

Episode 249 - Cicero's OTNOTG 24 - Are The Epicurean Gods Totally Inactive, And Are We To Emulate Them Through Laziness?

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2024 at 4:16 PM

Welcome to Episode 249 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, where we have a thread to discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

Today we are continuing to review Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," which began with the Epicurean spokesman Velleius defending the Epicurean point of view. This week will continue into Section 27 as Cotta, the Academic Skeptic, continues to insist that gods are supernatural and not at all similar to humans. We will, in turn, respond to Cotta's particular and general arguments.

For the main text we are using primarily the [Yonge translation, available here at Archive.org](#). The text which we include in these posts is available [here](#). 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](#)

A list of arguments presented [will eventually be put together here](#).

Today's Text

XXXVII. "They have nothing to do," your teacher says. Epicurus truly, like indolent boys, thinks nothing preferable to idleness; yet those very boys, when they have a holiday, entertain themselves in some sportive exercise. But we are to suppose the Deity in such an inactive state

that if he should move we may justly fear he would be no longer happy. This doctrine divests the Gods of motion and operation; besides, it encourages men to be lazy, as they are by this taught to believe that the least labor is incompatible even with divine felicity.

But let it be as you would have it, that the Deity is in the form and image of a man. Where is his abode? Where is his habitation? Where is the place where he is to be found? What is his course of life? And what is it that constitutes the happiness which you assert that he enjoys? For it seems necessary that a being who is to be happy must use and enjoy what belongs to him. And with regard to place, even those natures which are inanimate have each their proper stations assigned to them: so that the earth is the lowest; then water is next above the earth; the air is above the water; and fire has the highest situation of all allotted to it. Some creatures inhabit the earth, some the water, and some, of an amphibious nature, live in both. There are some, also, which are thought to be born in fire, and which often appear fluttering in burning furnaces.

In the first place, therefore, I ask you, Where is the habitation of your Deity? Secondly, What motive is it that stirs him from his place, supposing he ever moves? And, lastly, since it is peculiar to animated beings to have an inclination to something that is agreeable to their several natures, what is it that the Deity affects, and to what purpose does he exert the motion of his mind and reason? In short, how is he happy? how eternal? Whichever of these points you touch upon, I am afraid you will come lamely off. For there is never a proper end to reasoning which proceeds on a false foundation; for you asserted likewise that the form of the Deity is perceptible by the mind, but not by sense; that it is neither solid, nor invariable in number; that it is to be discerned by similitude and transition, and that a constant supply of images is perpetually flowing on from innumerable atoms, on which our minds are intent; so that we from that conclude that divine nature to be happy and everlasting.

XXXVIII. What, in the name of those Deities concerning whom we are now disputing, is the meaning of all this? For if they exist only in thought, and have no solidity nor substance, what difference can there be between thinking of a Hippocentaur and thinking of a Deity? Other philosophers call every such conformation of the mind a vain motion; but you term it "the approach and entrance of images into the mind." Thus, when I imagine that I behold T. Gracchus haranguing the people in the Capitol, and collecting their suffrages concerning M. Octavius, I call that a vain motion of the mind: but you affirm that the images of Gracchus and Octavius are present, which are only conveyed to my mind when they have arrived at the Capitol. The case is the same, you say, in regard to the Deity, with the frequent representation of which the mind is so affected that from thence it may be clearly understood that the Gods are happy and eternal.

Let it be granted that there are images by which the mind is affected, yet it is only a certain form that occurs; and why must that form be pronounced happy? why eternal? But what are those images you talk of, or whence do they proceed? This loose manner of arguing is taken from Democritus; but he is reproved by many people for it; nor can you derive any conclusions from it: the whole system is weak and imperfect. For what can be more improbable than that

the images of Homer, Archilochus, Romulus, Numa, Pythagoras, and Plato should come into my mind, and yet not in the form in which they existed? How, therefore, can they be those persons? And whose images are they? Aristotle tells us that there never was such a person as Orpheus the poet; and it is said that the verse called Orphic verse was the invention of Cercops, a Pythagorean; yet Orpheus, that is to say, the image of him, as you will have it, often runs in my head. What is the reason that I entertain one idea of the figure of the same person, and you another? Why do we image to ourselves such things as never had any existence, and which never can have, such as Scyllas and Chimæras? Why do we frame ideas of men, countries, and cities which we never saw? How is it that the very first moment that I choose I can form representations of them in my mind? How is it that they come to me, even in my sleep, without being called or sought after?

XXXIX. The whole affair, Velleius, is ridiculous. You do not impose images on our eyes only, but on our minds. Such is the privilege which you have assumed of talking nonsense with impunity. But there is, you say, a transition of images flowing on in great crowds in such a way that out of many some one at least must be perceived! I should be ashamed of my incapacity to understand this if you, who assert it, could comprehend it yourselves; for how do you prove that these images are continued in uninterrupted motion? Or, if uninterrupted, still how do you prove them to be eternal? There is a constant supply, you say, of innumerable atoms. But must they, for that reason, be all eternal? To elude this, you have recourse to equilibration (for so, with your leave, I will call your ἰσονομία), and say that as there is a sort of nature mortal, so there must also be a sort which is immortal. By the same rule, as there are men mortal, there are men immortal; and as some arise from the earth, some must arise from the water also; and as there are causes which destroy, there must likewise be causes which preserve. Be it as you say; but let those causes preserve which have existence themselves. I cannot conceive these your Gods to have any. But how does all this face of things arise from atomic corpuscles? Were there any such atoms (as there are not), they might perhaps impel one another, and be jumbled together in their motion; but they could never be able to impart form, or figure, or color, or animation, so that you by no means demonstrate the immortality of your Deity.

Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2024 at 4:18 PM

I am glad we reached this section before we do our special episode on the "real vs ideal" debate. This section contains some very interesting material on images, a subject that most seem to agree play into the question of prolepsis.

Post by “Joshua” of October 6, 2024 at 11:55 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

Show Notes

Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve*; Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*

The third post from [this](#) thread contains the full passage.

Velleius on the labors of the gods

Quote

Your sect, Balbus, frequently ask us how the Gods live, and how they pass their time? Their life is the most happy, and the most abounding with all kinds of blessings, which can be conceived. They do nothing. They are embarrassed with no business; nor do they perform any work. They rejoice in the possession of their own wisdom and virtue. They are satisfied that they shall ever enjoy the fulness of eternal pleasures.

§ 1.52 Such a Deity may properly be called happy; but yours is a most laborious God. For let us suppose the world a Deity — what can be a more uneasy state than, without the least cessation, to be whirled about the axle-tree of heaven with a surprising celerity? But nothing can be happy that is not at ease. Or let us suppose a Deity residing in the world, who directs and governs it, who preserves the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons, and the vicissitudes and orders of things, surveying the earth and the sea, and accommodating them to the advantage and necessities of man. Truly this Deity is embarrassed with a very troublesome and laborious office. We make a happy life to consist in a tranquillity of mind, a perfect freedom from care, and an exemption from all employment. The philosopher from whom we received all our knowledge has taught us that the world was made by nature; that there was no occasion for a workhouse to frame it in; and that, though you deny the possibility of such a work without divine skill, it is so easy to her, that she has made, does make, and will make innumerable worlds. [Here](#)

Ennius, *Iphigenia*; and Lucretius' response

Quote from Ennius

He who does not know how to use leisure
has more of work than when there is work in work.
For to whom a task has been set, he does the work,
desires it, and delights his own mind and intellect:
in leisure, a mind does not know what it wants.
The same is true (of us); we are neither at home nor in the battlefield;
we go here and there, and wherever there is a movement, we are there too.

The mind wanders unsure, except in that life is lived.

[Wikipedia](#)

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Quote from Lucretius

If men, in that same way as on the mind
They feel the load that wearies with its weight,
Could also know the causes whence it comes,
And why so great the heap of ill on heart,
O not in this sort would they live their life,
As now so much we see them, knowing not
What 'tis they want, and seeking ever and ever
A change of place, as if to drop the burden.
The man who sickens of his home goes out,
Forth from his splendid halls, and straight- returns,
Feeling i'faith no better off abroad.
He races, driving his Gallic ponies along,
Down to his villa, madly,- as in haste
To hurry help to a house afire.- At once
He yawns, as soon as foot has touched the threshold,
Or drowsily goes off in sleep and seeks
Forgetfulness, or maybe bustles about
And makes for town again. In such a way
Each human flees himself- a self in sooth,
As happens, he by no means can escape;
And willy-nilly he cleaves to it and loathes,
Sick, sick, and guessing not the cause of ail.
Yet should he see but that, O chiefly then,
Leaving all else, he'd study to divine
The nature of things, since here is in debate
Eternal time and not the single hour,
Mortal's estate in whatsoever remains
After great death.

[Persius Digital Library](#)

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Lucretius on Empedocles; "A great man, greatly fallen"

Quote from Lucretius, Book I

As first Empedocles of [Acragas](#),
Whom that three-cornered isle of all the lands
Bore on her coasts, around which flows and flows
In mighty bend and bay the Ionic seas,
Splashing the brine from off their gray-green waves.
Here, billowing onward through the narrow straits,
Swift ocean cuts her boundaries from the shores
Of the Italic mainland. Here the waste
Charybdis; and here [Aetna](#) rumbles threats
To gather anew such furies of its flames
As with its force anew to vomit fires,
Belched from its throat, and skyward bear anew
Its lightnings' flash. And though for much she seem
The mighty and the wondrous isle to men,
Most rich in all good things, and fortified
With generous strength of heroes, she hath ne'er
Possessed within her aught of more renown,
Nor aught more holy, wonderful, and dear
Than this true man. Nay, ever so far and pure
The lofty music of his breast divine
Lifts up its voice and tells of glories found,
That scarce he seems of human stock create.
Yet he and those forementioned (known to be
So far beneath him, less than he in all),
Though, as discoverers of much goodly truth,
They gave, as 'twere from out of the heart's own shrine,
Responses holier and soundlier based
Than ever the Pythia pronounced for men
From out the tripod and the Delphian laurel,
Have still in matter of first-elements
Made ruin of themselves, and, great men, great
Indeed and heavy there for them the fall:
First, because, banishing the void from things,
They yet assign them motion, and allow
Things soft and loosely textured to exist,
As air, dew, fire, earth, animals, and grains,
Without admixture of void amid their frame.
Next, because, thinking there can be no end
In cutting bodies down to less and less

Nor pause established to their breaking up,
They hold there is no minimum in things;
Albeit we see the boundary point of aught
Is that which to our senses seems its least,
Whereby thou mayst conjecture, that, because
The things thou canst not mark have boundary points,
They surely have their minimums. Then, too,
Since these philosophers ascribe to things
Soft primal germs, which we behold to be
Of birth and body mortal, thus, throughout,
The sum of things must be returned to naught,
And, born from naught, abundance thrive anew-
Thou seest how far each doctrine stands from truth.
And, next, these bodies are among themselves
In many ways poisons and foes to each,
Wherefore their congress will destroy them quite
Or drive asunder as we see in storms
Rains, winds, and lightnings all asunder fly.

[Persius Digital Library](#)

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David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*

[Amazon](#)

An excerpt of the first ten pages from chapter one is available in PDF form from Cambridge University Press; [link to PDF](#).

Norman Wentworth DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*

Quote

At the outset it must be observed and kept diligently in mind that nowhere in his extant writings does Epicurus call the gods immortal. This might be thought an accident of the tradition were it not for the fact that other considerations rule out this possibility. If Lucretius does call them immortal repeatedly, this may be set down as an indication that he never really mastered the Epicurean lore of the gods and did not live to make an intensive study of it in preparation for writing about it.

The reasoning behind this doctrine of incorruptibility is readily discerned. From the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void it follows that the bodies of the gods must be corporeal. Gods are zoa, "animate beings." They are thus units in the

ascending order of Nature, as is man. Being in this order and corporeal, they cannot be deathless. If deathlessness were inherent in their nature, they would be in another class by themselves. Since they do belong in the same class as man, it is a logical necessity to think of their incorruptibility as by some means preserved. Since in the cosmos of Epicurus, unlike that of Plato, this incorruptibility lacked a superior being to guarantee its

continuance, the sole possibility was that the gods preserved it for themselves by their own vigilance. Thus it must be discerned that just as the happiness of man is self-achieved, so the happiness of the gods is self-preserved.

Post by “Patrikios” of October 6, 2024 at 12:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am glad we reached this section before we do our special episode on the "real vs ideal" debate. This section contains some very interesting material on images, a subject that most seem to agree play into the question of prolepsis.

I'm looking forward to your upcoming podcast discussion of the Epicurean idea of "**images flowing**" and how this ties into human perception and knowledge. From my reading of Epicurus (although I can't cite source), all objects continuously emit thin films of atoms called eidola or "images." These images flow through space and interact with our senses, particularly our eyes, to create perceptions. These images maintained the shape and properties of the objects they came from, allowing us to perceive the world accurately. I find this to be a reasonable explanation for perception, consistent with Epicurean atomic theory, and refined (not discredited) today's scientific knowledge.

As I understand it, **Prolepsis** is closely tied to the theory of flowing images because these preconceptions are ultimately derived from sensory experiences caused by these images. It's a way of explaining how we form general concepts from particular experiences, bridging the gap between atomic theory and human cognition.

I look forward to the fascinating discussion on the podcast, with maybe some commentary on how this system of thought - from flowing images to sensory perception to prolepsis - forms a coherent materialist explanation for how we perceive and understand the world today, which was a cornerstone of Epicurean philosophy over 2000 years ago.

Post by “Joshua” of October 6, 2024 at 2:40 PM

We didn't make it that far in our discussion today, but that will be the next part of the text starting with this;

Quote

for you asserted likewise that the form of the Deity is perceptible by the mind, but not by sense; that it is neither solid, nor invariable in number; that it is to be discerned by similitude and transition, and that a constant supply of images is perpetually flowing on from innumerable atoms, on which our minds are intent; so that we from that conclude that divine nature to be happy and everlasting.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2024 at 3:50 PM

Pgannon I think you are right in your comments, but if I read them correctly you are probably leaving out the issue of the images being "received directly by the brain" and not going through the five senses. As I would understand it myself, you're right that all things give off "films" of atoms and that this explains vision, but it is also clear that they discussed receiving images while asleep - a time in which the eyes are closed and not the mechanism.

Lucretius is pretty clear that this is an important aspect in his discussion in Book 4. It even appears in the correspondence of Cicero and Cassius in their joking back and forth about "spectres."

I also recommend Dewitt discussion of images of you have not yet read his book.

Yes it is a fascinating subject!

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2024 at 5:34 AM

Programming note: Production of this episode is almost complete, and it will be out later today. We devoted the majority of this Episode 249 to the discussion on Section 37, so in Episode 250 we will continue into Section 38.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2024 at 10:54 AM

[This thread](#) returns to my mind as I am completing editing of Episode 249.

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

the pursuit of inner peace, the importance of friendship, the value of rational thinking, and the focus on achievable, natural pleasures rather than vain desires. It provides a strong historical and philosophical foundation for our approach to stress management and the pursuit of happiness.

That quote is a pretty good summary of what people generally read about Epicurus. And it is very true, I think, as far as it goes. The ambiguity that I find of most concern when I talk to people (especially when the conversation includes emphasis on such things as "stress management") is often expressed something like:

"What does 'the pursuit of happiness' really mean in concrete terms for what I should do with my time today? Stop talking in platitudes, Epicurus! (... or Aristotle, or anyone else who talks about happiness or eudaemonia. Give me something concrete. Tell me how I myself should spend my own time to achieve "the greatest happiness" or "the greatest pleasure."

The reason this returns to mind in episode 249 is that one statement of Cotta is:

Quote

XXXVII. ... Epicurus truly, like indolent boys, thinks nothing preferable to idleness; yet those very boys, when they have a holiday, entertain themselves in some sportive exercise. But we are to suppose the Deity in such an inactive state that if he should move we may justly fear he would be no longer happy. This doctrine divests the Gods of motion and operation; besides, it encourages men to be lazy, as they are by this taught to believe that the least labor is incompatible even with divine felicity.

This is essentially the charge that is also leveled against Epicurean ethics in general -- that "pleasure" (or any form of "happiness" linked to pleasure) is for the lazy and slothful, fit not as a goal for man, and certainly not fit as a goal for a god, and thus the entire Epicurean position is fit only for the lazy and worthless.

Talking about stress management and balance is all well and good for those who are primarily motivated by escape from pain. But the task at hand that Cicero doesn't allow Velleius to present, and Cicero allows Torquatus only to present briefly, is what kind of action is involved in this best life of pleasure and happiness.

Are we talking the pleasure of indolence, or the pleasures of pleasurable actions, and how do we explain the difference.

Cicero doesn't allow Torquatus or Velleius to say much like this following statement by Thomas Jefferson to William Short, but I think it's an example of how to point in the right direction.

[Quote from Thomas Jefferson Letter to William Short](#)

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up.....

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2024 at 1:55 PM

Lucretius Today Episode 249 is now available: "Are the [Epicurean Gods](#) Totally Inactive, And Are We To Emulate Them By Laziness?"

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62344137>

Post by "TauPhi" of October 13, 2024 at 8:53 PM

[Joshua](#) Around 40min mark when you talk about Empedocles and the four elements, I think we may already have a better source than Lucretius dealing with this failed idea. P. Herc. 1148, column 34 seems to be a refutation of philosophers endorsing the four elements as building

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

blocks of reality coming directly from Epicurus in his 'On Nature - Book 14'.

I'm not going to pretend I know what I'm talking about, but if [Bryan](#) or [Don](#) or anyone else who knows Ancient Greek feels like spending some time on the fragment below, we may have few more words from the Dude himself to talk about.

[DCLP/Trismegistos 59752 = LDAB 856](#)

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Post by “Don” of October 14, 2024 at 6:17 AM

Thanks, [TauPhi](#) , for the citation. I did have On Nature 14 as part of my review of Les Epicuriens that I checked out of the library on interlibrary loan. Here's my rough translation from the French, but we'll need to march this up to the Greek, too. This rough draft just happened to be sitting in my Google Drive:

[34 : p. 19 Leone: (29.22)]. [those] who specify a particular form belonging to fire, earth, water or air, are more ridiculous than those who, without specifying any, according to the juxtapositions, willy-nilly, that certain particular species of forms arise, which correspond to each of the associations which one could call substantial (for some are mistaken on the subject of the elements); but in speaking thus, they would say something that is more in line with these. And generally also they [introduce ?] differences in mixtures, and...

π[υρ]ὸς ἢ γῆς ἢ ὕδατος ἢ [ἀ]ἔρος

Fire or earth or water or air

γελοῖότεροί something like "those who are to be laughed at", ultimately from γελᾶω "laugh" but meaning more like ludicrous, absurd; mirth-provoking, amusing. Maybe in the spirit of the "laughing philosophers"?

ΟΡΙΖΟΝΤΑΣ ΧΗΜΑΓ... ΟΣΙ
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Post by "Don" of October 14, 2024 at 11:21 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

From my perspective, it is problematic to assign the gods the activity of *maintaining* their "incorruptibility" *through their actions*. That implies to me that if they, for some reason, fail to maintain themselves that would be a source of anxiety for the gods. They would have to remain vigilant every minute, maintaining, checking, working to keep balance in their atoms, or some such thing. That seems incompatible with Epicurus's whole definition of divinity. To me this excerpt from Diogenes Laertius implies that not only do the gods not experience an increase in pleasure but they do not experience any decrease as well. If their "incorruptibility" aspect dips a little and they have to maintain it, that implies a decrease in pleasure as well.

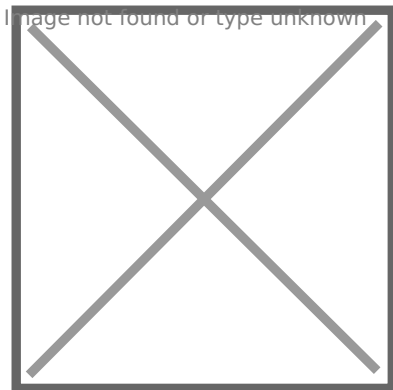
Quote from Diogenes Laertius 10.121

Happiness must be understood in two senses; the highest happiness, such as is that of God, which admits of no increase; and another kind, which admits of the addition or abstraction of pleasures. (Yonge)

[121] Τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν διχῆ νοεῖσθαι, τὴν τε ἀκροτάτην, οἷα ἐστὶ περὶ τὸν θεόν, ἐπίτασιν οὐκ ἔχουσαν: καὶ τὴν <κατὰ τὴν> προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν ἡδονῶν.

VS33 also says "The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for happiness." To me, a god would not have a body that cries out to not be incorruptible. I suppose someone could counter that the gods are "confident of continuing" to be incorruptible.

The paper by Geeta Raghunanan provides an interesting solution to the *incorruptible seen as eternal issue*:



["Imperishability" as Immunity to Moral Corruption: A Response to the Problem of the Imperishability of the Epicurean Gods \(Presentation for the CPA Annual Congress 2014\)](#)

"Imperishability" as Immunity to Moral Corruption: A Response to the Problem of the Imperishability of the Epicurean Gods (Presentation for the CPA Annual...

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Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

I contend that they may be imperishable; that is, the [Epicurean gods](#) may be destined to dissolution and yet be imperishable in the sense that they are impervious to decay or corruption, particularly, what might be termed moral decay or moral corruption. ... But I emphasize “moral corruption” or “moral decay” also to incorporate Epicurean descriptions of the gods that seem to suggest that imperishability might in fact have meant to the Epicureans imperviousness to moral corruption. ... it is possible to maintain that given an Epicurean physical theory and the doctrine that all compounds will dissolve, the [Epicurean gods](#), as compounds, are yet still imperishable in the sense that they are morally incorruptible.

This appeals to me - if I were to accept the idea that the Epicureans thought of the gods as living beings. One of my main objections to "god as living being" vs "god as conceptual metaphor" is that I can't reconcile Epicurus's foresight and critical thinking with believing in a physical god... However, Raghunanan narrowing of ἀφθαρτον to "incorruptible" ie "not able to be corrupted, from a moral/ethical perspective" - with the understanding that the gods will eventually physically decay due to their being material compound beings is enticing. And, if the gods do die, it would be nothing to them as they have lived in the midst of unceasing pleasure.

Things to think about for me at least.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2024 at 12:32 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I suppose someone could counter that the gods are "confident of continuing" to be incorruptible.

This actually makes sense if you follow the reasoning that (I think; correct me if I'm wrong!) [Cassius](#) is doing in the podcast. There's a prolepsis of gods, but one must use correct reasoning to determine their nature. This leads from the fullness of pleasure, and the confidence of it continuing, to blessedness and incorruptibility.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 15, 2024 at 8:24 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

However, Raghunanan narrowing of ἀφθαρτον to "incorruptible" ie "not able to be corrupted, from a moral/ethical perspective" - with the understanding that the gods will eventually physically decay due to their being material compound beings is enticing.

It was for this reason that I went with "incorruptible" in my own translation.

Short of addressing the seeming tension between "gods having immortal quasi-bodies" and "all compound objects being subject to the forces of dissolution", I can, *at least*, say, **confidently**, that, *at least*, the gods are buttressed against moral corruption. Whether they are space ghosts who exist forever on an infinite timeline, or whether they are self-actualized animals who have advanced beyond their terrestrial biochemistry but still threatened, or whether they are just conceptual metaphors: all of those beings neither cause trouble to themselves nor cause trouble to others.

Post by “Don” of October 15, 2024 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

This leads from the fullness of pleasure, and the confidence of it continuing, to blessedness and incorruptibility.

From this current direction I'm headed, the gods would have confidence in the continuation of their incorruptible nature because they've come to a right view of how things are, the nature of pleasure, their inability to be affected by praise or blame, their self-reliance, and so on. The gods would have no more need of infinite lives than a mortal would, but I'd have to dig into the texts a little deeper than Raghunanan does on that eternal existence issue. Gods or the divine nature as a class may be eternally existing but that doesn't necessarily imply to me the necessity of the eternal existence of any one specific god.

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2024 at 10:23 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The gods would have no more need of infinite lives than a mortal would,

Just to pick a random comment out to bounce off of ---

They would have no more need for infinite time in order to enjoy "complete pleasure" or "pure pleasure," but they would be able to do so for "longer," which would in itself be desirable, just like it is desirable for us to live pleasurable lives longer. We aren't missing anything by not living on, but that doesn't mean that living on longer is not desirable. That's the common sense way we live our lives - we want to continue living so long as the expectation of net pleasure can be achieved, and I don't see why that consideration would not apply to "the gods" or any other living thing.

And as for the "necessity" of all things eventually breaking apart, even our world, it seems to me that the texts are saying that this is a "necessity" only because the blows from the outside eventually overwhelm the structure of the living thing. Seems to me there is no reason to foreclose the possibility, and indeed I think it's likely, that ways can be found to continue to replace the lost / destroyed structure indefinitely. If the "world" is in danger of collapsing, then rational beings would leave the collapsing one and go to one that is not collapsing.

I know some of us are shying away from these conclusions, but I don't think that Epicurus would have shied away from them any more than from his other radical conclusions. This is a subject we need to examine much more closely but I see no supernatural force or "necessity" that any particular object must be limited to a set and particular life span.

The problem with "immortality" is that we don't see how it can be achieved naturally, but then we couldn't for a long time see how men could fly or go to Mars. I doubt there is a conceptual difference between going further and further out in space and extending life spans longer and longer. The issue is simply finding ways to replace the structure, like making sure that there is an endless supply of water and channeling it to continue flowing over the waterfall.

Post by "TauPhi" of October 15, 2024 at 12:02 PM

Quote

... it is possible to maintain that given an Epicurean physical theory and the doctrine that all compounds will dissolve, the [Epicurean gods](#), as compounds, are yet still imperishable in the sense that they are morally incorruptible.

It's morally acceptable to kill a mosquito but killing a cat is morally unacceptable. It was morally acceptable for Epicurus to own slaves but it's morally unacceptable for us. I'm giving these examples to show that human morality is liquid, ever changing set of societal rules arbitrary agreed upon by majority of people at any given time.

To say that [Epicurean gods](#) are morally incorruptible basically means to me: Let's grant gods human liquid, ever changing morality and then let's make people believe they have to behave accordingly since they have godly example to imitate.

I see few problems with gods and morality combined. Epicurean morally incorruptible gods interpretation sounds awfully familiar to me. Is it just me or is it just another code name for Ten Commandments? After all, these dos and donts are perfectly sensible to live by in societies. Therefore, these commandments must have been given to us by a god to follow.

Post by “TauPhi” of October 15, 2024 at 1:11 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I know some of us are shying away from these conclusions, but I don't think that Epicurus would have shied away from them any more than from his other radical conclusions. This is a subject we need to examine much more closely but I see no supernatural force or "necessity" that any particular object must be limited to a set and particular life span.

I suspect Epicurus to shy away from such conclusions if he had lived in our times. He would have been aware of laws of thermodynamics, for example. As far as we currently know, you don't need supernatural force of any kind to limit immortality. Natural forces do the trick perfectly well. If any compound of atoms is to perform meaningful work (that is to exchange energy and interact with its surroundings), immortality is out of the equation.

I am perfectly aware that human knowledge is not at the point (not even close) where we can claim with authority what is physically possible and what is impossible but I think Epicurus would be very cautious regarding the immortality of compounds of atoms of any sort by any means.

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2024 at 1:12 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

It's morally acceptable to kill a mosquito but killing a cat is morally unacceptable. It was morally acceptable for Epicurus to own slaves but it's morally unacceptable for us. I'm giving these examples to show that human morality is liquid, ever changing set of societal rules arbitrary agreed upon by majority of people at any given time.

I think these are good points. In an Epicurean context where virtue (morality) is keyed to the production of pleasure rather than anything absolute, I suspect you're right to think that "morally incorruptible" wouldn't do anything more than point the finger back to the ultimate questions such as:

Can they sustain their lives of pleasure indefinitely, and is there any "natural law" reason that would prevent them from doing so?

We observe here on earth that all things that come together ultimately are broken apart, but I see no reason why that must translate into a law of nature that cannot be - through natural means - indefinitely postponed in time. Certainly I don't know how to do that myself, and I doubt it will be discovered in my lifetime, but I see no reason to postulate that it will always remain technologically out of reach.

The earth and sun and moon etc don't have the intelligence to alter the facts of nature that were started when they first came into being, but can we say for sure that intelligent beings can't develop to the point of doing so? I would say that the odds of that happening over infinite space and infinite time are actually pretty good, and I'm intentionally understating what the odds probably are in reality.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 15, 2024 at 11:04 PM

Notes from a ruminaceous journey through my “innermundia” after reading the Raghunanan article:

- I didn't find the premise very convincing.
- Might it be most constructive to be satisfied with multiple possible explanations of the gods? And perhaps useful to look at the subject for practical insights, through modern eyes?
- If the goal is to live like gods among men, and since we have no direct evidence of their existence (others may feel differently) is there any point in trying to discern anything about

them other than their blessedness and incorruptibility? Other than for the pleasure of scholarship, of course. One can live like a god by not troubling oneself or causing trouble for others by worrying about the form(s) of the gods. Instead, what if one were to think of a god as "the being whose blessedness is incorruptible" rather than "the blessed and incorruptible being"? I realize that this is a leap from the texts, but it may be a more useful way for us moderns to contemplate the gods by being more in line with our current understanding. Instead of troubling ourselves over the forms of the gods, we can focus on achieving a godlike state of blessedness.

- Also, could it be that one will only come to a proper conception of the gods when one has achieved a state of blessedness that one has a reasonable expectation of continuing? By focusing on the action, not on the form. There's no textual evidence of this that I'm aware of; I'm just ruminating. But it's kind of indirectly analogous to Eastern "enlightenment" or the rarity of the Stoic sage, although I'm not suggesting any direct connection, just ruminating.

- And "neither causes trouble for oneself or another" (which the author repeated several times) can also be read to say that an Epicurean isn't a selfish hedonist, but one whose "hedonic calculations" include the well-being of others as consequences of one's own pleasure. EP is a philosophy of personal responsibility: nobody is dictating what is right. Consider, though, that one of the greatest gifts is multiplying pleasure by sharing it.

- In sum, know that a god is a being whose blessedness is incorruptible.... Meditate on this and other things, and you will live like a god among men!

Post by "Don" of October 16, 2024 at 7:40 AM

Responding to [TauPhi](#), in relation to gods' moral/ethical incorruptibility, I'd say it describes their ability to never make any choice that dilutes or decreases their pleasure. They don't have "temptations" for lack of a better word like us mortals.

But I'll lay my cards on the table:

I don't believe in any gods.

Whether Epicurus taught there were physical gods or he thought of them as metaphors is secondary, to me. The most important aspect of Epicurus' teaching on the gods is that even if there were gods, they have no impact on the blessings or misfortunes that befall me in my life. Any thoughts I have about the gods of a one-way interaction.

If I want to imagine a perfect state, I can do that. If I want to call that perfect state "godlike", fine. But that *is* metaphorical.

Putting ourselves in Epicurus' headspace and social context in this topic is nigh impossible given our current understanding of the universe. Those tenets of "1. gods don't bestow blessings or curses. 2. There's no evidence the universe is created or sustained or administered by gods" are enough for me.

Post by “Cassius” of October 16, 2024 at 9:58 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Putting ourselves in Epicurus' headspace and social context in this topic is nigh impossible given our current understanding of the universe.

Not to be argumentative and just for the record, in case lurkers see this and wonder if no one responds, I'll state that I respectfully very much disagree with this statement. The regulars here know that we've gone through this question many times before, and there is respectful disagreement among our regulars on this point, but the lurkers won't so that's why I note it. 😊

Post by “Don” of October 16, 2024 at 2:59 PM

I suspected you might have a response, [Cassius](#) . I'm happy to state explicitly: This is my opinion and in no way would I assume to make a "policy statement" for the EpicureanFriends forum as a whole.

That said... To expand on my personal perspective...

Epicurus' and the ancient Greek concept of eidolon (images, films, etc) was revolutionary in its time and was a move toward an understanding. It was less wrong than the alternative theory of rays from us interacting with the external works and reporting back to us. However, eidola are not how the senses work nor is it how the brain and memory work. For me, starting from Epicurus' desire to know how things work, we modern Epicureans should endeavor to know how things work to the best level (and reserve judgement on what needs confirmation) we should not try to shoehorn ancient understanding into modern molds. Epicurus didn't have access to information we have, and we can't unlearn general scientific principles we take for granted

now.

Post by “Patrikios” of October 16, 2024 at 4:04 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

- Might it be most constructive to be satisfied with multiple possible explanations of the gods? And perhaps useful to look at the subject for **practical insights**, through modern eyes?

[Godfrey](#), thank you for this suggestion to look for practical insights.

As I understand Greece and surrounding Mediterranean countries in 4th century bce, many of the 'gods' were still being worshiped for their control over some facet of Nature (e.g. Zeus - lightening bolts; Posieden - seas), or they represented human emotions/actions (e.g. Eros - sexual desire; Morpheus - dreams & sleep). Which gods was Epicurus suggesting were worth considering as being blessed? Was Epicurus referring only to the gods that represented positive traits (e.g. Apollo - god of music, poetry, art, oracles, archery, plague, medicine, sun, light and knowledge), not gods of war & violence (e.g. Ares)?

Epicurus could be calling us to consider, for example, the blessedness of Apollo when getting in the mood to write a creative music or poem. It appears that the Epicurus was using the generally accepted practice to acknowledge the existence of gods, but focusing only on the gods who demonstrate an appearance of happiness and imperturbation.

Was Epicurus using people's positive views of the best possible unperturbed state of mind (as envisioned with peaceful gods) as a goal of our practice to prudently live pleasantly?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 16, 2024 at 6:33 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

Was Epicurus using people's positive views of the best possible unperturbed state of mind (as envisioned with peaceful gods) as a goal of our practice to prudently live pleasantly?

That seems to be the case. It also seems to be the interpretation of the "idealist" theory of the gods, which is contrasted with the "realist" theory. There are several threads in the forum discussing these two interpretations.

Post by “Don” of October 17, 2024 at 6:38 AM

I realize I stray from the title of this thread, but one Lucretian passage I return to when it comes to gods is in Book 2:

In many a way she brings the many forth
Into the light of sun. And here, whoso
Decides to call the ocean *Neptune*, or
The grain-crop *Ceres*, and prefers to abuse
The name of *Bacchus* rather than pronounce
The liquor's proper designation, him
Let us permit to go on calling earth
Mother of Gods, if only he will spare
To taint his soul with foul religion.

Here, we're given permission to personify physical things metaphorically as gods. Why not metaphorical ideal lives as gods?

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2024 at 7:38 AM

Thanks for that quote. I had a mental lapse on the podcast last time I tried to use that and couldn't remember if it was Neptune or Ceres that was referenced. Now I see why - it's *both*

Post by “Bryan” of October 19, 2024 at 1:32 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

column 34 seems to be a refutation of philosophers endorsing the four elements as building blocks of reality coming directly from Epicurus in his 'On Nature - Book 14'

Thank you for bringing this up! Here is one version of what remains from columns 33-35. This is very interpretive, the bracketed and rubricated version with comments is attached.

Epíkouros, Peri Phýseōs, Book 14, P.Herc. 1148, columns 33-35:

(about monism) ...for these situations are not generated from this one single underlying substance by its concentrating or by its dispersing – but rather, what situation prevails is produced out of the differences in the variations of the shapes...

(about Platonic solids) ...such is the case for those who define one particular shape for fire, or earth, or water, or air: since they are more ridiculous than those who do not define one particular shape for each element – given that, in their comparative juxtapositions, those who define shape for elements should have agreed, either willingly or unwillingly, that certain multiple particular forms of shapes are produced which can affirmatively be said to be substantial [i.e., really existing] in accordance with each compound: but some miss the mark regarding these component elements, and there is something more consistent to be said that pertains to these elements – speaking in this way, those who define one particular shape for each element could also wholly refer to the difference in the mixtures – but those people who... for the...

...how could someone perceive water or air or fire as solid and indissoluble, when one cannot even perceive earth as solid and indissoluble? not to mention the fact that those people representing these ideas of indissoluble elements do in reality divide them: given that each of these elements is not conceived as solid, then one could provide many and varied images of shapes according to the divisions of elements – and there will not be just triangles, or pyramids, or cubes, or any other finite shape specific to each element – for those who define a particular shape for each element would have nothing persuasive to say to convince us that it is more fitting to think that these four visible forms are apprehended by us according to their divisions of a specific shape for each element rather than the elements being varied in their specific class of shapes...

Post by “TauPhi” of October 19, 2024 at 2:32 PM

Brilliant, [Bryan](#) . Thank you very much.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4068-episode-249-cicero-s-otnotg-24-are-the-epicurean-gods-totally-inactive-and-are-w/>

Post by “Bryan” of January 12, 2025 at 10:23 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It was less wrong than the alternative theory of rays from us interacting with the external works and reporting back to us.

Including this quote here, where we have [1] eyes made for a specific purpose (as opposed to mutating and finding a use) and [2] eyes generating light rays (as opposed to simply receiving external information).

Plato, Timaeus [45B-C] "The first of the organs fabricated were light-bearing eyes which they fixed in place for the following reason: they contrived to create a body from fire which does not burn but provides a gentle light kindred to the light of each day. So they caused the pure fire within us which is brother of this light of day, to flow through the eyes, and they compressed the whole eye, but especially the centre, to be smooth and dense, so as to retain all the coarser fire, and filter through only this kind of pure fire by itself. Then if ever there is daylight surrounding this stream of vision, like meets with like, joins together and establishes a single kindred body along a straight line from the eyes to wherever the stream from within is obstructed by the outside objects on which it impinges."