in what other shape do they ever appear to anyone, awake or asleep? But not to make primary concepts the sole test of all things, reason itself delivers the pronouncement. For it seems appropriate that a being who is the most exalted, whether by reason of his happiness

or of his eternity, should also be the most beautiful; but what disposition of the limbs, what cast of features, what shape or outline can be more beautiful than the human form? You Stoics at least, Lucilius, (for my friend Cotta says one thing at one time and another at another) are wont to portray the skill of the divine creator by enlarging on beauty as well as the utility of design displayed in all parts of the human figure. But if the human figure surpasses the form of all other living beings, and god is a living being, god must possess the shape which is the most beautiful of all; and since it is agreed that the gods are supremely happy, and no one can be happy without virtue, and virtue cannot exist without reason, and reason is only found in the human shape, it follows that the gods possess the form of man. Yet their form is not corporeal, but only resembles bodily substance; it does not contain blood, but the semblance of blood.

“These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

Now Velleius does say this about inactivity:

“You Stoics are also fond of asking us, Balbus, what is the mode of life of the gods and how they pass their days. The answer is, their life is the happiest conceivable, and the one most bountifully furnished with all good things. God is entirely inactive and free from all ties of occupation; he toils not neither does he labor, but he takes delight in his own wisdom and virtue, and knows with absolute certainty that he will always enjoy pleasures at once consummate and everlasting.

“This is the god whom we should call happy in the proper sense of the term; your Stoic god seems to us to be grievously overworked. If the world itself is god, what can be less restful than to revolve at incredible speed round the axis of the heavens without a single moment of respite? But repose is an essential condition of happiness. If on the other hand some god resides within the world as its governor and pilot, maintaining the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons, and all the ordered processes of creation, and keeping a watch on land and sea to guard the interests and lives of men, why, what a bondage of irksome and laborious business is his!

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I don't think that version of "inactivity" is any harder to explain than the special definitions of "gods" in the first place, or of virtue, or of pleasure. They aren't "toiling" or doing any "work" that they don't want to do, but that doesn't mean they are sitting in one place staring at candles either. But at least as to the plain meaning of "inactivity" in English, which implies "doing nothing," I can't see how gods with bodies analogous to humans and blood analogous to humans and speaking language analogous to Greek can be considered to be "doing nothing." They don't toil or work any more than they superintend the universe, but that doesn't mean we should think of them as "doing nothing."

I note in the article that the author thanks someone for helping with this English, which is presumably not his first language. Maybe my complaint can be chalked up to nothing more than terminology, but still I would be careful with the implication of "inactivity."

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of September 27, 2023 at 9:31 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

A proper attitude toward divinity has a very important impact on the way we live. But I will say as to the earlier parts of the article that no prolepsis or anticipation or logical deduction or image or anything else can in my world lead to a divinity which is totally inactive in its own sphere.

I am going to jump in without having read the article, to hypothesize that perhaps the blissfulness (and happiness) of the gods as seen by Epicurus is because he sees them as having perfected prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance in a manner in which the virtues are used as a tool for happiness...and thus the gods are to be emulated. So that the virtues aren't end, but only the means to the blissfulness.

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## Post by “Eikadistes” of September 27, 2023 at 10:15 AM

I wanted to share some additional material from *On Piety*, mixed in with some of my theological notes:

While scrutinizing these conjectures about **divine** “*beings surpassing* [ὑπερβαλλουσῶν or *hyperballousōn*] *in power* [δυνάμει or *dynámei*] *and excellence* [σπουδαιότητι or *spoudaiótēti*]”, beings that “*excel* [ὑπερέχον or *hyperékhon*] *in sovereignty* [ἡγεμονίαν or *hegemonían*]”,

Philodemus entertains the critical position that “no one has been prolific in finding convincing demonstrations for the existences of **the gods**; nevertheless all men, with the exception of some [...] worship them, as do we” (οὐδεὶς εἰκνουμένας περὶ τοῦ **θεοῦ**ς ὑπάρχειν τὰς ἀποδείξεις εὐπ[όρησ]εν· ὁμῶς δε [σέβ]ονται πάντε[ς εἰ μὴ παρ]άκοποι τινε[ς αὐτοῦς, *On Piety*, Col. 23, 13-17). The conception of the **divine** nature “is the best [ἄριστον or *áriston*] and most holy [σεμνότατον or *semnótaton* or “dignified”], most worthy of emulation [ἄξιοζηλωτότατον or *áxiozēlōtótaton*, “enviable”], having dominion over all good things, unburdened by affairs, and exalted [ὑψηλόν or *hypsēlon*, “sublime”] and great-minded [μεγαλόφρονα or *megalóphrona*, “noble”] and great-spirited [μεγαλόψυχον or *megalópsykhon*, “generous”] and ritually pure [ἅγιον or *hágion*, “sacred”] and purest [ἁγιοτάτον or *agiótaton*, “holiest”] and propitious [ἴλειων or *hīleōn*, “blameless”]. Therefore they say that they alone strive after the greatest form of piety [εὐσέβειαν] [...] the ineffable [ἄφραστον or *áphraston*, “inexpressible” or “marvellous”] pre-eminence [ὑπεροχὴν or *hyperokhēn*, “superiority”] of the strength [ἰσχύος or *iskhúos*] and perfection [τελειότητος or *teleiótētos*, “completeness”] of the **divine** [τοῦ **θείου**]. (*On Piety*. Col 45.2-30)

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### Post by “Joshua” of September 27, 2023 at 10:36 AM

I should note that the words 'kinetic' and 'katastematic' made a rare appearance on this week's podcast episode, along side a few quotes from John Stuart Mill. Most notably his claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2023 at 11:58 AM

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

I should note that the words 'kinetic' and 'katastematic' made a rare appearance on this week's podcast episode, along side a few quotes from John Stuart Mill. Most notably his claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Yes - it's probably going to take me until Friday but there is some good material in this episode, primarily because we encounter Torquatus saying this as to mental vs bodily pleasures:

#### Quote

[55] XVII. I will concisely explain what are the corollaries of these sure and well grounded opinions. People make no mistake about the standards of good and evil themselves, that is about pleasure or pain, but err in these matters through ignorance of the means by which these results are to be brought about. Now we admit that mental pleasures and pains spring from bodily pleasures and pains; so I allow what you alleged just now, that any of our school who differ from this opinion are out of court; and indeed I see there are many such, but unskilled thinkers. I grant that although mental pleasure brings us joy and mental pain brings us trouble, yet each feeling takes its rise in the body and is dependent on the body, though it does not follow that the pleasures and pains of the mind do not greatly surpass those of the body. With the body indeed we can perceive only what is present to us at the moment, but with the mind the past and future also. For granting that we feel just as great pain when our body is in pain, still mental pain may be very greatly intensified if we imagine some everlasting and unbounded evil to be menacing us. And we may apply the same argument to pleasure, so that it is increased by the absence of such fears.

[56] By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain.

I personally am fully on board with Torquatus in these statements. What I am not on board with is the apparent tendency of modern constructions to consider mental pleasures to be "katastematic" or in any other reason inherently superior to bodily pleasures. My reading of this is that depending on circumstances the significance of mental vs bodily ebbs and flows with the context of daily life.

I was thinking already about this before Joshua posted, but I believe this implicates Joshua's regular observation that humans are not inherently different from or similar to other animals.

Just like other animals we have our inherent abilities and capacities, and we have unique attributes that make us human just like cats have attributes that make them cats and dogs have attributes that make them dogs. We spend more time and effort (apparently) than do some other animals in mental activities, but that doesn't mean that we are "spiritual beings" or in any way different than other forms of life. It's useful to talk about specific activities in specific ways, but it's not useful, and in fact harmful, to take some activities out of the context of the whole and deify them as if they are all that we are about.

The Torquatus material is exactly where I would expect Epicureans to be after almost 200 years of discussion: We are beings with both mental and physical activities and life is a constant balancing and processing of different experiences between them. We are no more born with a goal of achieving some specific mental state than a cat is born to live anything but a cat's life or a dog a dog's life. A human's life is a mix of mental and physical activities day in and day out, and all of us - cats, dogs, and humans - are just doing the best we can to live the best mix of experiences.

When you pull things like "mental state" out of context and focus on them exclusively, as if achieving them for a moment is the single goal of your life for which everything else is subordinate, you're headed for trouble. In my view Epicurus is saying that pleasure and pain are navigation beacons, not destinations. The only stable and static point that comes along after birth is death, and death is *\*not\** the goal of life.

[Wikipedia:](#)

1 Vivāmus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,	Let us live, my Lesbia, and love,
2 rumoresque senum severiorum	and the rumors of rather stern old men
3 omnes unius aestimemus assis!	let us value all at just one penny!
4 soles occidere et redire possunt;	Suns may set and rise again;
5 nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,	for us, when once the brief light has set,
6 nox est perpetua una dormienda.	an eternal night must be slept.

### [Gaius Valerius Catullus](#)

Another version:

Code

My	sweetest	Lesbia,	let	us	live	and	love;		
And	though	the	sager	sort	our	deeds	reprove,		
Let	us	not	weigh	them.	Heaven's	great	lamps	do	dive
Into	their	west,	and	straight	again	revive;			
But,	soon	as	once	set	is	our	little	light,	
Then	must	we	sleep	one	ever-during	night.			

### [Let Us Live and Love \(5\)](#)

My sweetest Lesbia, let us live and love; And though the sager sort our deeds reprove, Let us not weigh them.

poets.org

And my favorite version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yzs2Fq1ICZU>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3354-article-the-ethical-implications-of-epicurus-theology-by-stefano-mecci/>

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**Post by “Godfrey” of September 27, 2023 at 5:05 PM**

Punk Rock Latin Poetry... who would have known? 😁👍