

# Episode 227 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 02 - Velleius Begins His Attack On Traditional Views Of The Gods

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2024 at 10:37 AM

## Welcome

to Episode 227 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at [EpicureanFriends.com](http://EpicureanFriends.com), where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

We are now discussing the Epicurean sections of Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," and this week we introduce the Epicurean spokesman Velleius, beginning in Section 8

For the main text we are using primarily the [Yonge translation, available here](#). The text which we include in these posts is the Yonge version, the full version of which is here at [EpicureanFriends](http://EpicureanFriends.com). We will also refer to the public domain version of the Loeb series, which contains both Latin and English, [as translated by H. Rackham](#).

Additional versions can be found here:

- [Frances Brooks 1896 translation at Online Library of Liberty](#)
- [Lacus Curtius Edition \(Rackham\)](#)
- [PDF Of Loeb Edition at Archive.org by Rackham](#)
- [Gutenberg.org version by CD Yonge](#)

## Today's Text

VII. Indeed, says I, I think I am come very seasonably, as you say; for here are three chiefs of three principal sects met together. If M. Piso was present, no sect of philosophy that is in any esteem would want an advocate. If Antiochus's book, replies Cotta, which he lately sent to Balbus, says true, you have no occasion to wish for your friend Piso; for Antiochus is of the opinion that the Stoics do not differ from the Peripatetics in fact, though they do in words; and I

should be glad to know what you think of that book, Balbus.

"I?" says he. I wonder that Antiochus, a man of the clearest apprehension, should not see what a vast difference there is between the Stoics, who distinguish the honest and the profitable, not only in name, but absolutely in kind, and the Peripatetics, who blend the honest with the profitable in such a manner that they differ only in degrees and proportion, and not in kind. This is not a little difference in words, but a great one in things; but of this hereafter. Now, if you think fit, let us return to what we began with.

With all my heart, says Cotta. But that this visitor (looking at me), who is just come in, may not be ignorant of what we are upon, I will inform him that we were discoursing on the nature of the Gods; concerning which, as it is a subject that always appeared very obscure to me, I prevailed on Velleius to give us the sentiments of Epicurus. Therefore, continues he, if it is not troublesome, Velleius, repeat what you have already stated to us. I will, says he, though this new-comer will be no advocate for me, but for you; for you have both, adds he, with a smile, learned from the same Philo to be certain of nothing. What we have learned from him, replied I, Cotta will discover; but I would not have you think I am come as an assistant to him, but as an auditor, with an impartial and unbiased mind, and not bound by any obligation to defend any particular principle, whether I like or dislike it.

VIII. After this, Velleius, with the confidence peculiar to his sect, dreading nothing so much as to seem to doubt of anything, began as if he had just then descended from the council of the Gods, and Epicurus's intervals of worlds. Do not attend, says he, to these idle and imaginary tales; nor to the operator and builder of the World, the God of Plato's Timæus; nor to the old prophetic dame, the Πρόνοια of the Stoics, which the Latins call Providence; nor to that round, that burning, revolving deity, the World, endowed with sense and understanding; the prodigies and wonders, not of inquisitive philosophers, but of dreamers!

For with what eyes of the mind was your Plato able to see that workhouse of such stupendous toil, in which he makes the world to be modeled and built by God? What materials, what tools, what bars, what machines, what servants, were employed in so vast a work? How could the air, fire, water, and earth pay obedience and submit to the will of the architect? From whence arose those five forms, of which the rest were composed, so aptly contributing to frame the mind and produce the senses? It is tedious to go through all, as they are of such a sort that they look more like things to be desired than to be discovered.

But, what is more remarkable, he gives us a world which has been not only created, but, if I may so say, in a manner formed with hands, and yet he says it is eternal. Do you conceive him to have the least skill in natural philosophy who is capable of thinking anything to be everlasting that had a beginning? For what can possibly ever have been put together which cannot be dissolved again? Or what is there that had a beginning which will not have an end? If your Providence, Lucilius, is the same as Plato's God, I ask you, as before, who were the assistants, what were the engines, what was the plan and preparation of the whole work? If it is

not the same, then why did she make the world mortal, and not everlasting, like Plato's God?

IX. But I would demand of you both, why these world-builders started up so suddenly, and lay dormant for so many ages? For we are not to conclude that, if there was no world, there were therefore no ages. I do not now speak of such ages as are finished by a certain number of days and nights in annual courses; for I acknowledge that those could not be without the revolution of the world; but there was a certain eternity from infinite time, not measured by any circumscription of seasons; but how that was in space we cannot understand, because we cannot possibly have even the slightest idea of time before time was. I desire, therefore, to know, Balbus, why this Providence of yours was idle for such an immense space of time? Did she avoid labor? But that could have no effect on the Deity; nor could there be any labor, since all nature, air, fire, earth, and water would obey the divine essence. What was it that incited the Deity to act the part of an ædile, to illuminate and decorate the world? If it was in order that God might be the better accommodated in his habitation, then he must have been dwelling an infinite length of time before in darkness as in a dungeon. But do we imagine that he was afterward delighted with that variety with which we see the heaven and earth adorned? What entertainment could that be to the Deity? If it was any, he would not have been without it so long.

Or were these things made, as you almost assert, by God for the sake of men? Was it for the wise? If so, then this great design was adopted for the sake of a very small number. Or for the sake of fools? First of all, there was no reason why God should consult the advantage of the wicked; and, further, what could be his object in doing so, since all fools are, without doubt, the most miserable of men, chiefly because they are fools? For what can we pronounce more deplorable than folly? Besides, there are many inconveniences in life which the wise can learn to think lightly of by dwelling rather on the advantages which they receive; but which fools are unable to avoid when they are coming, or to bear when they are come.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/59966401>

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## Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2024 at 2:32 PM

In this episode let's talk about:

- - The three main schools of thought on the gods:
  - - Stoics (Lucilius Balbus) (split the honorable from the profitable and go with the honorable)
  - - Epicureans (Velleius) (go with the profitable)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

- - Academics (Gaius Cotta) (they're not sure) Cicero is also in this category
- - Peripatetics would have been represented by Marcus Piso, but he is not present. (combine the honorable with the profitable)
- - The scene then of the dispute will be home of [Gaius Aurelius Cotta](#), who was talking with Senator Gaius Velleius, the Epicurean. [Quintus Lucillius Balbus](#) was also there, taking the Stoic side. Cicero says that if Marcus Piso were present, no school would lack an advocate. It appears that Piso would have represented the Peripatetics, because Cotta says that Antiochus held that the Peripatetics did not differ from the Stoics in substance but only in words. Cotta says this is actually a significant difference, but says more on that later.
- - The role of confidence in Epicurean philosophy - "After this, Velleius, with the confidence peculiar to his sect, dreading nothing so much as to seem to doubt of anything, began as if he had just then descended from the council of the Gods, and Epicurus's intervals of worlds."
- - Velleius says do not attend to:
  - - idle and imaginary tales;
  - - nor to the operator and builder of the World, the God of Plato's Timæus;
  - - nor to the old prophetic dame, the Πρόνοια of the Stoics, which the Latins call
    - Providence;
  - - nor to that round, that burning, revolving deity, the World, endowed with sense and understanding; the prodigies and wonders, not of inquisitive philosophers, but of dreamers!
- - First the attack on Plato's gods:
  - - What was his evidence? "For with what eyes of the mind was your Plato able to see that workhouse of such stupendous toil, in which he makes the world to be modeled and built by God?"
  - - Plato cannot explain how god created the universe: "What materials, what tools, what bars, what machines, what servants, were employed in so vast a work? How could the air, fire, water, and earth pay obedience and submit to the will of the architect? From whence arose those five forms, of which the rest were composed, so aptly contributing to frame the mind and produce the senses? It is tedious to go through all, as they are of such a sort that they look
    - more like things to be desired than to be discovered. (wishful thinking)
  - - How can Plato's god have created an eternal world? "But, what is more remarkable, he gives us a world which has been not only created, but, if I may so say, in a manner formed with hands, and yet he says it is eternal. Do you conceive him to have the least skill in natural philosophy <ins> who is capable of thinking anything to be everlasting that had a beginning?</ins> For what can possibly ever have been put together which cannot be dissolved again? Or what is there that had a beginning which will not have an end?"
- - Attack on the Stoic god:

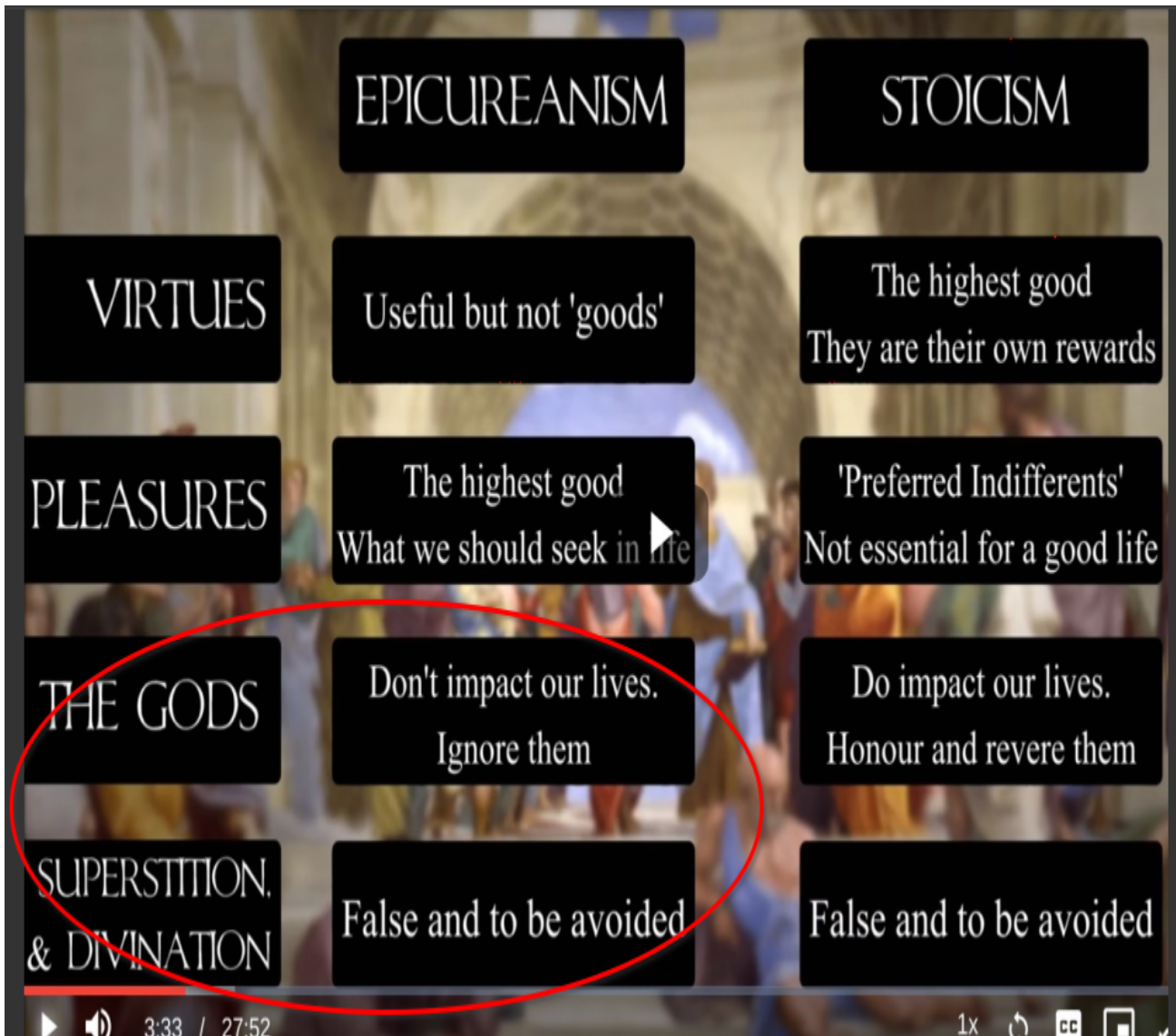
- - If your Providence, Lucilius Balbus, is the same as Plato's God, I ask you, as before, who were the assistants, what were the engines, what was the plan and preparation of the whole work? If it is not the same, then why did she make the world mortal, and not everlasting, like Plato's God?
- - Attack on Both Stoics and Academics:
  - - It makes no sense that the god woke up one day and created the world after doing something else for an eternity beforehand:
    - - But I would demand of you both, why these world-builders started up so suddenly, and lay dormant for so many ages? For we are not to conclude that, if there was no world, there were therefore no ages. I do not now speak of such ages as are finished by a certain number of days and nights in annual courses; for I acknowledge that those could not be without the revolution of the world; but there was a certain eternity from infinite time, not measured by any circumscription of seasons; but how that was in space we cannot understand, because we cannot possibly have even the slightest idea of time before time was.
  - - Why were the gods idle for so long?
    - - desire, therefore, to know, Balbus, why this Providence of yours was idle for such an immense space of time? Did she avoid labor? But that could have no effect on the Deity; nor could there be any labor, since all nature, air, fire, earth, and water would obey the divine essence. What was it that incited the Deity to act the part of an ædile, to illuminate and
      - decorate the world? If it was in order that God might be the better accommodated in his habitation, then he must have been dwelling an infinite length of time before in darkness as in a dungeon. But do we imagine that he was afterward delighted with that variety with which we see the heaven and earth adorned? What entertainment could that be to the Deity? If it was any, he would not have been without it so long.
  - - Who benefited from the creation? If for the wise, that's a small number. For fools? why?
    - - Or were these things made, as you almost assert, by God for the sake of men? Was it for the wise? If so, then this great design was adopted for the sake of a very small number. Or for the sake of fools? First of all, there was no reason why God should consult the advantage of the wicked; and, further, what could be his object in doing so, since all fools are, without doubt, the most miserable of men, chiefly because they are fools? For what can we pronounce more deplorable than folly? Besides, there are many inconveniences in life which the wise can learn to think lightly of by dwelling

rather on the advantages which they receive; but which fools are unable to avoid when they are coming, or to bear when they are come.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2024 at 6:28 PM**

As we get into Velleius' opening in the episode we record tomorrow, I plan to comment on this Stoic-based chart which, thanks to a new participant, I found today. Since we've so recently gone over "Virtue" and "Pleasure" in "On Ends," we will probably mention those too, but I especially want to focus on what this chart has to say (in my view, inadequately) about The Gods, Superstition, and Divination.



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**Post by “Don” of May 4, 2024 at 6:41 PM**

😄 Wow! There is so much wrong in that chart!

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**Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2024 at 7:19 PM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

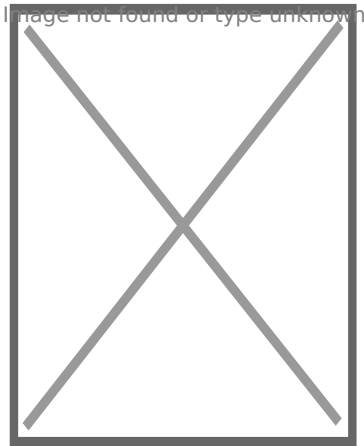
Wow! There is so much wrong in that chart!

And the commentary that he spoke while it was on the screen was even worse!

To give him credit, he started out the video saying that most of what he says in his discussions of Epicurus is negative, so I wouldn't look to a devoted Stoic for a fair presentation. When I reviewed it I was driving and listening to the audio so I may have missed some subtleties in the graphics, but it very much reminded me of many of the positions Cicero took while arguing against Torquatus.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of May 5, 2024 at 11:17 AM**



[The nature of things: a didactic poem : Lucretius Carus, Titus : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

In blank verse  
archive.org

This is John Mason Good's introduction to his translation of Lucretius, where he expresses on page *lxv* the view that the Epicureans believed in a First Cause or Prime Mover, and that it was this deity that created the lower order of gods that dwell in the intermundia.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of May 5, 2024 at 11:26 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

Samuel Butler's translation of *The Iliad*, of Vulcan forging a shield for Achilles in imitation of creation;

Display Spoiler

Thus did they converse. Meanwhile Thetis came to the house of Vulcan, imperishable, star-bespangled, fairest of the abodes in heaven, a house of bronze wrought by the lame god's own hands. She found him busy with his bellows, sweating and hard at work, for he was making twenty tripods that were to stand by the wall of his house, and he set wheels of gold under them all that they might go of their own selves to the assemblies of the gods, and come back again—marvels indeed to see. They were finished all but the ears of cunning workmanship which yet remained to be fixed to them: these he was now fixing, and he was hammering at the rivets. While he was thus at work silver-footed Thetis came to the house. Charis, of graceful head-dress, wife to the far-famed lame god, came towards her as soon as she saw her, and took her hand in her own, saying, "Why have you come to our house, Thetis, honoured and ever welcome—for you do not visit us often? Come inside and let me set refreshment before you."

The goddess led the way as she spoke, and bade Thetis sit on a richly decorated seat inlaid with silver; there was a footstool also under her feet. Then she called Vulcan and said, "Vulcan, come here, Thetis wants you"; and the far-famed lame god answered, "Then it is indeed an august and honoured goddess who has come here; she it was that took care of me when I was suffering from the heavy fall which I had through my cruel mother's anger—for she would have got rid of me because I was lame. It would have gone hardly with me had not Eurynome, daughter of the ever-encircling waters of Oceanus, and Thetis, taken me to their bosom. Nine years did I stay with them, and many beautiful works in bronze, brooches, spiral armlets, cups, and chains, did I make for them in their cave, with the roaring waters of Oceanus foaming as they rushed ever past it; and no one knew, neither of gods nor men, save only Thetis and Eurynome who took care of me. If, then, Thetis has come to my house I must make her due requital for having saved me; entertain her, therefore, with all hospitality, while I put by my bellows and all my tools."

On this the mighty monster hobbled off from his anvil, his thin legs plying lustily under him. He set the bellows away from the fire, and gathered his tools into a silver chest. Then he took a sponge and washed his face and hands, his shaggy chest and brawny neck; he donned his shirt, grasped his strong staff, and limped towards the door. There were golden handmaids also who worked for him, and were like real young women, with sense and reason, voice also and strength, and all the learning of the immortals; these busied themselves as the king bade them, while he drew near to Thetis, seated her upon a goodly seat, and took her hand in his own, saying, "Why have you come to our house, Thetis honoured and ever welcome—for you do not visit us often? Say what you want, and I will do it for you at once if I can, and if it can be done at all."

Thetis wept and answered, "Vulcan, is there another goddess in Olympus whom the son of Saturn has been pleased to try with so much affliction as he has me? Me alone of the marine goddesses did he make subject to a mortal husband, Peleus son of Aeacus, and sorely against my will did I submit to the embraces of one who was but mortal, and who now stays at home worn out with age. Neither is this all. Heaven vouchsafed me a son, hero among heroes, and he shot up as a sapling. I tended him as a plant in a goodly garden and sent him with his ships to Ilius to fight the Trojans, but never shall I welcome him back to the house of Peleus. So long as he lives to look upon the light of the sun, he is in heaviness, and though I go to him I cannot help him; King Agamemnon has made him give up the maiden whom the sons of the Achaeans had awarded him, and he wastes with sorrow for her sake. Then the Trojans hemmed the Achaeans in at their ships' sterns and would not let them come forth; the elders, therefore, of the Argives besought Achilles and offered him great treasure, whereon he refused to bring deliverance to them himself, but put his own armour on Patroclus and sent him into the fight with much people after him. All day long they fought by the Scaean gates and would have taken the city there and then, had not Apollo vouchsafed glory to Hector and slain the valiant son of Menoetius after he had done the Trojans much evil. Therefore I am suppliant at your knees if haply you may be pleased to provide my son, whose end is near at hand, with helmet and shield, with goodly greaves fitted with ankle-clasps, and with a breastplate, for he lost his own when his true comrade fell at the hands of the Trojans, and he now lies stretched on earth in the bitterness of his soul."

And Vulcan answered, "Take heart, and be no more disquieted about this matter; would that I could hide him from death's sight when his hour is come, so surely as I can find him armour that shall amaze the eyes of all who behold it."

When he had so said he left her and went to his bellows, turning them towards the fire and bidding them do their office. Twenty bellows blew upon the melting-pots, and they blew blasts of every kind, some fierce to help him when he had need of them, and others less strong as Vulcan willed it in the course of his work. He threw tough copper into the fire, and tin, with silver and gold; he set his great anvil on its block, and with one hand grasped his mighty hammer while he took the tongs in the other.

First he shaped the shield so great and strong, adorning it all over and binding it round with a gleaming circuit in three layers; and the baldric was made of silver. He made the shield in five thicknesses, and with many a wonder did his cunning hand enrich it.

He wrought the earth, the heavens, and the sea; the moon also at her full and the untiring sun, with all the signs that glorify the face of heaven—the Pleiads, the Hyads, huge Orion, and the Bear, which men also call the Wain and which turns round ever in one place, facing Orion, and alone never dips into the stream of Oceanus.

He wrought also two cities, fair to see and busy with the hum of men. In the one were weddings and wedding-feasts, and they were going about the city with brides whom they were escorting by torchlight from their chambers. Loud rose the cry of Hymen, and the youths danced to the music of flute and lyre, while the women stood each at her house door to see them.

Meanwhile the people were gathered in assembly, for there was a quarrel, and two men were wrangling about the blood-money for a man who had been killed, the one saying before the people that he had paid damages in full, and the other that he had not been paid. Each was trying to make his own case good, and the people took sides, each man backing the side that he had taken; but the heralds kept them back, and the elders sate on their seats of stone in a solemn circle, holding the staves which the heralds had put into their hands. Then they rose and each in his turn gave judgement, and there were two talents laid down, to be given to him whose judgement should be deemed the fairest.

About the other city there lay encamped two hosts in gleaming armour, and they were divided whether to sack it, or to spare it and accept the half of what it contained. But the men of the city would not yet consent, and armed themselves for a surprise; their wives and little children kept guard upon the walls, and with them were the men who were past fighting through age; but the others sallied forth with Mars and Pallas Minerva at their head—both of them wrought in gold and clad in golden raiment, great and fair with their armour as befitting gods, while they that followed were smaller. When they reached the place where they would lay their ambush, it was on a riverbed to which live stock of all kinds would come from far and near to water; here, then, they lay concealed, clad in full armour. Some way off them there were two scouts who were on the look-out for the coming of sheep or cattle, which presently came, followed by two shepherds who were playing on their pipes, and had not so much as a thought of danger. When those who were in ambush saw this, they cut off the flocks and herds and killed the shepherds. Meanwhile the besiegers, when they heard much noise among the cattle as they sat in council, sprang to their horses, and made with all speed towards them; when they reached them they set battle in array by the banks of the river, and the hosts aimed their bronze-shod spears at one another. With them were Strife and Riot, and fell Fate who was dragging three men after her, one with a fresh wound, and the other unwounded, while the third was dead, and she was dragging him along by his heel: and her robe was bedrabbled in men's blood. They went in and out with one another and fought as though they were living people haling away one another's dead.

He wrought also a fair fallow field, large and thrice ploughed already. Many men were working at the plough within it, turning their oxen to and fro, furrow after furrow. Each time that they turned on reaching the headland a man would come up to them and give them a cup of wine, and they would go back to their furrows looking forward to the time when they should again reach the headland. The part that they had ploughed was dark behind them, so that the field, though it was of gold, still looked as if it were being ploughed—very curious to behold.

He wrought also a field of harvest corn, and the reapers were reaping with sharp sickles in their hands. Swathe after swathe fell to the ground in a straight line behind them, and the binders bound them in bands of twisted straw. There were three binders, and behind them there were boys who gathered the cut corn in armfuls and kept on bringing them to be bound: among them all the owner of the land stood by in silence and was glad. The servants were getting a meal ready under an oak, for they had sacrificed a great ox, and were busy cutting him up, while the women were making a porridge of much white barley for the labourers' dinner.

He wrought also a vineyard, golden and fair to see, and the vines were loaded with grapes. The bunches overhead were black, but the vines were trained on poles of silver. He ran a ditch of dark metal all round it, and fenced it with a fence of tin; there was only one path to it, and by this the vintagers went when they would gather the vintage. Youths and maidens all blithe and full of glee, carried the luscious fruit in plaited baskets; and with them there went a boy who made sweet music with his lyre, and sang the Linos-song with his clear boyish voice.

He wrought also a herd of horned cattle. He made the cows of gold and tin, and they lowed as they came full speed out of the yards to go and feed among the waving reeds that grow by the banks of the river. Along with the cattle there went four shepherds, all of them in gold, and their nine fleet dogs went with them. Two terrible lions had fastened on a bellowing bull that was with the foremost cows, and bellow as he might they haled him, while the dogs and men gave chase: the lions tore through the bull's thick hide and were gorging on his blood and bowels, but the herdsmen were afraid to do anything, and only hounded on their dogs; the dogs dared not fasten on the lions but stood by barking and keeping out of harm's way.

The god wrought also a pasture in a fair mountain dell, and a large flock of sheep, with a homestead and huts, and sheltered sheepfolds.

Furthermore he wrought a green, like that which Daedalus once made in Cnossus for lovely Ariadne. Hereon there danced youths and maidens whom all would woo, with their hands on one another's wrists. The maidens wore robes of light linen, and the youths well woven shirts that were slightly oiled. The girls were crowned with garlands, while the young men had daggers of gold that hung by silver baldrics; sometimes they would dance deftly in a ring with merry twinkling feet, as it were a potter sitting at his work and making trial of his wheel to see whether it will run, and sometimes they would go all in line with one another, and much people was gathered joyously about the green. There was a bard also to sing to them and play his lyre, while two tumblers went about performing in the midst of them when the man struck up with his tune.

All round the outermost rim of the shield he set the mighty stream of the river Oceanus.

Compare the language used by Homer with that of Velleius;

Quote

For with what eyes of the mind was your Plato able to see that workhouse of such stupendous toil, in which he makes the world to be modelled and built by God? What materials, what tools, what bars, what machines, what servants, were employed in so vast a work? How could the air, fire, water, and earth pay obedience and submit to the will of the architect? From whence arose those five forms, of which the rest were composed, so aptly contributing to frame the mind and produce the senses? It is tedious to go through all, as they are of such a sort that they look more like things to be desired than to be discovered.

But, what is more remarkable, he gives us a world which has been not only created, but, if I may so say, in a manner formed with hands, and yet he says it is eternal. Do you conceive him to have the least skill in natural philosophy who is capable of thinking anything to be everlasting that had a beginning? For what can possibly ever have been put together which cannot be dissolved again? Or what is there that had a beginning which will not have an end? If your Providence, Lucilius, is the same as Plato's God, I ask you, as before, who were the assistants, what were the engines, what was the plan and preparation of the whole work? If it is not the same, then why did she make the world mortal, and not everlasting, like Plato's God?

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### **Post by "Cassius" of May 10, 2024 at 11:47 AM**

Today the Lucretius Today Podcast continues in the Epicurean section of Cicero's On The Nature of The Gods with Velleius beginning his attack on traditional views of the gods.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/59966401>

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### **Post by "Bryan" of May 14, 2024 at 6:51 PM**

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

Velleius: For with what eyes of the mind was your Plato able to see that workhouse of such stupendous toil, in which he makes the world to be modeled and built by God?

The "eyes of the mind" seems to correspond to criterion #4: "the image-based focus of the mind."

D.L. 10.31: Therefore, in *The Canon*, Epicurus affirms that the criteria of truth are [1] the sensations and [2] the preconceptions and [3] the feelings, and the Epicureans (also affirm) [4] the image-based focus of the mind.

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## Post by “Don” of May 14, 2024 at 6:58 PM

### 123f. ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ γνῶσις.

- Here's our δέ "on the other hand."
- ἐναργῆς [δέ] ἐστὶν αὐτῶν ἡ γνῶσις

"And the knowledge (ἡ γνῶσις (gnōsis)) of them (θεοί "gods", note the plural here) is ἐναργῆς." But what does ἐναργῆς mean?

LSJ provides two primary definitions:

- visible, palpable, in bodily shape, properly of gods appearing in their own forms (in Homer); so of a dream or vision; ex., ἐναργῆς ταῦρος "in visible form a bull, a very bull"
- manifest to the mind's eye, distinct

Epicurus can't mean the first meaning since he's adamant that the gods don't interact with humans. But the second definition coincides with his contention (and the idea of the prolepsis of the gods) that the gods are apprehended by the mind only. In first Principal Doctrine's scholia (i.e., a note added to the text by a later author), we read τοὺς θεοὺς λόγῳ θεωρητοῦς "the gods are conceived of through contemplation by reasoning." We don't - can't! - see the [Epicurean gods](#) with our physical eyes as Homer describes seeing the Olympian gods "in visible form." Homer's gods were ἐναργῆς in one sense of the word; Epicurus's in the other sense. The truth of the gods' existence in Epicurus's philosophy takes place entirely in our minds by reasoning through their existence by means of contemplation. But through that contemplation, Epicurus asserts that their existence is ἐναργῆς "clearly discernible to us / manifest to us in our minds."

This emphasis on contemplation is interesting in light of the characteristic of the Epicurean sage in Diogenes Laertius Book X.30: μᾶλλον τε εὐφρανθήσεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις. I continue to maintain that "in contemplation" is the best translation of ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις for this characteristic of the sage: "The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in

contemplation, speculation, and theorizing." Many translators see this as referring to state festivals and spectacles. I've explored the use of the word elsewhere in Diogenes Laertius' work as well as in Aristotle online. <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...tion?authuser=0> If the gods are "manifest" in contemplation, this seems consistent with that characteristic of an Epicurean sage.

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### Post by "Bryan" of May 18, 2024 at 12:23 PM

Cassius, I agree with most of DeWitt's thinking regarding the gods not being inherently immortal -- although they do maintain immortality (ἡ ἀθανασία) in practice.

Philódēmos, On Piety, 1.40.1138:

For the devout man preserves the **immortality** and the supreme blessedness of god (along with all those things connected to us) - but impious towards god is he who banishes either one. The man who deliberates without anger and without weakening of favor on [god's] preparations that [originate] from himself for both benefits and harms - this shows god to be in need of nothing from humans...

[Obbink] For pious is the person who preserves the **immortality** and consummate blessedness of God (together with all the things included by us) - but impious is the person who banishes either [blessedness or immortality] where God is concerned. And the person who sees also that the good and ill (sent us by God) come without any unhealthy anger or benevolence - declares that God has no need of human things..

[ Όσιος ] γὰρ ὁ τὴν **ἀθαν[ασίαν]** καὶ τὴν ἄκραν μακα[ριότητα] τοῦ θεοῦ σώ[ζων] (σὺν) ἅπασιν τ[οῖς] συναπτομένοις ἡμῖν) - ἀσεβῆς δὲ περὶ θεῶν ὃς ἐκά[τε]ρον [ἐξορ]ίξει μὲν. ὁ δ' [ἐπινο]ῶν χωρὶς ὀργῆ[ς] καὶ χάριτος ἀσθενούσης τὰς ἐξ αὐτοῦ παρασκευ[υ]ὰς τῶν ἀ[γα]θῶν καὶ τῶν κακῶν - ἀπο[φαί]νετ' [αὐτὸν] τῶν ἀνθρω[πειῶν] μηδ[ε]νὸς πρὸς δεῖσθαι...

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### Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2024 at 2:51 PM

## [Quote from Bryan](#)

Cassius, I agree with most of DeWitt's thinking regarding the gods not being inherently immortal -

Let's grapple directly with the most infrequently-discussed of DeWitt's assertions: That any particular god has not by nature existed from eternity, and will not by nature remain immortal without attending to its own immortality.

In support of this beginning page 267 DeWitt cites:

1. The general reasoning that nothing but atoms are inherently immortally the same.
2. Gods are in the same order of beings as men and all other living things, all of which have a beginning and end;
3. Since there is nothing higher / supernatural to maintain them, they must maintain themselves;
4. Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile. wrote with texts of Epicurus before him, has this to say: "Freedom from pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blissful being, standing in no need of active concern:' 57 This manifestly implies that the [Epicurean gods](#) were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its perpetuation.
5. The incongruity between this selfish concern for their own bodily security and their indifference to the good of mankind was certain to elicit condemnation from believers in divine providence, and this has not escaped record. Thus the Christian Eusebius quotes his Atticus as saying: "According to Epicurus it's goodbye to providence, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods bring to bear all diligent care for the preservation of their own peculiar blessings." 58
6. DeWitt translates the initial section of the letter to Menoeceus differently (see the full version in his appendix to "St Paul and Epicurus" and says this: When once it has been discerned that the gods are under the necessity of preserving their own blessings, the next step is to learn that this activity is ascribed to them as a virtue. The recognition of this fact will serve to explain a rather cryptic statement from the pen of Epicurus himself. Writing of the "false suppositions" of the multitude, who thought of the gods, now as punishing the wicked, now as having venal relationships with them, he concluded as follows: "for [the gods], being exclusively devoted to their own peculiar virtues are partial to those like themselves, deeming all that is not such as alien:' 59 The first half of this statement has been variously interpreted, but the recognition of our puzzling doctrine will make the meaning intelligible. Just as it is the virtue of men to achieve their own happiness, so it is the virtue of the gods to preserve their own blissfulness. This task so completely engages their attention that no participation in human affairs is possible.

What do you guys think of those, especially the reference to the letter to Menoecus? Obviously here DeWitt is trying to make things more clear by adding section titles, and in addition he is asserting by adding in a reference in brackets that the latter part is an independent reference to the gods and not a continuation of what was being asserted previously as to incorrect ideas about the gods. Is this another area where is asserting that the texts were emended? I did not include this reference in the podcast because I did not get a chance to check it beforehand.

If anyone has time I would appreciate comments on all three: this, the Eusebius reference, and **everything and not possessing it we do everything to have it.** t  
"

#### THE GODS

**“Both practice and study the precepts which I continuously urged upon you, discerning these to be the A B C’s of the good life. First of all, believing the divine being to be blessed and incorruptible, just as the universal idea of it is outlined in our minds, associate nothing with it that is incompatible with incorruption or alien to blessedness. And cultivate every thought concerning it that can preserve its blessedness along with incorruption. Because there are gods, for the knowledge of them is plain to see. They are not, however, such as many suppose them to be, for people do not keep their accounts of them consistent with their beliefs. And it is not the man who would abolish the gods of the multitude who is impious but the man who associates the beliefs of the multitude with the gods; for the pronouncements of the multitude concerning the gods are not innate ideas but false assumptions. According to their stories the greatest injuries and indignities are said to be inflicted upon evil men, and also benefits.**

#### THE GODS INDIFFERENT TO WICKEDNESS

**“[These stories are false, because the gods], being exclusively devoted to virtues that become themselves, feel an affinity for those like themselves and regard all that is not of this kind as alien.**

Let me be sure to call this post to the attention not only of Don and Bryan but also @Twentier as I think this (if DeWitt can be supported) is a particularly important aspect of Epicurean theology. In emulating the gods, we would not only be emulating a \*result\*, but one aspect of that role model that we would be emulating comes in realizing that the gods, just like us, must act to maintain their blessedness. This would help strengthen the usefulness of the suggestion that the gods are objects of emulation -- Epicurus would be suggesting that we not only emulate them in result, but that we are emulation the act of working to sustain blessedness. I agree with DeWitt's suggestion that this would be a logical extension of Epicurus' theories about the gods. An example of that would be that when Torquatus describes to Cicero the characteristics of the best life, those are characteristics which must be maintained, whether by gods or by men.

#### Quote

[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. [41] When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?

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### Post by “TauPhi” of May 18, 2024 at 3:36 PM

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

In emulating the gods, we would not only be emulating a \*result\*, but one aspect of that role model that we would be emulating comes in realizing that the gods, just like us, must act to maintain their blessedness. This would help strengthen the usefulness of the suggestion that the gods are objects of emulation -- Epicurus would be suggesting that we not only emulate them in result, but that we are emulation the act of working to sustain blessedness. I agree with DeWitt's suggestion that this would be a logical extension of Epicurus' theories about the gods.

So the gods, who live in intermundia do not and cannot interact with us. We on the other hand, cannot and do not interact with them. Both species live entirely disconnected lives under completely different circumstances and yet we are supposed to be emulating the gods. It's like asking a gnat to start juggling with bowling pins.

And how realization that the gods must act to maintain blessedness is supposed to have any effect of humans? We need to act to live blessed lives regardless of what gods supposedly do or don't do.

I know I'm usually harsh as far as Epicurean theology is concerned, but I'm raising this points with good intentions as I'm still trying to understand and find a logical connection between this aspect of Epicureanism and the rest of the philosophy.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 3:44 PM**

Tau Phi I think that you've stated the relationship. There are lots of things that we cannot perceive directly, like atoms, but we hold firmly that they exist and we base our actions on confidence that they (atoms) are at the basis of all things, and not supernatural gods.

Further, I think those who say that we "cannot interact" with the gods have to be careful that they are not going further than the texts support. They were talking about perceiving images of the gods, and those images would not be magical and would presumably be traveling from the intermundia to us (although that section seems to indicate the opposite direction). A fair reading of the various texts certainly seems to imply that while we DO not see them, the reason is that they are too far off to see, not that there is some kind of magical impenetrable barrier to seeing them, if we were closer, just like we see that the tower up close is square rather than round.

Also, I do not think that the "cannot" should be extended to more than the observation that in Epicurus' time they "could not" travel to the moon. I would see no theoretical reason why, having advanced to space travel, humans could not travel toward or even to the intermundia, just as Lucretius analogizes when he talks about what he sees of the intermundia in his mind's eye in the poem.

I see no reason at all not to conclude that Epicurus thought that it was important to affirm that there is life throughout the universe, that there is life that operates more successfully (and less successfully) than we do, and that "the gods" are examples of what we expect to find as we extend our observations out into the universe.

I understand that there are people, Frances Wright among them, as seen in her writings after "A Few Days In Athens," who have no use for that kind of theorizing. They think we should focus

our entire attention here on earth and not worry about more cosmic issues. But I think Epicurus thought that huge numbers of people DO have need for such theorizing as part of their confidence that the universe is entirely natural and has no supernatural component. I think that way myself, and I am confident that there are large numbers of people who, as part of their Epicurean reading, want to understand where Epicurus was coming from as a part of their overall thinking about the universe.

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### **Post by “TauPhi” of May 18, 2024 at 4:17 PM**

Thanks Cassius. I don't have issues with the possibility of existence of more advanced species in the universe. If someone asked me to make a bet I'd put my money that such species are out there. I even wouldn't be surprised to find out that some of these species figured out a way to considerably extend their lives and they make the best out of their lives. And I'm all on board with exploration of the universe outside of our planet to the best of our abilities. The same goes with the exploration of the subatomic realm.

My issue is with the emulation of gods as suggested in Epicureanism. To emulate anything we at the very least need to be exposed to it to have a vague idea of what we are supposed to be emulating. The only exposure in Epicureanism I'm aware of is 'eidola' and that is nothing more than: 'Hey, I imagined something so it must be true. From now on I will emulate it.' And with that approach I can only hope nobody starts imagining Freddie Kruger in a birthday balloon shop.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 4:52 PM**

#### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

To emulate anything we at the very least need to be exposed to it to have a vague idea of what we are supposed to be emulating. The only exposure in Epicureanism I'm aware of is 'eidola' and that is nothing more than: 'Hey, I imagined something so it must be true. From now on I will emulate it.' And with that approach I can only hope nobody starts imagining Freddie Kruger in a birthday balloon shop.

I think that objection is met by a rigorous application of what Epicurus said: believe NOTHING about them that is alien to incorruption or blessedness. I suspect this is where prolepsis comes

in and the argument would be that it is no more appropriate to take from prolepsis that a god could be like Freddie Kruger than that oars when inserted in water are bent and when withdrawn from water return to their straight shape. Sure there are temporary "illusions" that cause some people at some times to form false opinions, when they don't apply prudent canonicity to distinguish what they really know from what they don't, but these illusions are overcome by repeated rigorous observations -- and the same kind of repeated and rigorous examination of prolepsis leads to the conclusion that "blessedness" and "incorruptibility" do not comport with being a Freddie Kruger.

An awful lot of Epicurean philosophy depends on rigor in applying the fundamental premises. There are ONLY TWO FEELINGS, pleasure and pain, and if you don't \*rigorously\* apply that then you are going to spin your wheels forever on what "absence of pain" mean and fall into the trap of concluding that it means something other than pleasure.

If you don't \*rigorously\* apply proleptic concepts of blessedness and incorruptibility then you'll fall into the trap of thinking that \*anything goes\* and that a god could be like Freddie Kruger. Proper evaluation of prolepses leads to the conclusion that blessedness and incorruptibility involve self-sufficiency, happiness, and not playing enemies and favorites with others. Sure someone can argue over whether that assertion is correct, but they can also argue over whether oars get bent when they get placed in water. We all, in the end, have to make our own decisions about reality. Epicurus chooses to trust the senses, anticipations, and feelings, rather than to embrace skepticism or divine revelation or rationalism as replacing them.

And if you don't \*rigorously\* apply the viewpoint that some things are possible and some things are not possible, then you'll take the position that an infinity of time and boundlessness of space means that "anything goes." --- And on this last point I think that you and I are already together that it most certainly does NOT mean that, and that "anything goes" as an argument for where life came from (as in that Intelligent Design article) would be a perversion of Epicurean philosophy.

It seems to me that someone suggesting that Freddie Kruger could be like a god would be met by a classical Epicurean with the same kind of heated reaction as suggesting that infinity means that "anything is possible." Both are nonsensical contentions. (blasphemy! 😊 )

Letter to Menoecus [123] The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life. 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 incorruption or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and incorruption.

## Post by “Kalosyni” of May 18, 2024 at 5:29 PM

Some simplified ideas:

1. All cultures have had conceptions of gods that they worshipped.
  2. The gods have no influence on our lives.
  3. Since the conception of gods is everywhere (especially so in Epicurus' time), we should take it upon ourselves to think about them as living blessed lives as a result of their perfectly virtuous and incorruptible nature.
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## Post by “TauPhi” of May 18, 2024 at 5:47 PM

All right, I guess you're right about Freddie. I am going to be as rigorous as I possibly can for the remainder of this post. Nobody should worry - there will be enough balloons for now.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Letter to Menoecus [123] The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life. 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 incorruption or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and incorruption.

If the gods are incorruptible that means they cannot be corrupted. That also mean they do not have to act to maintain their blessedness as it cannot be taken from them. They are immortal. And since only atoms, void and the universe as a placeholder for them are eternal and cannot be corrupted, thanks to the [Epicurean gods](#) we can kiss Epicurean atomism bye, bye.

If the gods have to act to maintain their blessedness so we can emulate their work, that means they are corruptible. It also means they are not perfectly blessed as they have at least one worry on their minds all the time: Do not forget to act or you'll go poof.

Even if someone can explain to me how incorruptibility and blessedness can be married with atomism (for which I would be eternally grateful, so to speak) I'd still have to ask: How are we supposed to emulate incorruptibility and blessedness? How is it not asking a gnat to start juggling with bowling pins?

So, until someone shows me a way out, by rigorously applying the viewpoint that some things are possible and some things are not possible in our universe, I must conclude that [Epicurean gods](#) are the latter.

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 7:00 PM

### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

If the gods are incorruptible that means they cannot be corrupted. That also means they do not have to act to maintain their blessedness as it cannot be taken from them. They are immortal. And since only atoms, void and the universe as a placeholder for them are eternal and cannot be corrupted, thanks to the [Epicurean gods](#) we can kiss Epicurean atomism bye, bye.

I don't agree that this is rigorous application of Epicurean principles. "Incorruptible" does not contain within it an explanation of how that incorruptibility is maintained. As DeWitt argues, only atoms and void are eternally unchangeable. Something must maintain the status of incorruptibility, and since there is no god over them to do so for them, the gods must maintain their incorruptibility themselves.

This is supported by Velleius' statement in the material we are covering:

"But, what is more remarkable, he gives us a world which has been not only created, but, if I may so say, in a manner formed with hands, and yet he says it is eternal. Do you conceive him to have the least skill in natural philosophy who is capable of thinking anything to be everlasting that had a beginning? For what can possibly ever have been put together which cannot be dissolved again? Or what is there that had a beginning which will not have an end? If your Providence, Lucilius, is the same as Plato's God, I ask you, as before, who were the assistants, what were the engines, what was the plan and preparation of the whole work? If it is not the same, then why did she make the world mortal, and not everlasting, like Plato's God?"

No one I have seen has asserted that Epicurus definitely held that an individual god has existed ETERNALLY, so unless you are contending that it is clear that Epicurus held that a particular god has existed eternally, just like an atom, then a god came together from atoms at some point just like we did. I am not saying it is the only difference, but for purpose of this discussion I would say that the major distinction is that the god has found a way to maintain his togetherness indefinitely (being in the intermundia is part of that) and that there is no necessity for a god to worry that he will cease to exist, unless the god were to for some reason stop doing the things that keeps it alive. I don't see anything beyond that as necessarily a part of

"incorruptibility." Maybe there are ways to trace the etymology and definitions of the words used to a different conclusion, but again unless someone can point to clear references that the god (a god, the gods) had no beginning, then they are not exempt from the rule that only atoms have eternally unchanging nature.

Again, it's perfectly understandable if someone says that all this discussion of these issues is pure speculation and they want nothing to do with it, but that's not the position that Epicurus or the Epicureans took, and eliminating it from discussion is not Epicurean philosophy. It is, in fact, arguably the subject that the Epicureans considered of number one prime importance above all others.

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### Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 7:05 PM

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

2. The gods have no influence on our lives.

i agree with points one and three, but on this one the formulation is probably too broad. I think Epicurus was saying that the gods don't INTERVENE in our lives, but that doesn't mean that their existence, and (I don't like the word contemplation so I will use) "consideration" of them does have a very strong influence on our lives.

If we consider them incorrectly that leads to disaster. If we consider them incorrectly that leads to the greatest confidence in the ability to live happily.

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### Post by “TauPhi” of May 18, 2024 at 7:44 PM

I don't think we are going to reach an agreement regarding the nature of the gods and I don't think it matters, to be honest, as we are just people speculating about something way above our pay grade.

I just want to clarify that it was never my intention to eliminate gods from Epicureanism. The gods are integral and significant part of the philosophy. I'm first to admit it. I do study Epicurean theology as any other aspect of the philosophy but to my current knowledge, that aspect seems to be a weak link in the philosophy and I am definitely not going to pretend that emulation of gods is a viable option FOR ME just because Epicurus said so. I find insistence on

emulation of unknown as dangerous as following any other gods people came up with through the history of mankind.

I hope I'm perfectly clear that it's my own personal stance on the topic and every conversation I'm involved in on this forum regarding gods is only my attempt to get some clarification and further study. I'm not interested in trying to convince anyone of anything I know very little about. Just in case someone gets the wrong impression that I'm against Epicureanism - I'm not. I find it fascinating and useful, most of the time.

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### **Post by “Don” of May 18, 2024 at 7:59 PM**

This is exactly why I'm in the "idealist" camp when it comes to this topic.

I find it hard to fathom that Epicurus really posited atomic beings existing outside his kosmos, between world-systems. Remember, the stars we see are part of *our* kosmos. The "intermundia" has no world, no stars, no moons. It is, as far as I can determine, an undefined soup of random atoms that haven't coalesced into an orderly kosmos. I see no way an atomic material being would even have a place to stand in such a region of the Universe!

Epicurus did posit "alien" life elsewhere in the Universe, but they lived in their own cosmos. Those other beings weren't the gods.

My understanding of the "idealist" position is that each person can have their own conception of the best blessed life possible, and that is *\*their\** "god." That, to me, is part of the significance of those singular "god"'s in *Menoikeus*. That kind of "god" is deathless because you can't kill an idea. It goes on, being reconceived again and again

That's where my head is at currently on this topic.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 18, 2024 at 9:10 PM**

Perhaps the gods could be this kind of "preconception". This occurred to me as I was looking at an old book cover.



[Face pareidolia](#) - spotting faces in objects that have none. Pareidolia is a mistake of the mind, part of a human tendency to perceive patterns in random circumstances.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 9:55 PM**

Luckily for purposes of the podcast there is no reason to prejudice the issue. We will methodically go through the texts and see where we end up at the other end.

Going though On Ends was a cathartic experience for me, and I expect "On the Nature of the Gods," combined with Joshua's color commentary, to be the same!

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### **Post by “Little Rocker” of May 20, 2024 at 7:43 AM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

My understanding of the "idealist" position is that each person can have their own conception of the best blessed life possible, and that is *\*their\** "god." That, to me, is part of the significance of those singular "god"'s in Menoikeus. That kind of "god" is deathless because you can't kill an idea.

I guess like Don I'm more sympathetic to the 'idealist camp,' though I do tend to think the conception is probably shared rather than particular (or at least *\*more\** shared than particular).

I suppose what puzzles me about the idea that we should aim to be like the gods is that it might seem perfectly sufficient to aim to be like the *\*sage.\** If, for example, the sage expresses

gratitude, but the gods do not (KD 1), then shouldn't I want to be like the sage because I am human?

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### Post by “Don” of May 20, 2024 at 8:07 AM

#### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I suppose what puzzles me about the idea that we should aim to be like the gods is that it might seem perfectly sufficient to aim to be like the \*sage.\* If, for example, the sage expresses gratitude, but the gods do not (KD 1), then shouldn't I want to be like the sage because I am human?

Great question. LOL! Maybe it's all marketing. "Be an Epicurean. Live the life of the gods!"

In a slightly more serious vein, maybe it's the self-sufficiency (autarkeia) aspect of the gods. By Epicurean definition, they neither expect praise nor dispense random punishment. They are always "blessed" and have an unshakable (incorruptible) blessed life. So a sage can live a god-like life in the here and now?

I'll have to give this one some more thought ☐☐

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### Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2024 at 9:05 AM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

maybe it's the self-sufficiency (autarkeia) aspect of the gods. By Epicurean definition, they neither expect praise nor dispense random punishment. They are always "blessed" and have an unshakable (incorruptible) blessed life. So a sage can live a god-like life in the here and now?

I would say it that way too (that the gods are a model of achieving that we can aspire to even if we can't achieve their success ourselves).

Humans, even Epicurus, suffer from diseases and all sorts of nagging pains that detract from a totally pleasant life, and it would be desirable to expand our knowledge and technology to eliminate even those. So even Epicurus himself and the ancient Epicureans would have profited

by "reverencing the gods" to the extent that emulating a "better" gives you motivation or ideas to work to maintain your own blessedness (live watching a master tennis player helps younger players get better).

At least that's the way I would interpret the "Captain Kirk perspective" on Epicurean philosophy - do everything possible to achieve more pleasure than pain, and push the envelope as far as you can on what is possible, because you're not going to get a second chance.

That would be another reason why I think there is work to be done on articulating Epicurus' full perspective on "impossible" goals, I don't think we have a well-developed-enough reconciliation of "life is desirable so it's desirable to live longer" with "it's impossible to live forever." Variation may not be new, and may not make the pleasure "greater" in every respect, but it seems clear that variation is itself desirable even if it doesn't "greaten" the total pleasure. Unless this calculation is made clear it seems a lot of people are tempted to accept less than what they could actually obtain if they focused their efforts on trying harder. (And of course I realize that some are going to say "you're just setting yourself up for disappointment," and I would respond with something like: "Since I know there is pain in life, and that I only have one life, I'll gladly accept the inevitability that at some point I will fail to stay alive in exchange for the pleasure that I will obtain by living longer. My goal is not running from every moment of pain, but achieving the most pleasurable life possible, so I gladly accept some pain in exchange for greater pleasure."

For some reason as I write this I am reminded of the abortion debate, and how medical technology has shifted the date of "viability" shorter and shorter and effectively overturned what seemed to be a way to come up with a dividing line. We surely don't want to talk too much about abortion here, but I think this specific analogy is relevant -- as medical technology advances, it's likely that humans can live longer and longer under better and better conditions, and old dividing lines about how long is reasonable to live will become obsolete.

My reading of Epicurus is that he would fully endorse living longer so long as conditions remain more pleasurable than painful, so it seems to me the focus really needs to be on "live as long as you can reasonably expect to experience more pleasure than pain" rather than suggesting that there is any period of XX number of years that everyone should deem to be sufficient - or too short.

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**Post by "Kalosyni" of May 20, 2024 at 9:30 AM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

At least that's the way I would interpret the "Captain Kirk perspective" on Epicurean philosophy - do everything possible to achieve more pleasure than pain, and push the envelope as far as you can on what is possible, because you're not going to get a second chance.

This may be slightly off-topic... but the problem with "Captain Kirk" is that he is a fictional character, and the on-going story gives him a kind of "immortality" - if he dies then the story ends - so he can't die for the sake of entertainment. In real life, the people who take on certain actions with great risks do end up dying due to events taking a bad turn. Also, I see him as a being like a "modern stoic".

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### Post by “Kalosyni” of May 20, 2024 at 9:38 AM

#### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I suppose what puzzles me about the idea that we should aim to be like the gods is that it might seem perfectly sufficient to aim to be like the \*sage.\* If, for example, the sage expresses gratitude, but the gods do not (KD 1), then shouldn't I want to be like the sage because I am human?

Two possibilities:

- The writings explaining this have been lost.
- Epicurus may have allowed multiple ways to "consider the gods" as long as you foremost believed that they do not intervene or interact with humans.

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### Post by “Little Rocker” of May 20, 2024 at 11:15 AM

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Two possibilities:

- The writings explaining this have been lost.

-- Epicurus may have allowed multiple ways to "consider the gods" as long as you foremost believed that they do not intervene or interact with humans.

I think the first is definitely right and the second also seems right to me. We don't have what he wrote about this question, but he wrote something for sure. And my hunch is that his theological project was primarily negative (i.e. aimed at removing false beliefs about the gods rather than at developing a worked-out theology). It could very well be that his positive theology was something like--believe whatever you want about the gods so long as it is consistent with all the other stuff we accept.

I'll have to think more about Captain Kirk, but it seems to me that if Epicurus himself (or let's just say 'the sage') thought we have every reason to use scientific innovation to diminish pain and increase pleasure, then emulating the attitudes and efforts of the sage would again suit the aspirational purpose.

To tie those two thoughts together, and if I'm understanding Kalosyni roughly correctly--we need to eliminate false beliefs about the gods, but it remains unclear whether the gods themselves play an essential role that can't be fulfilled by thinking of the best way to live as a human being. There's a paper on 'Epicurean Immortality' I once read that I'm going track down and revisit.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of May 20, 2024 at 12:09 PM**

There's an interesting paper "The Polytheism of the Epicureans" by Paul Terrence Matthias Jackson which may also be relevant here.

My guess is that Epicurus' take on the gods wasn't primarily negative, but equally positive in his redirected way of thinking about them. But we've moved so far from the Greek ideas of the gods that his ideas on the subject may seem irrelevant to us. So a further question is whether it makes sense for us to attempt to apply the Epicurean ideas of the gods to our modern lives, or is doing so a form of historical reenactment?

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### **Post by “Bryan” of May 20, 2024 at 12:17 PM**

"For indeed, all concepts have arisen from the senses – according to [1] circumstance, [2] analogy, [3] similarity, or [4] synthesis – with reasoning also contributing something." (DL 10.32)

Given that all our ideas are necessarily built only from impressions of the outside world, I do not understand how the idealist interpretation is tenable. We need impressions from external physical objects to form our thoughts. By analogy to direct impressions we are able to "mentally contemplate invisible realities." (DL 10.59)

Additionally, if an idea synthesized in our mind does not accurately correspond to an external object, then it is an empty opinion.

If you imagine a centaur, you have synthesized your impressions from reality into something that no longer corresponds to reality. In this case, the centaur exists in your mind as a real impression because it moves your mind with the impression of a centaur, but that synthesis does not correspond to reality (again, an empty opinion).

DL 10.49, 50 (Mensch Trans.) "We must also believe that it is when something from the external objects enters us that we see and think of them; for external objects could not stamp in us the nature of their own color and shape through the air that is between them and us, nor by means of the rays of light or any sorts of currents that travel from us to them, but rather by the entrance into our eyes or minds (as their size determines) of certain rapidly moving outlines that have the same color and shape as the external objects themselves; the same cause explains how they present the appearance of a single, continuous object and preserve their mutual interconnection at a distance from the substratum, their corresponding impact on our senses being due to the oscillation of the atoms in the solid object from which they come."

"And whatever image we derive by focusing the mind or the sense organs, whether on the object's shape or its concomitant properties, this shape is the shape of the solid object and is due either to the continuous compacting or to the residue of the image. Falsehood and error always reside in the added opinion [when a fact is awaiting confirmation or the absence of contradiction, which fact is subsequently not confirmed by virtue of an immovable opinion in ourselves that is linked to the imaginative impression, but distinct from it; it is this that gives rise to the falsehood]. For impressions like those received from a picture, or arising in dreams, or from any other form of apprehension by the mind, or by the other criteria, would not have resembled what we call the real and true things had it not been for certain actual things on which we had cast our eyes. Error would not have occurred unless we had experienced some other movement in ourselves that was linked to, but distinct from, the apprehension of the

impression; and from this movement, if it is not confirmed or is contradicted, falsehood results; whereas if it is confirmed, or not contradicted, truth results. And to this view we must adhere, lest the criteria based on clear evidence be repudiated, or error, strengthened in the same way, throw all these things into confusion."

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### **Post by "Pacatus" of May 20, 2024 at 2:12 PM**

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Additionally, if an idea synthesized in our mind does not accurately correspond to an external object, then it is an empty opinion.

And yet, our ability to imagine often leads to discoveries about the external, sensual world that may not have come about otherwise: theoretical science often becomes physical science.

There is also the aesthetic element: Mozart imagined ("heard"/synthesized in his mind) combinations of musical notes that became a score - and hence a symphony that can be played and enjoyed.

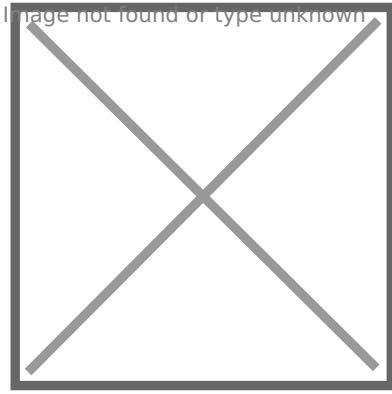
And the very ways in which we represent the sensual world to ourselves, and think about it, may invariably involve some imaginative activity (at least I don't think that can be discounted; and I think there is some empirical evidence for it). For example, "Even when you use your imagination to remember something that actually happened to you, you're creating a simulation of a time and place that no longer exists." (Jim Davies. *Imagination: The Science of Your Mind's Greatest Power*. 2019. Pegasus Books.) Also, imagination can be employed therapeutically to discover and address things about ourselves we might otherwise have not uncovered.

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### **Post by "Pacatus" of May 20, 2024 at 2:22 PM**

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

There's an interesting paper "The Polytheism of the Epicureans" by Paul Terrence Matthias Jackson which may also be relevant here.



### [The Polytheism of the Epicureans](#)

Epicureans have been branded atheists since antiquity, but although they might have held unorthodox beliefs about divinity, they did nevertheless believe in...

[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

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## **Post by “Little Rocker” of May 20, 2024 at 3:15 PM**

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Given that all our ideas are necessarily built only from impressions of the outside world, I do not understand how the idealist interpretation is tenable. We need impressions from external physical objects to form our thoughts.

This is not something I have fixed views on, and apologies if I'm rehashing something already well-traveled, but Sedley has argued that Cicero has it right in the *Nature of the Gods* 1.43-5 that for Epicurus, our grasp of the gods is innate. As I understand it, Sedley thinks it's a natural outgrowth of another thing Epicurus considers innate--our desire for pleasure. Or at least that's how I'm reading this passage:

'The question then arises how we come to have this innate predisposition, given that, in Epicurean eyes, it cannot have been hardwired into us by any divine creator. The answer should be as follows. According to Epicurus all animals have, by nature and without divine design, an innate desire to maximize their own pleasure, and for human beings that maximization is identifiable with a life of blessed tranquillity, untainted by the fear of death. The gods, correctly understood in accordance with the basic *prolepsis* as blessed and altogether free from the fear of death, are an ideal model of just such a life. Each of us has an innate propensity to imagine – and in particular to dream of – the being we would ideally like to become. By doing so, we are *ipso facto* giving a concrete realization to the *prolepsis* of god. Hence our innate predisposition to form this *prolepsis* is likely to amount to our natural

tendency to form a graphic picture of our own equally innate moral agenda. And the guaranteed truth of the *prolepsis* may well be identifiable with the truth of our intuitive underlying conception of the best life.'

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2024 at 3:49 PM**

That's a great quote and I think that's consistent with Dewitt's view too that Velleius (taking that Cicero is simply following some contemporary Epicurean text) has it right.

But just like Velleius doesn't stop there, and he joins with it the isonomy argument, I am thinking that there is no reason that *\*we\** should stop there either. We should also factor in the Epicurean argument for life on other worlds, existing in "equitable distribution" (based on how we see a progression of life here on earth). From those we can conclude that living beings more blessed than us, and deathless, are as certain to exist somewhere as are the atoms, which are also beyond our sensory reach, but about which we are confident, based on reasoning from observations that *\*are\** within our sensory reach.

As far as the gods living "between" the worlds, that sounds to me more like one of those manifold possibilities that must satisfy us, rather than a requirement that they live *\*only\** in that location. The requirement would be that they have mastery over their environment so that it provides all that they need for their happiness, and we could suggest numbers of possibilities for how that could be set up, rather than thinking that "intermundia" gives us a complete physical description of a specific particular location. The main thing is that we see no evidence or reason to believe that they would take any notice of us, wherever they are and no matter how many of them there may be.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2024 at 5:17 PM**

#### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

At least for me. But prolepsis really seems to be the key.)

Prolepsis being the key to LOTS of things, not just the gods, and that's a huge subject in itself.

I understand that we have to take the senses, anticipations, and feelings as given, as they are our connection with reality, but it seems to me it's all one big question: We have good reason to

think that no supernatural god created them, and that they didn't occur simply by chance, but through the natural aspects of atoms moving through void. But I think we all have the tendency to presume that there must have been a **\*\*First\*\*** combination or event that led to everything else, and I think we have to get past that to connect with where Epicurus would have been going by asking us to study principles of infinity. Whatever process allows for life to develop and then evolve, that process has *\*always\** been something that is naturally part of the universe, so we have to think through what that *\*always\** means. If we take the optimistic view that mankind (our closest example) won't eventually destroy itself,**\*\*** then we've got infinite number of species with tremendously developed technologies all across the universe, and that's going to make it important eventually that we distinguish (1) advanced civilizations far ahead of us, which we expect to exist from (2) universe-creating supernatural gods, which we are confident cannot and do not exist.

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**\*\*** And even if mankind does destroy itself, we should presume that it wasn't fated that it do so, and that other species would not necessarily destroy themselves.

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### **Post by “Bryan” of May 20, 2024 at 7:03 PM**

In an effort to reconcile (DL 10.32) "All concepts have arisen from the senses" with (DND 1.43) "...gods exist, because nature herself has impressed a notion of them on the minds of all." I am thinking:

What has "nature used to impress a notion of gods on our minds" if not the very images of the gods that come from their bodies?

We also cannot forget that Philodemus discusses the actual physical processes by which the gods exist:

Philódēmos, *On Piety*, 1.8.205: <sup>[Obbink]</sup> And having written another book *On Holiness*, in it too he makes clear that -not only that thing which exists indestructibly - but also (that which) continually exists in perfection as one and the same entity: are termed in the common usage "[unified] entities" - some of which [entities] are perfected out of the same elements, and others from similar elements.

Philódēmos, *On Piety*, 1.13.347: [Obbink] Its constitution out of things similar would obviously be a unified entity: for it is possible [for beings constituted] out of similarity for ever to have perfect happiness – since [unified] entities can be formed no less out of identical than out of similar elements ([and both kinds of entity] are recognized by Epicurus as [being] exactly the same things, for example in his book *On Holiness*.)

Philódēmos, *On Piety*, 1.13.364: [Obbink] ...Therefore he was wont to say that nature brought all these things to completion alike – and that for the most part many things come about [when they are formed] from an aggregation of various similar particles...

Sedley is correct when he says "each of us has an innate propensity to imagine." We also have an innate ability to see -- but we have to actually look and see things to use that ability! So he goes too far by saying "By doing so, we are ipso facto giving a concrete realization to the prolepsis of god." We can give similar mental "realizations" to centaurs. The process Sedley is describing is actually how we form a hypolepsis (supposition) and unless it corresponds to an external body, it is an empty thought.

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### Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2024 at 7:56 PM

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

What has "nature used to impress a notion of gods on our minds" if not the very images of the gods that come from their bodies?

Yep I think that is definitely the question, but even as I argue for the realist position I am not sure that the question is answered very easily.

Do we have notions of "atoms" impressed on our minds even though we have never seen them?

Do we have notions of "justice" impressed on our minds even though justice is an abstract concept which cannot be seen in bodily form?

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### Post by “Eikadistes” of May 20, 2024 at 9:23 PM

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

What has "nature used to impress a notion of gods on our minds" if not the very images of the gods?

**Drugs.** And a few other things, but I'd like to start with *drugs*.

By definition, **psychedelic chemicals** are associated with the religious experience (from the ancient Greek ψυχή [*psykhé*] "mind" or "soul" and δῆλος [*dêlos*] "manifest" or "visible"). In addition to near-universal consumption of wine, as well as (what I deem to be) *possible*, recreational use of cannabis (as demonstrated by the Scythians according to Herodotus), the many Mystery Rites (such as the Orphic, Dionysian, and Eleusinian Mysteries) of Antiquity presented the average ancient Greek with a variety of ways to induce a religious experience, either through the inhalation or ingestion of **psychoactive substances**. The content of those experiences are categorically inspirational, and the experience, *itself*, can be psychologically and behaviorally transformational.

**Dancing.** It goes well with drugs for a reason.

Similar neurological patterns are activated through ritualistic **dancing** and/or **drumming**. In Islam, we see this with Sufi whirling, renown as inducing a mystical state. Dancing is a primary form of spiritual expression throughout the world's cultures, too numerous to name. The repetitive, kinetic and acoustic rituals of rhythmic drumming and dancing are partners in inducing the religious experience. Dancing would have been a feature of Dionysian Mysteries, and the practice had a practical purpose, to induce the psychedelic experience, or, in Epicurean terms (*so long as I am not conflating incompatible ideas*), to "impress a notion of gods on our minds." *Historically-speaking*, getting high while dancing to rhythmic music never gets old (and has never gotten old).

**Meditation.** It's another pathway to the gods.

**Meditation** yields similar neurological patterns as **drugs**, **dancing**, and **drumming**. We can also throw **chanting** in this category (and, perhaps, **singing**). We find recorded examples in Tibetan Buddhism. For the same reasons that dancing and drumming induce psychedelic experiences, various forms of **meditation**, **chanting**, and **breathing** can facilitate psychological states in which lasting, psychologically-transformational impressions (such that we call them "divine") can be consciously apprehended. Focusing upon the icon of a deity can induce an experience that can lead to measurably-positive, behavioral changes. Here again, the Mystery Rites come into play.

**Dreams.** This is the big one in an Epicurean context.

I think that nocturnal dreams are the best example, not only because they are mentioned by Epicurus, but because they are the only psychedelic experience that occurs without consciously initiating it. Very rarely do we chose our dreams, and we are usually *only* observers of our dreams, much as, throughout the day, we are observers of sensations. A strong analogy can be made between the images our eyes apprehend in the day and the images our mind apprehends at night. Both are received without the bias of the rational mind, and can therefore be trusted as sources of data. As with optical illusions, it is up to the intellect to formulate a practical interpretation, but those images are already there for the intellect to consider when it awakens.

**Those are some general ways of inducing transformational mental states that illicit the "perception of deities" and inspire the "divine nature".** The Epicurean connection between *piety* and *ethics* reinforces to me the proposition (I'm making) that Epicurus' description of the gods (as impressive objects of a dreamy mind) can be expressed as a function of needing to provide a naturalistic explanation for psychedelic experiences, experiences that would have been common among ancient Greeks as demonstrated by the plethora of Mystery Rites.

Epicurean Philosophy is always practical, and Epicurean theology should be no different: sober vocabulary is required to ground theology in physics, or, in other words, to ground the religious experience within the framework of a universe that is made from particles dancing in void. Unlike the gods of metaphysicians, who were purely theoretical, the [Epicurean gods](#) were apparent, and the religious experience was not only accessible, but, through ritual, repeatable and reliable.

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## Post by “Don” of May 21, 2024 at 7:35 AM

We're lucky to have On Piety, but Obbink's reconstruction of the text is speculative at best in some areas of the papyrus. Even the parts of the papyrus that are more complete often provide citations without much context. Obbink et al are more than happy to provide commentary, but much of that appears speculative. However, all that said, I need to dig deeper into Obbink's translation and commentary. One paragraph that caught my eye this morning was:

solution, as in Epic. *KD* 1) and (2) possessing it eternally (see on 352), i.e. being eternal. The problem is, of course, that normal compounds (and our ideas of them), which *ὑπάρχουσιν ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν*, must all be subject to corporeal dissolution. Unlike them, in the the Epicurean theory, the gods and our ideas of them, because they *ὑπάρχουσιν ἐκ τῆς ὁμοιότητος* and, because the supply of similar images is inexhaustible, are not subject to such dissolution. Of course in one sense they are always undergoing such dissolution, viz. in the minds of individual thinkers; but they are constantly and eternally being reformed, their constitutions out of similars being constantly replenished. Of course my own idea of the gods (while it includes the aspect of imperishability) cannot *guarantee* them a form of existence throughout all time. It is unknown how Epicurus might have proposed to get around this difficulty. On the one hand, regularity of human nature guarantees that it has been going on since the earliest humans (a view specifically attributed to Epicurus below, 225–31) and can be expected to do so as long as there are humans, the aberrant counter-examples posed by notorious atheists in human history (519–30) notwithstanding. Epicurus, impressed by the regularity and consistency with which we form conceptions of the gods, concluded that there must for this reason be something basically and naturally right about the idea (see Obbink 1992*b*, especially 199–202). While humans as a lot will not of course exist eternally (a view argued, for example, by Lucretius) to think about the gods for ever, nevertheless, since there exist now and will in the future exist worlds both like and unlike ours (*Ad Herod.* 45), there will on this reasoning always be



something around which thinks more or less like humans to conceive them

Fascinating stuff!

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 21, 2024 at 8:37 AM

Very interesting quote. And I agree with how speculative this reconstruction of the text seemed to me when I first checked out his book. But I agree with his reasoning that Epicurus would have thought that there would always be intelligent beings somewhere thinking about these things.

I was listening yesterday to Greg Sadler deride the Epicurean arguments in "On The Nature of the Gods" as easier to refute than the Stoic arguments, but one of the things he said prompts this comment about what Velleius said:

### Quote

“You see therefore that the foundation (for such it is) of our inquiry has been well and truly laid. For the belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom, or law, but rests on the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind; their existence is therefore a necessary inference, since we possess an instinctive or rather an innate concept of them; but a belief which all men by nature share must necessarily be true; therefore it must be admitted that the gods exist. And since this truth is almost universally accepted not only among philosophers but also among the unlearned, we must admit it as also being an accepted truth that we possess a ‘preconception,’ as I called it above, or ‘prior notion,’ of the gods. (For we are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word *prolepsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before).”

Right now I am entertaining the thought that the focus ought to be not on Epicurus inventing the idea and the term *prolepsis* from nothing, but on the "in a sense in which no one had ever used it before." (I'm sure that this has been probably obvious to everyone but me.

If Epicurus was *expanding* the term *prolepsis* to cover more things in the same way that he expanded use of the word "pleasure," then you could analogize that:

- just as Epicurus appears to have expanded the existing term "pleasure" to cover not just agreeable stimulative sensations (which the Cyreniacs and everyone else too agrees with), but to include all awareness of feeling that is not painful (with which standard philosophers would disagree);

would it not make sense to consider that:

- Epicurus may have expanded the existing term "prolepsis" to cover not just the recognition of physical objects like men or horses or oxes as a result of having seen examples of them over time (which is the example Diogenes Laertius gives, and everyone agrees with as a process that definitely happens), but to include identification of abstractions such as justice or divinity which require considerably more organizing in the mind because they aren't physical objects that can be touched or seen or heard or smelled or tasted (which is a process with which other philosophers - especially blank slate philosophers - would disagree).

The point of this post being that maybe the emphasis on prolepsis can be analogized to the expansion of the word as an explanation of why Diogenes Laertius' explanation does not seem complete.

For reference this is pretty close to what Dewitt says around page 142 et seq.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2024 at 3:13 PM**

As i mention in our 20th Zoom, thanks to Kalosyni I have become aware of a new series of five videos put out just in the last month by noted Stoic philosophy professor Greg Sadler. Here's a link to the first of the series of five:

<https://youtu.be/h9KPpb8amUg>

The episodes don't seem to have numbers in their titles, you just start with the oldest and go from oldest to newest to get them in order.

Here in episode three at right around the 14:43 mark is the place where he makes what I think is a pretty clear error - He references how it is interesting that Lucilius is objecting to Cotta's skeptical presentation on the gods. The issue is that he calls Lucilius the EPICUREAN and says it is interesting that an EPICUREAN would talk about defending the gods. At 15:21 he again says that it is the Epicurean who is objecting.

I though to myself that that WOULD be pretty interesting, and actually very impossible, given that the Epicureans were strongly defending their views of the gods. However in checking the actual text it is in fact Lucilius who objects - Professor Sadler just calls Lucilius an Epicurean rather than a Stoic.

<https://youtu.be/SDN2ck3dGd8?t=870>

I haven't listened to the rest yet, and I am sure it isn't going to go through the book the way we will on the podcast, but it sounds like a very good overview that will be helpful to set the stage for deeper analysis.

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### Post by “Bryan” of June 9, 2024 at 5:21 PM

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

Do we have notions of "atoms" impressed on our minds even though we have never seen them?

As we know, atoms are not visible in any way because, unlike every other object, atoms cannot give off images. Atoms do not flow off of the bodies of other atoms, but atoms do flow off every other object.

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

Do we have notions of "justice" impressed on our minds even though justice is an abstract concept which cannot be seen in bodily form?

The physical basis for justice is simply the fact that life is a potential characteristic [sýmptōma] of matter -- and justice is a potential characteristic of life.

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### Post by “Little Rocker” of June 9, 2024 at 6:44 PM

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

Epicurus may have expanded the existing term "prolepsis" to cover not just the recognition of physical objects like men or horses or oxes as a result of having seen examples of them over time (which is the example Diogenes Laertius gives, and everyone agrees with as a process that definitely happens), but to include identification of abstractions such as justice or divinity which require considerably more organizing in the mind because they aren't physical objects that can be touched or seen or heard or smelled or tasted (which is a process with which other philosophers - especially blank slate philosophers - would disagree).

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

The physical basis for justice is simply the fact that life is a potential characteristic [σύμπτωμα] of matter -- and justice is a potential characteristic of life.

I've been trying to work through some of these ideas lately, and I've run into perennial problems because people often talk past each other when they use terms like 'empiricism' and 'innate.' So perhaps the two of you can help. The question of whether Epicurus countenances anything as 'innate' comes up most often with the gods, but it seems like DeWitt, for example, also thinks justice is 'innate.' He thinks these fall under 'Anticipations,' and I confess I still haven't quite sorted through his textual evidence with 'Anticipations' (TBD).

Anyway, I've been wondering what it would even mean for Epicurus to consider something 'innate,' since the Platonic 'innate'--a pre-birth experience of abstract objects that we vaguely remember as we go about our daily life--is off the table. So is 'innate' in the sense of 'put in our nature by a creator.' So the chief option would be that it's part of our biological nature/cognitive architecture to categorize the world in a particular way or arrive at a particular conclusion in light of experience. We would be pre-disposed to eventually conclude, 'there must be gods,' or 'justice must be about entering agreements to avoid harm.' And if that were the case, then Epicurus need not think we have pre-existing 'experience' or 'impressions' of these things. We are not 'blank slates,' but instead beings who approach and process the world with a shared apparatus for discernment. And as a result, we arrive at a wide variety of shared conclusions.

Atoms strike me as different, but maybe they're not? After all, if we think, 'there's substance and motion,' then atoms are a highly effective explanation of how there can be both, and motion and substance certainly seem proleptic, if atoms do not. But does 'arguing for' atoms make Epicurus no longer an empiricist? I tend to think you can remain happily an empiricist and posit underlying explanations for what you observe all the time, so long as you consider them hypotheses.

I suppose I want to think that Epicurus is a dyed-in-the-wool empiricist (even though he posits atoms that he can't see by means of deduction) and might very well think some things are 'innate,' at least in the sense of resulting from use of the standard operating equipment. Does that sound roughly in the vicinity of reasonable?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 9, 2024 at 7:13 PM**

Great topic to pursue. I will write more later but in my mind I think innate "ideas" is a total nonstarter, and Dewitt was being sloppy when he used that reference.

My preferred explanation of what is innate is more on the order of pleasure and pain, extended to the innate ability to recognize relationships that then as we examine them are formed into ideas.

The best and even poetic presentation of such a position I have found is in the section from the work that Jackson Barwis wrote in the late 1700s against John Locke - the first of his "Dialogues on Innate Principles" found here: <https://jacksonbarwis.com>. (Specifically starting here: <https://jacksonbarwis.com/DOIP-One/> )

In that work Barwis argues strongly against innate "ideas" but says that innate "principles" - such as feeling pleasure at the recognition of acts of benevolence - is a very different thing.

If I were forced to take a position on the direction Epicurus would likely have gone, that would be it.

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 9, 2024 at 7:31 PM

For anyone who checks out my Jackson Barwis link I urge them to read up to the point in Dialogue One where he writes these two paragraphs, which I find not only persuasive but poetic:

### [Quote from Jackson Barwis - Dialog On Innate Principles](#)

"The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, moral principles. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.

When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature."

## Post by "Bryan" of June 9, 2024 at 10:01 PM

Thank you all for this great discussion!

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

So the chief option would be that it's part of our biological nature/cognitive architecture to categorize the world in a particular way or arrive at a particular conclusion in light of experience.

Yes, I agree. Just as we have an innate ability to see (but we have to actually look and see things to use that ability) -- similarly we have an innate ability to anticipate (but we have to actually anticipate [mentally focus] to use that ability). As Long says, "any explanation of Epicurus as an intuitionist is on quite the wrong track."

We are born with the ability to mentally focus on gods in the same way we are born with the ability to visually focus on dogs. By focusing we get a clear view, and correspondence of clear views shows us the true nature of an object.

[D.L. 10.38b] *And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions, whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.*

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I tend to think you can remain happily an empiricist and posit underlying explanations for what you observe all the time, so long as you consider them hypotheses.

The atoms are in a different class because the atoms do not give off images. One of the features of Epicurus' empiricism is that (as Long says) "Judgments about non-evident objects are true if they are consistent with clear sense-impressions."

Thus we have a positive use of the non-contradiction principle: Epicurus does not make the presupposition that atoms exist -- it is the absence of any other conceivable theory for phenomena which justifies the general inference about the existence of atoms.

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 9, 2024 at 10:58 PM

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

So the chief option would be that it's part of our biological nature/cognitive architecture to categorize the world in a particular way or arrive at a particular conclusion in light of experience. We would be pre-disposed to eventually conclude, 'there must be gods,' or 'justice must be about entering agreements to avoid harm.'

Since Bryan quoted that I would suggest some possible tweaking, along the lines of:

So the chief option would be that it's part of our biological nature/cognitive architecture to categorize the world in a particular way, *and thereby we are disposed to form conclusions about those categories in the light of experience*. We would be pre-disposed more to something like sensing that, 'the subject of the best form of existence is important enough to us to become alert to under a particular name such as 'divinity,'" or 'the subject of our relationships with others is important enough to become alert to under a particular name such as "justice."

That sounds more to me like a "faculty" (which is what i gather "prolepsis" or "anticipations" must be, in order to be one of the three legs of the canon as a means of perception. Given its equivalence to the five senses or the feelings of pain and pleasure, we have to accept the workings of prolepsis as part of our makeup, and constructed "honestly" like pleasure and pain and the five senses, which do not inject their own opinions. The workings of the prolepsis faculty would then become "perceptions" combined in our minds with all other perceptions of the other faculties, and there processed to eventually form ideas.

So specific conclusions such as "there must be gods" or "it is good to enter into agreements with my particular neighbors to avoid harm" would to me be outside of the prolepsis process. Those would be "conclusions" that are part of the functioning of the mind, which turns all the inputs into ideas. So if we keep the focus on the view that it's in the mind that errors can happen, then we recognize the possibility of error in subjects where prolepsis is involved. We can make the mistake of concluding that "the gods must be supernatural," or "as Hatfield I should treat all my neighbors the same, even if they are McCoys and are dying to kill me," because even though those involve divinity and justice, prolepsis doesn't deliver to us "conclusions" or "ideas" but just the disposition to recognize the issues and process them in the mind -- where right or wrong conclusions get made.

Under this perspective it would be wrong to ever consider "a prolepsis" to be an idea or a conclusion of any kind. That's where i think we implement Epicurus' observation that the opinions of the hoi polloi about the gods are not true, and are indeed false, even though they

are about a subject in which prolepsis is involved. The prolepsis would dispose us to evaluate the subject and consider it important, but the prolepsis would not provide the correct conclusion -- conclusions occur only in the mind.

The input provided by the faculty of prolepsis would never be any more right or wrong than the input from your eye or your ear is right or wrong - it is what it is, and has to be taken as canonical, but it's not an idea or a conclusion. it's the tool we use to make contact with reality and then from that form ideas and conclusions in our mind. But the distinction between the two is sharp, and it's the same distinction I think Jackson Barwis makes so well in pointing out the flaw in Locke's empiricism.

*"When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature."*

In analogy to eyes enabling us to see light and ears enabling us to hear sound, I would paraphrase Barwis and see prolepsis as the human faculty that "*makes us sensible to [divinity and justice] and enables us to understand their nature* -- without which we would neither be sensible to or have the capacity to form any understanding about them.

And this is the point in the argument of analogizing prolepsis to a "sense" where I quote Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, **August 10, 1787**:

Moral Philosophy. I think it lost time to attend lectures on this branch. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules. In this branch, therefore, read good books, because they will encourage, as well as direct your feelings. ....

## Post by “Little Rocker” of June 10, 2024 at 7:23 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Under this perspective it would be wrong to ever consider "a prolepsis" to be an idea or a conclusion of any kind. That's where i think we implement Epicurus' observation that the opinions of the hoi polloi about the gods are not true, and are indeed false, even though they are about a subject in which prolepsis is involved. The prolepsis would dispose us to evaluate the subject and consider it important, but the prolepsis would not provide the correct conclusion -- conclusions occur only in the mind.

I can see the benefits of your approach, but I wonder whether Epicurus builds a bit more content into the prolepsis than that. It seems to me like the prolepsis for the gods in Letter to Menoecus 123-4 is that 1) they exist and that 2) they are 'blessed and indestructible,' which offers at least some kind of skeletal conceptual structure.

And then it might be that the way 'the many'/hoi polloi go wrong is in their understanding of what 'blessed and indestructible' entail. But I admit that the more I look at this sentence, the more my eyes cross:

### Quote

'For the pronouncements of the many about the gods are not basic grasps but false suppositions.'

οὐ γὰρ προλήψεις εἰσὶν ἀλλ' ὑπολήψεις ψευδεῖς αἱ τῶν πολλῶν ὑπὲρ θεῶν ἀποφάσεις.

On one reading, Epicurus might think \*his\* pronouncements about the gods are 'basic grasps' (prolepseis), which would give the prolepsis \*a lot\* of argumentative content. On another reading, he's just offering 'true suppositions' about a 'basic grasp' he shares with the many, who instead offer 'false suppositions' about that prolepsis.

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 10, 2024 at 9:29 PM

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

It seems to me like the prolepsis for the gods in Letter to Menoecus 123-4 is that 1) they exist and that 2) they are 'blessed and indestructible,' which offers at least some

kind of skeletal conceptual structure.

My best thought at the moment is that the prolepsis "faculty" (and I think that's the major point, it's got to be a faculty like seeing through the eyes) has to be kept separate and apart from ideas, just like we keep the eyes and ears separate and apart from ideas. Otherwise it won't report "honestly," and won't have that canonical status, because it will be reaching its own conclusions.

So "the gods are blessed and imperishable" seems to me to necessarily be a conclusion of the mind, which rules it out from being considered a prolepsis itself. But it's a conclusion which would not exist but for the faculty of being able to recognize the relationships involved in being blessed vs not blessed, or deathless vs not deathless.

And I would also think that the prolepsis faculty does not function independently of the mind any more than the eyes function independently of the mind. If we take the position that we aren't born with these ideas about gods, then the mind has available to it not only the relationship organizing function, but also the past experiences of the five senses and the feelings of pleasure and pain on what we observe here on earth. And I would include there the issues of isonomia and deductions that life exists throughout the universe and that the universe is boundless and eternal. All of those would have to be brought together in the mind to conclude that divinity means total blessedness and deathlessness, and again the point may be that we would *\*not\** bring all those things together for consideration at all if not for prolepsis disposing us to evaluate the possibilities.

So I'd see the two fundamentals of deathlessness and blessedness as hard to rank as "anticipations" in themselves. It seems to me they fit better from Epicurus' perspective as "correct conclusions," which are based on and consistent with all the data from all three of the canonical faculties. In contrast, the ideas that gods are arbitrary and capricious are false conclusions, contrary to our experiences, even though the people who reach that conclusion are also basing their opinions on the same canonical faculties. If that's the case then the prolepsis aspect would be a necessary part of the starting point for analysis, but not the end point of the conclusion that "gods are blessed and imperishable."

No doubt this is a very speculative subject for us to discuss, but maybe in conclusion I'd say that the main point I can't get past in fitting everything together is that if the prolepsis is indeed part of the canon, which it appears to be, then it *\*cannot\** have any "fully-formed-idea" content to it. If it did, it wouldn't be parallel to the five senses and the feelings of pleasure and pain, both of which exist at birth and are in full operation at birth before we open our eyes and see our first sight or hear our first sound.

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**Post by “TauPhi” of June 10, 2024 at 9:47 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I can see the benefits of your approach, but I wonder whether Epicurus builds a bit more content into the prolepsis than that. It seems to me like the prolepsis for the gods in Letter to Menoeceus 123-4 is that 1) they exist and that 2) they are 'blessed and indestructible,' which offers at least some kind of skeletal conceptual structure.

I don't think what you're describing as 'the prolepsis for the gods' above is the Epicurean prolepsis. It's already active reasoning based on prolepsis. I'll try to explain it the best I can (while simultaneously pretending I know what I'm talking about, which might not be the case).

The criteria of truth (sensations, anticipations and feelings) are all automatic and passive - independent of our will. Our mind, having active ability to reason, can take these passive criteria and work out more and more general properties of things (even if those things can be only indirectly reasoned about - like the gods above). That's why Cassius' explanation that the prolepsis can't provide any conclusions seems to be correct. Conclusions of any nature are the result of active reasoning of the mind.

I hope I got this right but I probably should have gone back and refresh my knowledge on Epicurean induction first. No guarantees, but maybe that can help a bit.

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## Post by “Don” of June 10, 2024 at 10:40 PM

I would agree with [Cassius](#) that the prolepseis have to be (to be part of the Canon) pre-rational and provide "building materials" (best phrase I can do right now) for concepts but not concepts themselves. Prolepsis, it seems to me, is a *faculty* of the mind like sight is for the eyes, taste is for the tongue, hearing is for the ears, etc... Yes, we know they all flow into the brain now, but Epicurus didn't seem to divide up the senses that way.

I've entertained on this forum that the prolepsis of the gods is our innate faculty to feel awe. This also seems at least \*partially\* substantiated by the use of σέβομαι "to feel awe or fear before a god". For example:

Post

**[RE: "A Socio-Psychological and Semiotic Analysis of Epicurus' Portrait" by Bernard Frischer](#)**

[...]

It seems the practices of wearing rings or displaying portrait busts or having cups with Epicurus's picture on them is a physical manifestation of both Seneca's quote "Do all things as if Epicurus were watching" and VS32 Honoring a sage is itself a great good to the one who honors. τοῦ σοφοῦ σεβασμὸς ἀγαθὸν μέγα τῷ σεβομένῳ ἐστί.

σεβασμὸς in modern Greek just means "respect" however, in ancient Greek it was broader: "to be moved by awe, fear, or respect for others or for their..."



Don

January 23, 2023 at 11:58 AM

and

Post

### **RE: Philodemus On Piety**

The following are excerpts and notes from columns 27-36 of Obbink's Philodemus On Piety which outline the participation of Epicurus himself and the early Epicureans in religious festivals and other rites and practices. Obbink also shared more detailed notes in his book, so I may try and share some of those pages in later posts. For now, the material below has proved quite interesting...

Quoted in col. 27, On Piety: Epicurus, On Gods (Περὶ Θεῶν): as being both the greatest thing and that...



Don

December 25, 2020 at 10:05 PM

Of course, that "faculty" of a prolepsis doesn't help as much when deciding Epicurus's "blessed and incorruptible" vs the mistaken notions specifically the hoi polloi had (LOL... I just like calling them that to keep the original.. better than "the many" or "the crowds".. I'm assuming the Romans would have used "the mob.").

As for the letter to Menoikeus, I think 124 has to be read in the full context, along with 123:

Quote

*The gods do not exist in the way that the 'hoi polloi' believe them to, because they do not perceive what maintains the gods. One is not impious who does not take up the gods of the hoi polloi; but the one who attributes the beliefs of the hoi polloi to the gods. For what they believe are not prolepses but rather the judgements of the hoi*

*polloi concerning the gods which are false, hasty assumptions. So, they believe the greatest evils are brought to the wicked from the gods as well as the greatest aid to the good, because the hoi polloi are believing that the gods accept those who resemble themselves who are similar through all excellences and goodness; all those not of their sort are strange and alien.*

So, the hoi polloi's first big mistake is that "they don't perceive what maintains the gods." Plus, their fundamental "false, hasty assumptions" are that the gods bestow favors and punishments. The "gods of the hoi polloi" are the ones that demand sacrifice to keep them on your good side. There's every reason to reject those "gods" because all that is assigning false attributes to the gods, like jealousy, anger, beneficence (to humans), etc. All that has nothing to do with Epicurus's inborn faculty of perceiving the gods' nature. It seems to me that the *ONLY* things Epicurus is willing to assign to the gods, per Menoikeus's letter, are that they are "blessed" (makarios) and they are "uncorrupted, not liable to corruption or decay, imperishable" (aphthartos).

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 10, 2024 at 11:01 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I've entertained on this forum that the prolepsis of the gods is our innate faculty to feel awe.

Do you see "awe" as a sort of appreciation of a relationship that makes it fit as a prolepsis, or does it fit as a prolepsis for some other reason?

I ask that in context of trying to identify what characteristics divinity and justice might have in common with awe that could explain why divinity and justice are the primary examples of where Epicurus thought prolepsis was involved.

Is there anything else to suggest beyond building materials to identify what type of building materials? If eyes are processing light and ears are processing sound, what are prolepses processing? Do you see "relationship" useful as a term to describe at least in part what prolepses are perceiving?

If what we are talking about is some aspect of concept formation, what else comes before fully-formed concepts that might partially justify the term PRE-conceptions?

There would seem to be something involved in selecting similarities between particulars before some subset of particulars are then by judgment assembled into fully-formed concepts. I think

we are all mostly agreeing that only then at the duly formed stage do we then evaluate something as in some way either right or wrong.

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### **Post by “Don” of June 10, 2024 at 11:17 PM**

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

I ask that in context of trying to identify what characteristics divinity and justice might have in common with awe that could explain why divinity and justice are the primary examples of where Epicurus thought prolepsis was involved.

I see (well, that's a strong word... I sometimes surmise) that the prolepsis of divinity is connected some way with our innate sense of awe; I see justice connected with our innate sense of fairness (as demonstrated by experiments with human children and other primates). For example: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1220806110>

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### **Post by “Don” of June 10, 2024 at 11:26 PM**

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

If eyes are processing light and ears are processing sound, what are prolepses processing?

The subtle eidolon/films only able to be picked up by the mind?

It still seems to me that prolepseis are the mind's ability to discern patterns - a faculty of pattern recognition - from the cacophony of incoming sensations and to make sense of the senses. We're bombarded by sensations - literally swimming in an abundance of sensations. The prolepseis are the mind's ability to "make sense" of that and pick out.. "Oh, that's significant. I've sensed that pattern before. It must be important because it's repeating. It stands out from the background 'noise'." Same way for visual senses, et al. Same way for the mental sense. It seems to me that Epicurus treats the mind similar to the way he does the other sensation-sensing faculties of the body. The mind just picks up on the most subtle of eidola incoming.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, πρό-ληψις](#)

"preconception, mental picture or scheme into which experience is fitted" This would fit the idea of "pattern-recognition."

I \*think\* [Bryan](#) had a good list of all the -lepsis words (pro-, hypo-, etc.) and his interpretation of them.

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### Post by “Little Rocker” of June 11, 2024 at 12:26 AM

I definitely think we have a 'proleptic' capacity or capacities that produce prolepseis, but I just tend to think the prolepseis themselves (the products of the capacity) have conceptual content and structure. And I guess one place I'm seeing Epicurus suggest that is in the plural of prolepseis and 'pronouncements':

Quote

'For the pronouncements of the many about the gods are not basic grasps (prolepseis) but false suppositions.'

οὐ γὰρ προλήψεις εἰσὶν ἀλλ' ὑπολήψεις ψευδεῖς αἱ τῶν πολλῶν ὑπὲρ θεῶν ἀποφάσεις.

It strikes me that Epicurus is at least suggesting that his own 'pronouncements' about the gods \*are\* prolepseis. But maybe I'm just tired.

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### Post by “Don” of June 11, 2024 at 7:23 AM

You raise some solid points, [Little Rocker](#) . I especially find intriguing that statement: a "a 'proleptic' capacity or capacities that produce prolepseis". So, if I understand correctly, you're positing a mental capacity/faculty/process/function that leads to or produces something we can call a "prolepsis." And, since the texts use the plural, there has to be some significance to including it with sensations and feelings (pleasure and pain). For example:

Quote

Now in The Canon, Epicurus affirms that our *sensations* (*plural: τὰς αἰσθήσεις*) and *preconceptions* (*plural: προλήψεις*) and our *feelings* (*plural: τὰ πάθη*) are the standards of truth ; the Epicureans generally make *perceptions of mental presentations* (τὰς φανταστικὰς ἐπιβολὰς τῆς διανοίας) to be also standards.

The interesting thing (per LSJ) about "sensations" αἰσθήσεις is that it can not only refer to "physical sensations through what we think of as the sense-organs (eyes, ears, nose, etc.) but "also of the mind, perception, knowledge of a thing." The citations are to Plutarch, so maybe that's a later connotation? Although LSJ also references Plato in [Philebus](#) (emphasis added):

[Plato, Philebus, section 39b](#)

Socrates: When a man receives from sight *or some other sense* (αἰσθήσεως) the opinions (δοξαζόμενα doxazomena) and utterances of the moment and afterwards beholds in his own mind the images of those opinions and utterances.

So, the sensations of "the opinions and utterances" received "from sight or some other sense" give rise (according to Plato) to sustainable mental images that we can hold, discuss, etc. in our minds. The prolepsis, as defined by LSJ, are "mental picture or scheme into which experience is fitted." So, the sensations come pouring in, and, are then fit into "mental pictures or schemes" to make sense of them. I'm getting the image of one of those old-time coin sorters that you could put coins into, they'd roll down a little ramp, and then fall into the correct sized slot: pennies (smallest) first, then dimes, etc. The "proleptic" faculty would be like the sorting machine... and the prolepseis would be the tubes into which the coins fell, depending on their size.



But that doesn't move us along from Epicurus's "content" of the prolepsis of the gods being "blessed and uncorrupted", does it?

Long & Sedley in [The Hellenistic Philosophers](#) (login with free account to view the link) cite the Letter to Herodotus as showing that prolepseis are necessary to get at the underlying meaning of words. The citation doesn't use the word prolepsis but I can see where they get that it's being discussed:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

Quote from Letter to Herodotus, 37-38

"In the first place, Herodotus, *you must understand what it is that words denote*, in order that *by reference to this* we may be in a position to test opinions, inquiries, or problems, so that our proofs may not run on untested ad infinitum, nor the terms we use be empty of meaning. [38] For the primary signification of every term employed must be clearly seen, and ought to need no proving<sup>58</sup>; this being necessary, if we are to have something to which the point at issue or the problem or the opinion before us can be referred.

It seems to me that the faculty of the prolepsis is what it is that provides us the ability to "understand what it is that words denote," and ,by reference to this, we can test opinions, etc. I also like that Epicurus literally says that the "primary signification" of every term but be "clearly seen" (φθόγγον βλέπεσθαι)... like that coin dropping into its proper slot.

So, what's the point of these early morning musings? The prolepsis (to me, as of 7:21 am on a Tuesday 😊) seems to imply both a mechanism of the mind as well as a reference to making sense of sense perceptions. It involves both the sorting of sensations as well as the slots into which the sensations fits in their respective patterns.

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## Post by "Cassius" of June 11, 2024 at 10:01 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Plato, [Philebus](#), section 39b

Socrates: When a man receives from sight or some other sense (αἰσθήσεως) the opinions (δοξαζόμενα doxazomena) and utterances of the moment and afterwards beholds in his own mind the images of those opinions and utterances.

As another physics experiment to complement Don's, and one which the ancients I gather would have been familiar, I'd consider another possible analogy.

It seems Epicurus and Democritus thought that non-visible images could be received by natural mechanical means over a distance. Of course they didn't have tuned radios, but they did presumably observe how their musical instruments worked, such as tuning forks:

<https://youtu.be/vNuDxc9tZMk?t=111>

(There are lots of questionable videos about ancient science on youtube but I'll not link to those here.)

It seems we ultimately need to take a position on whether the "canonical" status of prolepsis tells us that something is "true or real" in terms of fully-formed correct opinions, or simply "true or real" in the sense of honestly reported to us by the faculty of perception.

By analogy the tuning fork isn't conveying any opinions, it's just "mechanically", due to its makeup, resonating in response to a particular frequency of vibration emanating from somewhere else. That might constitute a "true and real" perception received at a distance through non-visible means, and one that doesn't require bringing in supernaturalism as the explanation. In their discussions such as the one Don cited about how the mind retains images received through experience, it's possible that when they seem to be talking about a faculty of prolepsis as being "etched" in the mind at birth then maybe thinking about tuning forks could provide at least a partial analogy.

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## Post by “Little Rocker” of June 11, 2024 at 4:05 PM

Thanks! This exchange is really helpful.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems we ultimately need to take a position on whether the "canonical" status of prolepsis tells us that something is "true or real" in terms of fully-formed correct opinions, or simply "true or real" in the sense of honestly reported to us by the faculty of perception.

It seems so. I currently lean towards the former, but I can see that confining oneself to the latter has its advantages.

### [Quote from Don](#)

So, if I understand correctly, you're positing a mental capacity/faculty/process/function that leads to or produces something we can call a "prolepsis."

Right. Or at least, that's my current thought.

### [Quote from Don](#)

But that doesn't move us along from Epicurus's "content" of the prolepsis of the gods being "blessed and uncorrupted", does it?

I guess it still seems to me that 'blessed' and 'indestructible' are essential features of the prolepsis of 'gods' for Epicurus. 'The many,' too, think the gods are blessed and indestructible. They just go off the rails when they try to put meat on the bones of 'blessed.'

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## Post by "Cassius" of June 11, 2024 at 4:38 PM

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I guess it still seems to me that 'blessed' and 'indestructible' are essential features of the prolepsis of 'gods' for Epicurus. 'The many,' too, think the gods are blessed and indestructible. They just go off the rails when they try to put meat on the bones of 'blessed.'

That's the really sticky point that's hard to get one's mind around. Does every positive aspect of a god (or anything else) boil down to simply that our faculty of feeling is assigning this to the "pleasure" category? It seems clear to me that "pleasure" has something to do with considering anything we would describe as blessedness.

But isn't there more to what's going on in our minds in addition to finding the gods (or any other subject) to produce a "pleasant" response in us?

Doesn't the mind have to have some organizing process that would present to us a selection portion of our attention that the faculty of pleasure then deems to be pleasurable?

Some selected DeWitt from his anticipations chapter that I think make sense here, even if some of his conclusions that seem to point to "innate ideas" don't necessarily follow:

### Quote

"Let the faithful Lucretius be called to the witness stand. Among his more striking and better remembered passages is one that emphasizes the proleptic or anticipatory behavior of all living creatures, including animals. Their first gestures anticipate the activities of their adult state. Children point with the finger before they can talk. Calves butt before they have horns. The cubs of lions and panthers fight with tooth and claw almost before they have teeth and claws. Young birds go through the motions of flying

before their wings are fit for flight. Obviously all living things are preconditioned for life in their terrestrial environment. Is it, then, inconsistent with this observed fact to assume that human beings are preconditioned for life in their social environment?"

That calls to my mind the other section of Lucretius that I always have a problem getting my mind around -- how the eyes were not born so that should see, but that sight follows from the birth of the eyes. We talk about that mostly in terms of its relationship (or lack thereof) to Darwinian evolution, but wouldn't it also apply to the faculties of the brain being born with some capabilities within them?

Another good observation I think:

#### Quote

Let Epicurus himself be allowed to testify. Basic to his hedonism is the observed fact that all living creatures, brute or human, however young and helpless, reach out for pleasure and shrink from pain. Even before the five senses have begun to perform their parts, long before the dawn of conscious motivation, and long before the development of understanding, pleasure seems to be a good and pain an evil thing.<sup>42</sup> This initial behavior, like the subsequent gestures of play, is at one and the same time prompted by inborn propensities and anticipatory of adult experience. In the growth of the living being and the unfolding of the faculties the attention of Epicurus is manifestly focused upon this principle, the priority of Nature over reason.

We don't often talk about "where pleasure came from" or "how it determines what is pleasurable and what is painful, but doesn't some kind of operation have to be "hard-coded" within us to get that process going from maybe as far back as the moment of conception? If that kind of mechanism is operational in terms of pleasure and pain, surely something analogous exists in our "thinking" processes, not in terms of a conclusion that this or that is painful, but that under certain conditions and contexts we're going to find some abstractions to be important and some not to be important?

Another quote that stems from the same issue (the status of pleasure -- is it proleptic?):

#### Quote

Even within Epicurean circles the term *prolepsis* underwent unjustified extensions. For instance, Epicurus, recognizing Nature as the canon or norm, had asserted that, just as we observe fire to be hot, snow to be cold, and honey to be sweet, so, from the

behavior of newborn creatures, we observe pleasure to be the telos or end. Certain of his followers, however, shaken no doubt by Stoic criticism, took the position that the doctrine was an innate idea, that is, a prolepsis.<sup>48</sup> In strict logic this error was a confusion between *quid* and *quale*. The problem was not *to* decide what could be predicated of the end or telos but what was the identity of the end. Was it pleasure or was it something else?

I have a feeling that a lot of our problem in dealing with this issue is that we too are still "shaken by Stoic criticism."

I don't think DeWitt does a great job of wrapping all this up into a neat conclusion (especially when he occasionally talks about "innate ideas") but his "intuitionism" rings better, and along the way he makes what i think are a lot of good points that we can use today to make headway.

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### **Post by "Don" of June 11, 2024 at 6:58 PM**

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

doesn't some kind of operation have to be "hard-coded" within us to get that process going from maybe as far back as the moment of conception?

Maybe our individual capacity, but I would say it goes further back than that since other animals have the same or similar capacity.

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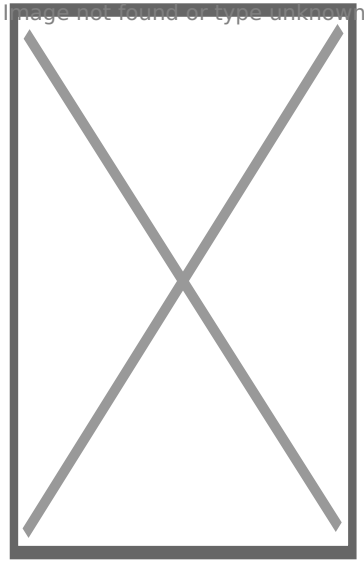
### **Post by "Don" of June 11, 2024 at 10:13 PM**

For what it's worth, here's a section from *The faith of Epicurus* by Benjamin Farrington (1967)

in the acquisition of knowledge.

The interpretation of the second criterion, 'anticipations', presents far more difficulty. The best and most up-to-date discussion of what has been a controversial subject will be found in Kleve's *Gnosis theon*. I adopt his conclusions. 'Anticipations' may be defined as general ideas, the mental equipment by which we organize and interpret our sensations. Our difficulty in understanding the term arises from our confusing it with the Cartesian notion of Innate Ideas, which is itself derived from Plato. But Epicurus is not trying to tell us that we are born with a collection of general ideas which precede our sensory experience and of which we are 'reminded' by our sense impressions. This view is inconsistent with his thought. The explanation lies elsewhere – in the biological way of thinking which he had acquired from Aristotle. Man, Epicurus believed, is born with certain specifically human characteristics which include the gift of reason. Sensation, which we share with the animals, has no mental content; it is, as the Greeks said, *alogos*. But sensation, with man, gives rise to the mental activity of sorting out, comparing, arranging, his sensations. Hence arise the general ideas to which we attach names. They are gradually acquired as the result of repeated sensations; but, once acquired, they exist in our minds as ready-made categories for arranging the data of experience. In this sense they are 'anticipations'. 'Anticipations' do not precede all experience; but they do precede all systematic observation and scientific discussion, and all rational practical activity. Again they denote the activity of the subject in the acquisition of knowledge.

We come now to the third criterion, the feelings (*pathē*).



[The faith of Epicurus : Farrington, Benjamin, 1891- : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

xiii, 160 p. ; 22 cm  
archive.org

Available to read with free account

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 11, 2024 at 11:06 PM**

Thanks Don. One thing I get from this passage is: "Overuse of the word 'they' in a difficult subject without specifying precisely what 'they' refers to is hazardous." Maybe it's just me being slow, but in that last sentence, when he uses "they," it looks to me like he's talking about "anticipations," and I think most of us would agree that "the activity of the subject in the acquisition of knowledge" is involved.

But the question we are asking is precisely \*what\* activity is involved. Because he has previously used "they" just above in an apparent reference to "general ideas," it's tempting to read him as saying that anticipations \*are\* general ideas, but then he goes on to refer to "ready-made categories for arranging the data of experience." But "categories" don't sound like "ideas" to me.

The term "ready-made categories" sounds ok and compatible with existing at birth and prior to experience, and I can see the potential for "gods" or "blessedness" being such categories. Those terms are general enough and evoke aspects of "pleasure" and "maximum pleasure" which relate to the in-born feeling of pleasure, especially when we define "pleasure"

expansively as Epicurus appears to have been doing.

But I don't see that description as constituting "general ideas" such as the idea "the gods are blessed and imperishable." That kind of conclusory idea is what we are asking "Did it exist at birth?" with the almost certain answer "No."

As I write this it occurs to me to want to hold firmly to a test of "*Did it exist at birth in at least rudimentary form?*" as a necessary test of any suggestion that a faculty (including anticipations) is canonical. All sorts of opinions can be built on the data we get through faculties over time as we age, but I'm tempted to suggest that as to saying something is a "canonical faculty" then "***If a one day old baby doesn't have it, then it's not a canonical faculty!***"



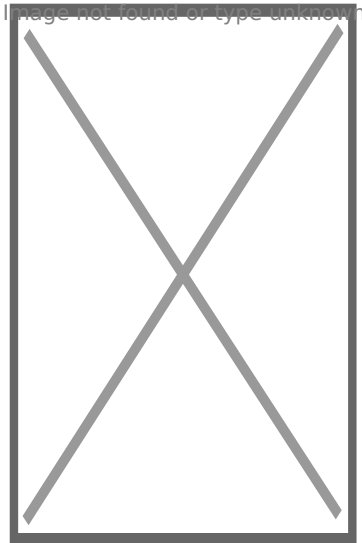
(And I would expect "one day after birth" is not the relevant factor either, as these faculties we are talking about have been developing since conception and even prior to that in the passing down of genetic coding over generations.)

And to pick up on an earlier comment I think you made, I would expect Epicurus would say that many if not all animals also have a corresponding form of this faculty.

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## Post by "Don" of June 11, 2024 at 11:39 PM

For German readers:



[Gnosis Theon : Kleve, Knut : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

142 pages

archive.org

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

This is the work mentioned at the beginning in Farrington's chapter.

[Knut Kleve - Wikipedia](#)

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 12, 2024 at 8:26 AM

I don't want to sidetrack this specific discussion on prolepsis as it relates to gods, in part because this is going to be very helpful to Joshua and me as we have not even yet begun to deal with what Velleius has to say about prolepsis in OTNOTG, and I am sure we will want to talk about that for several weeks.

However in the meantime, and in a more general way for reuse in other contexts, I started this thread that might be of help here too, and later in other discussions:

Thread

### [What Are The Essential Elements Of Any Canonical Faculty According to Epicurus?](#)

In conjunction with [the current thread in which we are discussing prolepsis in relation to gods](#), I suspect it would be helpful to compose a list of considerations given in the thread title. What are the essential elements of ANY canonical faculty, according to Epicurus?

I have a couple of ideas but would appreciate additions, comments, suggestions, corrections, and citations to support these or their tweaked versions:

1. A faculty must be present at birth, given by nature, not created through our

...



Cassius

June 12, 2024 at 8:23 AM

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## Post by “kochiekoch” of June 12, 2024 at 5:31 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

This might be a scientific description of the faculty of perceiving the gods:

[Columbia and Yale scientists just found the spiritual part of our brains \(qz.com\)](https://www.qz.com)

Other innate preconceptions might work similarly in the brain.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of June 12, 2024 at 5:59 PM**

Among other things, this data could be useful in defining "spirituality," which seems to me to be a rather vague notion.

However, at first blush, it seems to me that the idea of the gods is more language based. But a preconception of justice or fairness might work similarly to what's described in the article.

Just my initial reaction. Interesting!

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### **Post by “kochiekoch” of June 12, 2024 at 7:43 PM**

Thank you, Godfrey! 😊

I think the gods might be what the cognitive does with the feelings created by this 'spiritual' mechanism in the brain. And of course, the gods are all culturally determined. It's why the gods all look different in different parts of the world, BUT are acknowledged worldwide, which was one of Epicurus' insights.

It's why he thought they must exist.

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### **Post by “Eikadistes” of June 13, 2024 at 10:48 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3833-episode-227-cicero-s-otnotg-02-velleius-begins-his-attack-on-traditional-views-o/>

I think it is important to consider Epicurus' context in a post-Alexandrian world. Epicurus would have thrived at a time when the Greeks became linked with a trans-continental empire that made them aware of dozens of new languages, commodities, and religions. Diogenes records Epicurus as having had a fascination with Pyrrho, who accompanied Alexander's army to Northwest India and modern-day Afghanistan, so we know that Epicurus had an interest in 4th-century BCE anthropology. One can imagine how an intellectual in this context might have been struck at the discovery that every group of humans whom Alexander encountered had some sort of cultural practice in which they reserved time to interface with inspirational or behaviorally-impactful images in their minds that do not correspond with physical objects in the immediate environment.

Knowledge of spiritual ideas would seem to have been confirmed by the independent attestation of foreign peoples. Based on the cultural exchange of ideas that occurred after Alexander's conquest, it would seem that *everyone* from *every* part of the planet knew that *gods are sublime*, in the same way that *everyone* from *every* part of the planet knew that *water is refreshing* and *sex feels good*. (Along those lines, *every* group of humans seem to have independently known that *intoxication is memorable*, and—what I continue to emphasize is *not only* not a coincidence, but is rather a fundamental feature of spirituality—almost every religion incorporates an intoxicant or intoxicating practice into the heart of their rituals). Indeed, knowledge of "the gods" is self-evident from Egypt to India and everywhere in-between: *everyone has met the divine nature without ever having shaken its hand*.

Since the gods did not proverbially walk door-to-door, introducing themselves to each civilization, each in its own tongue, the experience of the gods must be an internal phenomenon.

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## Post by “Little Rocker” of June 13, 2024 at 12:54 PM

### [Quote from Twentier](#)

(Along those lines, *every* group of humans seems to have independently *intoxication is memorable*, and—what I continue to emphasize is *not only* not a coincidence, but is rather a fundamental feature of spirituality—almost every religion incorporates an intoxicant or intoxicating practice into the heart of their rituals).

Love that you hedged with the 'almost every' here because those of us raised old-school evangelical were regrettably taught that sobriety was close to godliness. I was told, no joke, that Jesus did not actually turn the water in to wine, but into grape juice!

Epicurus would also likely have access to some older reports that suggested universality and relativism of religious practice, including Herodotus' reports of his travels. And while It's probably already showed up in a previous discussion, one of my favorite Presocratic fragments is from Xenophanes:

"But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own-horses like horses, cattle like cattle."

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### **Post by “Don” of June 13, 2024 at 1:13 PM**

#### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

"But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own-horses like horses, cattle like cattle."

I used that exact quote in an anti-Creationist editorial written for my high school newspaper after a creationist came to our school and presented during an assembly.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2024 at 1:25 PM**

High school!?? So you have been a rabble-rouser of long standing!! 😊

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### **Post by “Little Rocker” of June 13, 2024 at 2:18 PM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I used that exact quote in an anti-Creationist editorial written for my high school newspaper after a creationist came to our school and presented during an assembly.

I remember that when my high school biology teacher announced that we would be studying evolution for the next few weeks, she said she wanted to impress upon us from the outset, and for us to tell our parents, that we would be studying it as 'only a theory.' \*Still\* contentious in the schools in 1994.

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### Post by “Don” of June 13, 2024 at 2:24 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

' \*Still\* contentious in the schools in 1994.

Mine was in the early 1980s.

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### Post by “Eikadistes” of June 13, 2024 at 4:56 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

I used that exact quote in an anti-Creationist editorial written for my high school newspaper after a creationist came to our school and presented during an assembly.

I remember that when my high school biology teacher announced that we would be studying evolution for the next few weeks, she said she wanted to impress upon us from the outset, and for us to tell our parents, that we would be studying it as 'only a theory.' \*Still\* contentious in the schools in 1994.

My 9th-grade biology teacher prefaced our lectures on Darwin and Mendel with a disclaimer on creationism and/or intelligent design. This was in 2004. I live in Florida. 🤔