

Article: "Extraterrestrial Life May Look Nothing Like Life On Earth..." (and for our purposes, applying the article to "gods")

Post by "Cassius" of December 13, 2024 at 9:48 AM

The framing of this article reminds me of the relevant section of the letter to Menoecus.

The question: *"How do you look for alien life when you don't know what alien life might look like?"*

Could be transposed as: *"How do you look for gods when you don't know what gods might look like?"*

And it seems to me that the only answer to that question is to start with a "definition" stating the essential attributes of the thing you think you are looking for. The article doesn't focus on addressing those in the case of "alien life," but it seems to me that what Epicurus is doing in regard to gods: his starting point is to define them as living beings, blessed, and imperishable, and saying that we reach that conclusion based on prolepses (which I think most of us presume relates to "images"). There's a lot more to say than that, but the point of this post is only to point out that you can't even discuss something without stating a clear picture of what you're talking about, and that problem is as apparent today (in this article) as it would have been to Epicurus.

Quote

We have only one example of biology forming in the universe - life on Earth. But what if life can form in other ways? *How do you look for alien life when you don't know what alien life might look like?*

These questions are preoccupying astrobiologists, who are scientists who look for life beyond [Earth](#). Astrobiologists have attempted to come up with universal rules that govern the emergence of complex physical and biological systems both on Earth and beyond.

I'm an astronomer who has written extensively about [astrobiology](#). Through my research, I've learned that the most abundant form of extraterrestrial life is likely to be microbial, since single cells can form more readily than large organisms. But just in case there's advanced alien life out there, I'm on the international advisory council for the group designing messages to send to those civilizations.

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[Extraterrestrial life may look nothing like life on Earth – so astrobiologists are coming up with a framework to study how complex systems evolve](#)

How do you look for alien life when you don't know what alien life might look like?

www.space.com

Post by “TauPhi” of December 13, 2024 at 6:01 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4183-article-extraterrestrial-life-may-look-nothing-like-life-on-earth-and-for-our-pu/>

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"How do you look for gods when you don't know what gods might look like?"

I agree that it's rather hard to look for something if you have no idea what you're looking for. One may be looking for a brick, got hit in the head by it and keep looking for a brick just because he doesn't know what a brick is.

But the answer to your question about the hunt for gods, if those are [Epicurean gods](#), is: "You don't." [Epicurean gods](#) do not interfere with human affairs. Whenever you find creatures that are living beings, blessed, and imperishable, you know for sure that those are not [Epicurean gods](#). The act of finding them establishes interference, therefore whatever you have just found is definitely not [Epicurean gods](#). Looking for such gods makes as much sense as trying to see an invisible elephant. If you see it, it's definitely not an invisible elephant.

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2024 at 6:25 PM

You're certainly entitled to your personal opinion on this topic, Tau Phi, but it's my responsibility to the website readers to point out that Epicurus felt dramatically differently, and I think - and apparently every dedicated Epicurean in recorded history thought - for very good reason.

If your life is not disturbed by the issue of gods then you are fortunate, but that is not the case for most of the world throughout history. Epicurean philosophy is based largely on developing a proper view of divinity as a response to those problems and is a very legitimate response.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 13, 2024 at 6:32 PM

PD1: "That which is blissful and immortal has no troubles itself, nor does it cause trouble for others, so that it is not affected by anger or gratitude (for all such things come about through weakness)."

---> This seems to indicate that which is not a god. And would be saying that what everyone thinks are the gods, are not gods.

Post by “TauPhi” of December 13, 2024 at 6:49 PM

I am not expressing my personal opinion about gods in post #2, [Cassius](#) . My personal opinion is not relevant in this thread at all. My point is, Epicureans should not engage in an attempt to actively seek a physical contact with their gods. [Epicurean gods](#) do not interfere in human affairs. Otherwise they wouldn't be blessed. I don't see how my post #2 is dramatically incompatible with Epicurean philosophy. On the contrary, looking for a contact with such gods is incompatible with the philosophy.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 13, 2024 at 7:37 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

The act of finding them establishes interference, therefore whatever you have just found is definitely not [Epicurean gods](#). Looking for such gods makes as much sense as trying to see an invisible elephant. If you see it, it's definitely not an invisible elephant.

There is nothing in Epicurean texts that says the gods are invisible.

Seeing "films" is not bodily contact (not interference).

Letter to Menoeceus says: "For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision."

This is just what the texts say. I think it is up to each person to decide if they "like" (or agree with) this or not. I personally consider myself an atheist, so this idea doesn't resonate for me personally (just for the record).

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2024 at 7:51 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

There is nothing in Epicurean texts that says the gods are invisible.

Actually I think there is. It's pretty clear as I understand that texts that gods cannot be sensed through the five senses. Now if you want to call the "direct receipt of images by the brain" a sense then you can say that they can be sensed, but I think it's pretty clear that they are not visible to us. Perhaps that's one of the finer points of their being in the intermundia (very far away - too far to see them).

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

My point is, Epicureans should not engage in an attempt to actively seek a physical contact with their gods

Now if " PHYSICAL CONTACT" is the point you're making then we are in complete agreement, cause as I said to Kalosyni the texts are clear that they can't be seen or touched. But I read your comment as saying we should not "seek information" or "knowledge" about the gods. That would be directly contrary to core Epicurean views. I don't want to get too picky about language but let me go back and review the thread.

Here's the part i was responding to:

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

But the answer to your question about the hunt for gods, if those are [Epicurean gods](#), is: "You don't." [Epicurean gods](#) do not interfere with human affairs. Whenever you find creatures that are living beings, blessed, and imperishable, you know for sure that those are not [Epicurean gods](#). The act of finding them establishes interference, therefore whatever you have just found is definitely not [Epicurean gods](#). Looking for such gods makes as much sense as trying to see an invisible elephant. If you see it, it's definitely not an invisible elephant.

So if you're clarifying that you mean don't "physically" hunt for them, then I'd agree, at least until we make further progress in space travel etc. But I read that as a dismissal of any concern about divinity whatsoever, and that position (don't concern yourself about gods at all) is simply not what Epicurus taught.

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2024 at 7:58 PM

"The act of finding them establishes interference"

I can see where you might be coming from and I can see this being arguable in a limited context -- here on Earth --- but I don't think Epicurus would agree that there are truly hard and fast and definite limitations that prevent this from being so if we traveled through space.

If Epicurus had been asked to consider whether they could be sensed in some way after space travel (maybe he did like Lucian did, but we don't know) then I think he would have said that of course that would be conceivable. He said that there are infinite numbers worlds with life on them, some like and some unlike ours, and all his basic definition requires is that they be living, happy, and imperishable. All the rest about quasi-bodies and the like is pretty clearly labeled a derivative speculation based on reasoning which might or might not prove to be correct (as to size, shape, language, etc)

Post by “TauPhi” of December 13, 2024 at 8:22 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So if you're clarifying that you mean don't "physically" hunt for them, then I'd agree,

I am responding to your parallel of looking for extraterrestrial life to looking for [Epicurean gods](#). I am talking about active, physical pursuit of finding life (and gods) in the universe, not about an abstract deliberation on their existence or non-existence.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

at least until we make further progress in space travel etc.

And again I have to disagree with this, taking the Epicurean perspective into consideration. It doesn't matter how much progress we make. Even if we have technology to be everywhere at the same time in the universe, [Epicurean gods](#) are off limit to humans. This is non-negotiable. Otherwise, the idea of such gods collapses entirely and Epicurus is proven dead wrong in this area of his philosophy.

Post by “TauPhi” of December 13, 2024 at 8:27 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

He said that there are infinite numbers worlds with life on them, some like and some unlike ours, and all his basic definition requires is that they be living, happy, and imperishable.

The first part is about non-gods. The second part is about gods. They don't mix.

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2024 at 8:45 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I am responding to your parallel of looking for extraterrestrial life to looking for [Epicurean gods](#). I am talking about active, physical pursuit of finding life (and gods) in the universe, not about an abstract deliberation on their existence or non-existence.

We definitely disagree on that. People in the past who were not able to go to the stars were limited in their knowledge, but had no need for regret about it, because they could not. People in the future can go to the stars and the Epicurean theories of life on other worlds and even divinity will have even more practical meaning than it does today. And the very thought that we should restrict ourselves from exploring space and learning more about the universe is antithetical to Epicurus' emphasis on studying nature as the best way to live happily. The best way to learn more about nature and our place in it will be to go to the stars. Not everyone will want to or be able to do that, but the idea of arguing against the desirability of doing so - for those who wish to - would be against the positive and even combative spirit of the ancient Epicureans.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

And again I have to disagree with this, taking the Epicurean perspective into consideration. It doesn't matter how much progress we make. Even if we have technology to be everywhere at the same time in the universe, [Epicurean gods](#) are off limit to humans. This is non-negotiable. Otherwise, the idea of such gods collapses entirely and Epicurus is proven dead wrong in this area of his philosophy.

Again, we disagree. The texts are not clear that they are by nature non-sensible to us for all time, only that they are in the intermundia and/or for whatever reason they are not something we sense EXCEPT through prolepsis, and Epicurus is labeling that as "clear." So we disagree on this aspect -- totally - in taking it to the conclusion that any other interpretation would "collapse"

the philosophy.

You're going further even than the "idealists" would go in stating that it would be "impossible" to gain additional knowledge about divinity.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

The first part is about non-gods. The second part is about gods. They don't mix.

Again, I think we're just in fundamental disagreement here because you are maintaining that it is inherently impossible to gain additional knowledge in the future (after space travel) than we have today, and I think that's a fundamentally flawed perspective. We'll learn much more in the future about everything as we travel out into space, including what forms life may take in which it lives happily and imperishably.

This discussion is exactly what I thought might occur and I am glad to have the opportunity to explore it.

The biggest hurdle in Epicurean philosophy is to take seriously that Epicurus was using important words in different ways than the majority use them.

Pleasure IS the absence of pain literally and fully in Epicurean philosophy, because the feelings are defined to be one of two - either pleasure or pain, with no middle or third option. But most people are like Cicero, and that choice of wording just goes past them like water off a duck's back. Like Cicero, they insist on equating pleasure with sensual stimulation *alone*, and they refuse to include within pleasure other positive experiences of life that don't include sensory stimulation, so they have to get that definition out of their minds if they are going to understand Epicurus' position better than Cicero did.

The same thing is going on with gods. I am not going to assert why any one individual thinks the way they do, but I *will* assert that most every living being on the earth today has been conditioned to think that "gods" are supernatural, omniscient, omnipotent, and all the other baggage that goes along with monotheism.

Epicurus was clearly breaking from that and saying that should define godhood as *ONLY* being happy and imperishable . That's why he could talk about being gods among men and not seem ridiculous, because he didn't for a minute entertain that there is anything supernatural about being a god. Being "imperishable" is somewhat allegorical, but even there there is allegory in surrounding yourself with "immortal" things like friendship.

It's possible Tau Phi that you have a unique perspective that makes you impervious to concerns about divinity, and again if that is so I applaud you for it. But you are in a small minority of people on earth if you are , and it was Epicurus' view that it was not sufficient to say "supernatural gods do not exist."

His direction clearly seems to be, "Supernatural gods do not exist, but the idea of "divinity" is not crazy at all, and there is good reason that people think about it." There's lots and lots of speculation that can be had about images and prolepsis and "why" Epicurus thought that people have legitimate concerns about divinity, and that's the kind of thing that this forum is setup to do -- to explore what Epicurus taught and then apply it as productively as possible. This is not one of those fringe areas of physics that is easy to admit that modern science has changed. This is a core area of human philosophy and psychology which is going to be with us as long as we are human.

And to repeat, even the "idealists" who reject the view that Epicurus thought his gods really existed appear to me to be essentially in agreement with how important a question this is. Having a proper perspective on divinity is a lot more than saying negatively "supernatural gods don't exist." It's an essential part of the picture to understand where the issue comes from and to have a positive position that relates to where we want to go in living as close to happily and imperishably as we can.

Post by “TauPhi” of December 13, 2024 at 9:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And the very thought that we should restrict ourselves from exploring space and learning more about the universe is antithetical to Epicurus' emphasis on studying nature as the best way to live happily.

[Cassius](#) , I don't know what you're trying to achieve by stating the above but if you're suggesting I'm against learning, getting knowledge or exploring space, than you can't be further from the truth. I was talking about not pursuing physical contact with [Epicurean gods](#), not about not pursuing anything at all. Your conclusions have nothing to do with what I said, whatsoever.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Again, I think we're just in fundamental disagreement here because you are maintaining that it is inherently impossible to gain additional knowledge in the future (after space travel) than we have today, and I think that's a fundamentally flawed perspective.

Yeah, except that's not my perspective at all. Once again, you're twisting my words about pursuing physical contact with [Epicurean gods](#) into what suits you and it's in almost perfect

opposition to what I think about gaining knowledge.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It's possible Tau Phi that you have a unique perspective that makes you impervious to concerns about divinity, and again if that is so I applaud you for it.

As I said, my perspective is not relevant to the conversation. I'm talking strictly about Epicurean perspective regarding gods.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

His direction clearly seems to be, "Supernatural gods do not exist, but the idea of "divinity" is not crazy at all, and there is good reason that people think about it."

I absolutely agree that this is the case.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And to repeat, even the "idealists" who reject the view that Epicurus thought his gods really existed appear to me to be essentially in agreement with how important a question this is. Having a proper perspective on divinity is a lot more than saying negatively "supernatural gods don't exist." It's an essential part of the picture to understand where the issue comes from and to have a positive position that relates to where we want to go in living as close to happily and imperishably as we can.

As far as I can comprehend Epicurus' view of gods, I think his gods were very much real in a physical sense. And he tried to make perfectly clear that they are not supernatural, not interested in human affairs and this is the proper perspective on divinity - think about it, marvel at it but don't physically touch it. He did this to remove the fear of gods and to shut the door behind such fear. Your insistence on the possibility of contact with gods by the means of space travel opens the door again to the fear of gods and I think this is an anti-Epicurean position and again, please don't read it as I am against knowledge in general because such accusations are frankly speaking ridiculous.

Post by "Don" of December 14, 2024 at 12:09 AM

I just came across this quickly-escalating conversation and have thoughts.

I find myself aligned with [TauPhi](#) 's direction here as I read it. Correct me if I'm wrong, but paraphrasing his stance as I understand it (and Epicurean theology) with some of my own perspective mixed in:

The gods (whether thought constructs or physical beings) are not above or outside nature; they have no concerns for humans and do not bestow blessings or rain down punishment. Those seem to be the points of paramount importance to Epicurus. We have nothing to fear from gods (no matter how they exist).

The gods do not interfere with humans, have no need of humans, live in bliss, and are incorruptible.

Going from [TauPhi](#)'s points with my own direction: The gods have no concern for humans; however, if humans were to try to contact gods or come into physical contact with them... the gods would necessarily be troubled by humans. This seems to me to be counter to Epicurean theology. If we wish to be "god-like" in an Epicurean sense, we should not bother the gods: "That which is blissful and immortal *has no troubles itself, nor does it cause trouble for others*, so that it is not affected by anger or gratitude (for all such things come about through weakness)." If we trouble or annoy the gods by going around poking them, prodding them, trying to contact them, by definition, we not acting as an Epicurean god. Leave them be, and admire their blessedness within our minds, contemplate their blessedness and incorruptibility.

On the Gods as Aliens...

I have no problem whatsoever thinking that Epicurus would be interested to learn his idea of the universe was not as he had envisioned it. Knowing how the universe was put together and seeing other stars and worlds around those stars would further solidify his resolve that there was nothing to fear outside of the universe and that natural laws governed the universe and not a supernatural intelligence. He might even have been curious to entertain the multiverse/bubble universe concepts. If aliens contacted Earth, he would probably shrug and say, "I knew it would happen eventually." But those aliens are NEVER going to be [Epicurean gods](#). By definition, if they concern themselves with humans, they aren't gods. "That which is blissful and immortal has no troubles itself, nor does it cause trouble for others."

For anyone curious about my general stance on Epicurean theology, listen to our recent podcast episode on the idealist vs realist god stances, or think of it as "thought-construct" vs "physical being" debate. I don't think the gods have a corporeal form, visible to the eye, able to be touched. I think they are mental constructions of the ideal existence put into a form by the mind to be able to comprehend and think about a blessed and incorruptible state.

I don't think astrobiology has anything to say about Epicurean theology.

I do think astrobiology has everything to do with Epicurus' theory that multiple worlds exist and that other beings exist on those other worlds. I do **not** think that Epicurus would say those other beings on other worlds are gods. Go ahead and contact the other beings, by all means. Teach them about Epicurus and learn from their "Epicurus." There could very well be an alien "Epicurus" since I could easily see "pleasure-seeking" a universal trait of life. But they're not gods.

Post by "Cassius" of December 14, 2024 at 4:16 AM

Ok - let me go back to the opening post. The point of it (and the thrust of the article, I think) is that to even look for something you have to define what you are looking for. In this sense "look" refers to investigation to establish that something is real.

I can see that we have an ambiguity in what it means to find that something is real. Most of the time we are referring to the five senses to establish reality, but in this case Epicurus / Lucretius seem to be talking about direct receipt of images by the mind as the criteria by which we are motivated to think of them as real.

Most of the time images correspond to things that have physical reality. In the case of centaurs, he's apparently saying that images can arrange themselves and *not* correspond with reality. It's debatable whether gods fit into the category of centaurs or not. Idealists might say gods are in the centaur category and have absolutely no independent existence. Realists might say that gods do have an independent existence, but that existence is not in the form of what we think of as solid bodies, but in the form of "quasi-bodies" of apparently flowing atoms (referencing Velleius here).

As i read the thread now the essential point of controversy that Tau Phi is different from the point of the original post that you should define what you are investigating before you start your investigation.

Tau Phi is suggesting that the act of "finding" something by our having any perception of it whatsoever with any of our five senses by definition means that the perceived thing is not an Epicurean god.

In order to reach that conclusion, I would say that you would need to find a clear statement by an authoritative Epicurean that it is universally inherent in the nature of a god that a god cannot ever be perceptible to one of the human five senses.

(That gets back to the comment Kalosyni made earlier as to exactly what Epicurus said that gods re invisible. Did one of the key Epicureans make a clear statement that rules out an

Epicurean god ever being visible under any conditions? If there is such a statement I can't call it to mind, and this issue could have caused the possibility of living in the intermundia to arise as a way to reconcile why they might be visible there but not visible to us here on earth.)

Here I would go back to the question of comparing our knowledge of gods to our knowledge of atoms. Throughout most of history we have had no capacity to sense an atom with any of our five senses, yet we would firmly believe that atoms exist. Do we also take the position that advances in technology will never make it possible through instrumentation to "see" an image of a "smallest" particle? I doubt there is a theoretical impossibility of -- through advanced science -- observing a visualization of an elemental particle.

In Epicurean philosophy as I understand it, "images" are like anything else - they are composed of elemental particles. If you take the David Konstan / traditional realist position that Epicurus meant what he said that gods are perceivable through images, then there is an atomic basis for gods just like anything else, and I would see no theoretical reason why that presence could not be detected at least through advanced instrumentation.

Further, I see no theoretical reason why, as the article indicates, that we should rule out finding living beings which are self-sustaining and successfully regenerate themselves indefinitely. The question of whether they would be detectable to our five senses if we were close enough to them physically is pretty much exactly what the article is all about.

It's not at all obvious to me that the simple act of *our* being able to "detect" them, like we do or will eventually detect atoms, would necessarily amount to their being "disturbed" by our act of being able to detect them. As it is already, I see no reason to infer that it is impossible for an Epicurean god to be aware of humans, even if we stipulate as we do that humans cause no "trouble" for gods. That would be parallel to our being able to visualize an atom through instrumentation -- visualizing an atom would not necessarily cause us any disturbance whatsoever.

To try to summarize at this point, the traditional realist view of [Epicurean gods](#) is that they have *some* kind of physical existence arising from atoms. "Atoms" are non-detectable to our unaided five senses, but I would expect that they either are already or will be detectable in the future via instrumentation. Certainly combinations of atoms frequently become visible and touchable to humans. The bottom line is that such observation is pleasurable and the additional pleasure that such knowledge brings makes it desirable.

To my knowledge there's nothing in the texts that rules out an analogy between combinations of atoms giving rise to other things that are theoretically detectable and combinations of atoms giving rise to gods.

To impose a flat rule that "if they are detectable to humans then they are not gods" seems to me to be going too far. To me, this imposes a limitation on the possibilities that I don't see good reason for in the texts. The texts, especially Lucretius, seem to refer to humans perceiving

images of gods when asleep and even sometimes when awake, so to me the texts seem to me to go in the opposite direction.

Yes you have to be flexible in thinking about what "detection" really involves, but that's the very point of the article. it's helpful to think about how we look for things which we don't ordinarily perceive with our senses here on earth, because there are lots of such things that affect us.

Once we eventually find intelligent life in some other part of the universe, our failure to have detected their existence up to that point did not in any way mean that we should have ever presumed that they did not exist. We have had at least since the time of Epicurus very good reason to firmly expect that intelligent life outside earth exists. For the same reason, we have reason to expect that some of those life forms are imperishable and experience lives that fit Epicurus' definition of godlike. And our act of detecting them in some way doesn't necessarily violate our expectation that they are blessed and imperishable.

OK more than enough for the moment.....

Post by "Cassius" of December 14, 2024 at 7:58 AM

i discover I do have one more thing to add to this.

The statement "if they are detectable to humans then they are not gods" is very close to:

"Believe that a god is something you can never know anything about."

Then where would you be?

You would be at the point: *"If you claim to know anything about a god then by definition then what you are talking about is not a god."*

That might be a very neat word-play way of disposing with the entire idea of gods, but it would be more far-reachingly negative to the existence or usefulness of the concept of divinity than even the idealist view.

Note I am saying "very close to" and not "identical," but the difference in the positions would be in the finer points of the word "contact," and that's why I called attention to taking this too far.

Lucretius Book Six:

[68] And unless you spew out all this from your mind and banish far away thoughts unworthy of the gods and alien to their peace, the holy powers of the gods, degraded by thy thought, will

often do thee harm; not that the high majesty of the gods can be polluted by thee, so that in wrath they should yearn to seek sharp retribution, but because you yourself will imagine that those tranquil beings in their placid peace set tossing the great billows of wrath, nor with quiet breast will you approach the shrines of the gods, nor have strength to drink in with tranquil peace of mind the images which are borne from their holy body to herald their divine form to the minds of men. And therefore what manner of life will follow, you may perceive.

Post by “Cassius” of December 14, 2024 at 10:51 AM

Sometimes the most contentious issues generate the most progress.

I would say that the construction "Whenever you find creatures that are living beings, blessed, and imperishable, ... you know for sure that those are not [Epicurean gods](#)." can be very useful if made more complete and clear.

I have added the ellipsis because I don't think it is clear what 'find' means, nor is it complete.

As to "find," much revolves around whether "images received by the mind" should be included within "find."

But the bigger issue I have is the completeness. The following variations that make the statement more complete I would say are clearly in harmony with Epicurus, and more practical to apply, especially as will be needed for application as we begin space travel and start finding alien life:

- Whenever you find creatures who appear to be living beings, blessed, and imperishable, and yet causing trouble for others or experiencing trouble themselves, you know for sure that those are not [Epicurean gods](#).

Or -

- Whenever you find creatures who appear to be living beings, blessed, and imperishable, and yet suffering from pain disease or dying, you know for sure that those are not [Epicurean gods](#).

But in contrast, to construct something that leads to "Whenever you find creatures who appear to be living beings, blessed, and imperishable, you know for sure that these are not gods" shifts the emphasis to a physics test, rather than one that follows the logical definition that Epicurus sets out in both Menoeceus and [PD01](#).

In addition to being a physics test that is not clearly present in the texts, the latter construction rings of a dualism between gods and the rest of the universe. I know of no reason to infer that gods cannot come into contact with any non-god entity whatsoever under any circumstances. It seems clear that that was in part the reason for the discussion of the *intermundia*. To say that by definition they cannot have any contact with any other forms of matter would place them entirely outside the sphere of natural entities composed of atoms, which Epicurus seems to be working hard to keep them squarely within.

As to not making the gods a physics test, I would apply what David Sedley says about pleasure in "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism" (my emphasis added):

By establishing that cognitive scepticism, the direct outcome of reductionist atomism, is self-refuting and untenable in practice, Epicurus justifies his non-reductionist alternative, according to which sensations are true and there are therefore bona fide truths at the phenomenal level accessible through them. The same will apply to the *pathe*, which Epicurus also held to be veridical. Pleasure, for example, is a direct datum of experience. It is commonly assumed that Epicurus must have equated pleasure with such and such a kind of movement of soul atoms; but although he will have taken it to have some explanation at the atomic level, I know of no evidence that he, any more than most moral philosophers or psychologists, would have held that an adequate analysis of it could be found at that level. Physics are strikingly absent from Epicurus' ethical writings, and it is curious that interpreters are so much readier to import them there than they are when it comes to the moral philosophy of Plato or Aristotle.

Post by "Don" of December 14, 2024 at 3:38 PM

If I temporarily take the physical gods perspective...

If you want to go down the physics route translated into a modern paradigm, I'm going to posit that the *intermundia* refers to another dimension or another universe in the multiplicity of universes out in The All. Gods are material and natural, but reside outside our universe under a different physics than our own. We cannot see them with our eyes, because our universe doesn't overlap with theirs. They are not aliens living on planets in our universe. That's just an assertion on my part, granted. But that's the only way I could right now "accept" a corporeal divinity in an Epicurean theological context.

I find it much easier to think of the gods as what an ideal life would be like without the limits on mortal, corruptible bodies. The best I can do is to live "like a god". That doesn't mean identical to a god or equivalent to a god. It's a metaphorical divine existence.

Post by "Pacatus" of December 14, 2024 at 3:41 PM

[Don](#) : I've been following this, but posted some thoughts on the old thread below. I think they relate to what you just said here.

Post

[RE: "The Polytheism of the Epicureans" by Paul T. M. Jackson](#)

I just revisited the essay linked by @Godfrey in the opening post.

One of the considerations that seems to get shunted aside in discussions of the [Epicurean gods](#) (especially from a realist perspective, but also from an idealist one) is that the Athenian gods that Epicurus venerated (like the gods of other polytheisms) "embodied" (or at least represented) various, specific associations in their personae. Dionysus was the god associated with wine, viticulture and theater (especially *comedia*...



Pacatus

December 14, 2024 at 3:28 PM

Post by "Cassius" of December 14, 2024 at 4:15 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

If you want to go down the physics route translated into a modern paradigm, I'm going to posit that the intermundia refers to another dimension or another universe in the multiplicity of universes out in The All. Gods are material and natural, but reside outside our universe under a different physics than our own. We cannot see them with our eyes, because our universe doesn't overlap with theirs. They are not aliens living on planets in our universe. That's just an assertion on my part, granted. But that's the only way I could right now "accept" a corporeal divinity in an Epicurean theological context.

I'd say your suggestions there are possibilities, but not really compelled at all by the texts. I would expect Epicurus thought of the universe as "all that exists."

[Quote from Don](#)

I find it much easier to think of the gods as what an ideal life would be like without the limits on mortal, corruptible bodies.

I think this indicates our difference in perspectives. I have no problem stipulating that it is possible within natural physics for a living being to find ways to completely replace its own atomic structure over time so as to not be subject to the necessity of death. In fact I'd find it much more difficult for me to argue that it's "impossible." Absent the standard possibilities of humanity blowing itself up etc., I'd wager we are no more than a couple of hundred years from that ability ourselves, at the outside.

Post by “Don” of December 14, 2024 at 5:48 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Epicurus posited many world-systems in an infinite All (universe). That's exactly what the texts provide.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I'd wager we are no more than a couple of hundred years from that ability ourselves, at the outside.

By what means? Not being argumentative, just curious.

Post by “Cassius” of December 14, 2024 at 5:57 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus posited many world-systems in an infinite All (universe). That's exactly what the texts provide.

... And that's exactly what I mean too when I say "the universe is all that exists." Any kind of terminology such as world systems or multiverses or anything else falls within "the universe is all that exists. " If it exists anywhere using any adjective, it's part of the "universe."

[Quote from Don](#)

By what means? Not being argumentative, just curious.

Probably by means not currently predictable by me, but I bet there are people who could suggest ready answers. Brain transplants would be a gross example, but I presume that the aging process has genetic control mechanisms which should be reversible. I'm rusty on my old Star Trek episodes and I am sure there are many more suggested mechanisms. But I don't see it as a stretch to say that there's nothing that happens to human bodies that shouldn't be reversible given advances in technology.

Probably we need a subsection of the physics forum devoted to life extension!

Post by “Don” of December 14, 2024 at 9:42 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

... And that's exactly what I mean too when I say "the universe is all that exists." Any kind of terminology such as world systems or multiverses or anything else falls within "the universe is all that exists. " If it exists anywhere using any adjective, it's part of the "universe."

Oh, I completely agree that "the universe is all that exists" just to be clear. The only complication on that is possibly a differing view on what we mean by "world" and "universe." To be clear about my perspective: when Epicurus says κόσμος cosmos "world" I think the evidence is that he means a planet (Earth) and all its accompanying sky and stars. Another "world" or κόσμος is this same system elsewhere. The universe, Το Παν (To Pan) "The All" is the entirety of existence that contains ALL these cosmoi. The planets we find orbiting other stars are part of our cosmos. If we want other cosmoi, we have to accept the multiverse, ie, other universes. All the universes together in modern cosmology make up The Universe, THE All. If one is trying to map Epicurean cosmology onto a modern paradigm, I contend that that's the only way to do it.

That doesn't in any way go against Epicurus' primary tenet that we live in a natural, material universe.

Post by “Bryan” of December 14, 2024 at 11:46 PM

Cosmos connects well with a galaxy, *To Pan* with the universe. If we want other *cosmoi*, I'd think we only have to accept multiple galaxies. As we know, Epíkouros uses *Cosmos* in the plural, but not *To Pan*.

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2024 at 7:57 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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Yes this is where I ultimately will let those who want to follow the latest theories follow that terminology, and I'll likely never accept that in philosophical discussion there is a necessity of mapping into modern paradigms that are regularly changing and within which the experts don't even agree among themselves. I'll let those who want to try do to that pursue that, and I do understand that some want to do that.

The dictionary definition of universe of "all that exists" seems perfectly sufficient to me and won't change next year or the year after.

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2024 at 9:56 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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[Quote from Bryan](#)

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Honestly, I think that trying to map ΚΟΣΜΟΣ "kosmos", ΚΟΣΜΟΙ "kosmoi", and ΤΟ ΠΑΝ "The All" onto modern concepts, especially concepts and theories that are evolving, is a fool's errand. Epicurus' conceptions of kosmoi and The All were fundamentally different than our own. My understanding is that kosmoi were islands of order in The All. Kosmos literally means "order" (actually related to English cosmetic, bringing order to one's face or appearance). Our word "planet" to the Greeks was simply a wandering star, πλανήτης, against the fixed stars in the sky. Epicurus didn't speak of beings on another πλανήτης but beings in/on/inhabiting other κόσμοι. Earth, to him as best I can ascertain, was where we lived in our κόσμος.

That's why discussions like this about theology or cosmology are often talking past each other. When the ancients were talking about an intermundia "between worlds" or ΜΕΤΑΚΟΣΜΟΣ they didn't imagine planets or worlds or galaxies or multiverses. They had their ideas, . We have our ideas, informed by science and observation. I need to accept that Epicurus and the ancient Greek cosmological concepts have no necessity to equate with my modern ideas. They may overlap slightly, but they cannot be made to synchronize.

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2024 at 11:23 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

We have our ideas, informed by science and observation. I need to accept that Epicurus and the ancient Greek cosmological concepts have no necessity to equate with my modern ideas. They may overlap slightly, but they cannot be made to synchronize.

We all end at the same point - I think - that whatever is the truth, the universe is "natural" and doesn't have a supernatural overlay above it. So frequently the details are not necessarily important to reconcile, UNLESS they point to a major conclusion about the supernatural or life

after death or something that would call into question whether the truth is natural or supernatural, or would call into question key issues about the "knowability" of any truth at all. Definitely when anything like that arises it does need to be made to synchronize at least at the conclusion level.

Post by "Don" of December 15, 2024 at 1:12 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We all end at the same point - I think - that whatever is the truth, the universe is "natural" and doesn't have a supernatural overlay above it. So frequently the details are not necessarily important to reconcile, UNLESS they point to a major conclusion about the supernatural or life after death or something that would call into question whether the truth is natural or supernatural, or would call into question key issues about the "knowability" of any truth at all. Definitely when anything like that arises it does need to be made to synchronize at least at the conclusion level.

We basically agree. I would reword your initial sentence as: The truth is that the universe is "natural" and doesn't have a supernatural overlay above it.

Anything that contradicts that, much like seeing Alexander the Oracle Monger's snake, we should be one "whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by scepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility."

Post by "Pacatus" of December 15, 2024 at 2:26 PM

From the *Letter to Phytocles* (just as a textual addendum to the parts of this discussion that reflects on modern science, and uncertainties in our knowledge of the natural world - as we all agree on "no supernature" 😞)

"[86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is

only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. ***For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.***

“[87] ***For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena:*** for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

“Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. ***But when one accepts one theory and rejects another which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth.*** Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.” EF version, based on Bailey; my emphases.

I just found that "niggling" in the back of my mind as I read through the thread. 🙄🤔😊 It really is, it seems to me, an early paean to empiricism -- and keeping open-minded about plausible hypotheses and theories that might fit the known facts (have not been falsified), with whatever uncertainty that might entail.

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2024 at 5:53 PM

Good addition Pacatus. And if I recall correctly I basically included much of that in our podcast recording today for the same reason.

Post by “Bryan” of December 24, 2024 at 2:59 PM

I wanted to throw in this sweet little bit from Diogenes of Oinoanda, fr. 63, Smith trans.

"I am sending you, in accordance with your request, the arguments concerning an infinite number of worlds. And you have enjoyed good fortune in the matter; for, before your letter arrived, Theodoridas of Lindus, a member of our school not unknown to you, who is still a novice in philosophy, was dealing with the same doctrine. And this doctrine came to be better

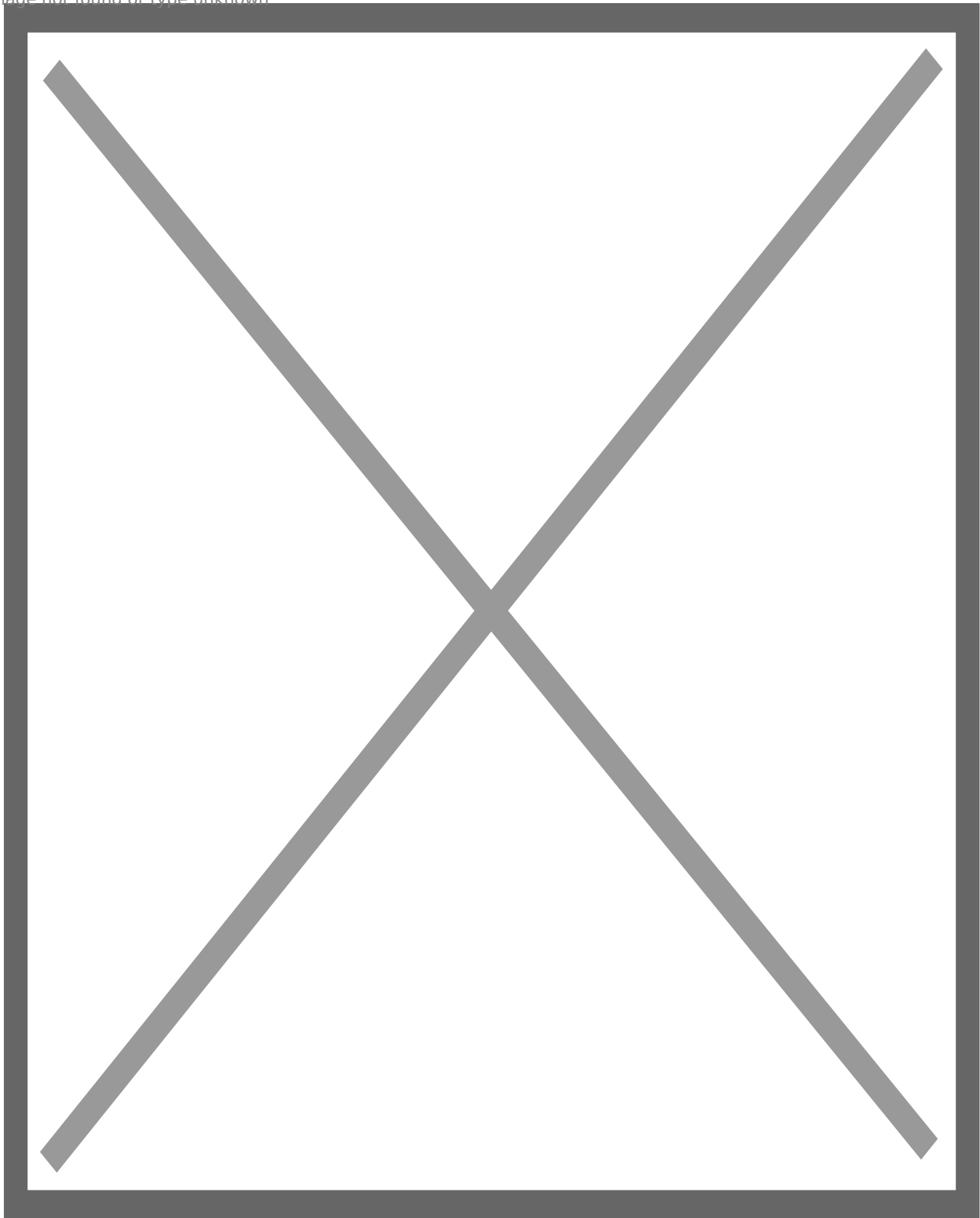
articulated as a result of being turned over between the two of us face to face; for our agreements and disagreements with one another, and also our questionings, rendered the inquiry into the object of our search more precise."

Post by "Don" of December 24, 2024 at 3:22 PM

Is that a fragment of a letter from Epicurus?

[Lindus - Wikipedia](#)

Image not found or type unknown



[Lindos - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

Post by “Bryan” of December 24, 2024 at 5:19 PM

It's a letter from Diogenes to an Antipater. It continues:

"I am therefore sending you that dialogue, Antipater, so that you may be in the same position as if you yourself were present, like Theodoridas, agreeing about some matters and making further inquiries in cases where you had doubts. The dialogue began something like this: 'Diogenes', said Theodoridas, 'the [doctrine laid down] by Epicurus on an infinite number of worlds is true...'"

So he wrote a dialogue and then had it written in stone.