

# Must an Epicurean believe in gods?

**Post by “Rolf” of April 15, 2025 at 5:24 PM**

Hey folks!

Is it essential for one who follows (classical) epicurean philosophy to believe in the existence of (non-interventional) gods existing in the “space between worlds”, in the same way that it is essential to hold a materialistic view of reality?

My gut tells me it’s not so important, since gods play no role in epicurean cosmology and ethics. That said, Epicurus didn’t deny the existence of such gods (as far as I’m aware). Do we disregard this as a mere product of its time or does it play some vital role within epicurean philosophy?

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**Post by “Godfrey” of April 15, 2025 at 6:53 PM**

Well that's quite the juicy question, and a subject of debate since long before this forum! We have several threads on this very topic, but here's an overly brief synopsis:

The academics have basically divided into two camps on this subject, while I and I think some others have a hybrid view. One view is the realist view, which is that the gods exist (or at least Epicurus believed they exist) as he has described them. The other view is the idealist view, which is that the gods are an ideal culmination of Epicurean philosophy, and an ideal to strive for even though they don't exist.

Some things to examine:

- Epicurus has described the gods as material, in a way that follows the overall logic of his materialism. This can be compared to his description of sight, of memory and of other phenomena in terms of atoms and void and nothing supernatural.
- My knowledge of the culture of Athens of his day is sketchy, but I also think that he saw some value in festivals and worship, as long as one kept in mind that there is nothing supernatural. There are various pleasures to be had in celebration and in being part of a community, and I think that he wanted to make use of these.
- Then there's the fact that science has advanced in the last 2300 years. Epicurus was a philosopher, not a scientist. Much of his thinking was remarkably prescient, but we also have

far more information than he had access to. So, on the one hand we need to consider his ideas in light of modern science. But on the other hand we need to do our best to follow his reasoning and motivations, which is extremely difficult given the limited quantity of his extant texts.

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## Post by “Joshua” of April 15, 2025 at 7:32 PM

For the six years I've been active here, I've always tried to hold myself to the following two precepts:

- For as long as I stand under Epicurus' banner, I will make a good-faith attempt (given the surviving material) to understand his philosophy as it was understood by his successors.
- When I present his philosophy, I will make a good-faith effort to present it as best as I can understand it. When I am offering my own opinion, I will try to make it clear that that is what I am doing.

I am confident that Epicurus really did accept the existence of 'natural gods', and that he rejected the claim that there were gods (or anything else, for that matter) outside of nature. My understanding is that he believed that gods existed in nature, and as physical beings made of matter. This is what we call the "realist view" of the gods. There is a competing theory, the "idealist view", which holds (again, to my understanding) that Epicurus spoke of the gods as useful thought constructs; images of the good life that we can call to mind, in the same way that we can call the image of Epicurus himself to mind as a goal to strive for.

The idealist view is probably a minority interpretation, but it has distinguished defenders. I believe David Sedley is the chief living proponent of this view. I might be mistaken! [Don](#) might have more to say about this.

We do have a fragment (collected by Usener in his *Epicurea*) in which Epicurus is said to have rejected Atheism;

Quote

[ [U152](#) ] (link to the Attalus site)

Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Vol. Herc. 1, V.2, fragment VI: he will be frank with the one who has erred and even with him who responds with bitterness. Therefore, Epicurus too, when Leonteus, because of Pythocles, did not admit belief in gods, reproached Pythocles in moderation, and wrote to him {i.e., Leonteus, though Usener renders "Mys"} the so-called "famous letter," taking his point of departure from Pythocles...

With all of that said, my own view is that a good-faith effort to *a.)* understand the information, and *b.)* present the information accurately, does not amount to a requirement to accept everything in it. I do not think the gods exist. It pleases me to think of the Earth itself as a second mother (*alma mater*, "nurturing mother", a phrase first appearing in Lucretius), and the idealist view of the gods likewise appeals to me. But that's as far as I can get.

#### [Quote from Rolf](#)

Do we disregard this as a mere product of its time or does it play some vital role within epicurean philosophy?

The major problem with casting the gods aside is that doing so challenges Epicurus' view of the anticipations (*prolepsis*) as a canonic or epistemological faculty parallel to the senses (*aisthesis*) and feelings (*pathe*). These three are (for Epicurus) how we acquire knowledge about nature, including human nature, with confidence.

The gods also play a role in our understanding of *isonomia*, the equitable distribution of things in nature. The fact that the atoms *can* come together to bring this world into existence means that there is no bar to them bringing other worlds into existence, and the fact that there living beings on this world means we should expect to find them elsewhere as well. I'll let Norman Dewitt take it from here so that I don't misstate the case;

#### Quote

It was from this principle [*i.e. of the infinity of the universe in matter and space*] that Epicurus deduced his chief theoretical confirmation of belief in the existence of gods. It was from this that he arrived at knowledge of their number and by secondary deduction at knowledge of their abode. He so interpreted the significance of infinity as to extend it from matter and space to the sphere of values, that is, to perfection and imperfection. In brief, if the universe were thought to be imperfect throughout its infinite extent, it could no longer be called infinite. This necessity of thought impelled him to promulgate a subsidiary principle, which he called *isonomia*, a sort of cosmic justice, according to which the imperfection in particular parts of the universe is offset by the perfection of the whole. Cicero rendered it *aequabilis tributio*, "equitable apportionment." The mistake of rendering it as "equilibrium" must be avoided.

*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, page 271

Edit; it seems I cross-posted with Godfrey, I agree with what he said!

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 15, 2025 at 9:18 PM**

I want to add a comment based on my latest thoughts after reading Matthew Stewart's "Natures' God...."

I think the "Deists" and their associates made a major mistake in abandoning Epicurus' views of the nature of gods into a sort of "nature is god" pantheism. If Stewart is correct and I am reading Stewart correctly most of them decided essentially either that there was too much pressure from religion, or the masses of people are too stupid, to take any other position, so they played a game of obfuscation and decided to retreat from the confrontation with supernaturalism by going all in on "the god of nature."

I find it very interesting that as part of that period, however, many of the people who were working on finding a way to fight back against religion also found Epicurus' theory of life throughout the universe as very significant to their thinking.

To the question "Must an Epicurean believe in gods?" nobody really has the right to say "yes" other than as part of stating their own opinion. There's certainly no rule to that effect in order to post to Epicureanfriends.com. If someone in the future sets up other organizations for other purposes, that's something that they would have to decide.

However on the core point that "there are no supernatural gods" or supernatural forces of any kind, I think most of us agree that that is such a core part of Epicurean philosophy that it would be absurd to divorce that from the rest of the philosophy.

Even specifying the term "non-interventional" doesn't go nearly far enough to avoid what I am characterizing as the mistake of the Deists. There are too many other attributes that people associate with gods that also have to be eliminated.

At present and with the limited texts that we have it's just not possible to be certain exactly what Epicurus taught positively about gods except that they are not supernatural in any way. While it's a certainty in Epicurean philosophy that there is life elsewhere in the infinite and eternal universe, and it seems likewise a certainty that we as humans are NOT the best and the brightest, what's really necessary is to stamp out every implication of supernaturalism in discussing what those beings might be like.

So the "stamping out every implication of supernaturalism" is what I see as the essential part of Epicurean theory of gods, and any wavering on that issue is where I would draw the line of considering someone thoroughly Epicurean. Most all the rest is just a matter of applying reasonable projection to the possibilities that do exist in an infinite and eternal natural universe, and how far one wants to go in that direction is largely a matter of personal disposition.

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 15, 2025 at 9:24 PM**

### [Quote from Rolf](#)

My gut tells me it's not so important, since gods play no role in epicurean cosmology and ethics. That said, Epicurus didn't deny the existence of such gods (as far as I'm aware). Do we disregard this as a mere product of its time or does it play some vital role within epicurean philosophy?

I think as you read more you'll come to revise the premises of your opinion in this paragraph, and you'll see that the Epicurean theory of gods plays a much greater role than first meets the eye, and certainly not just as a product of his time.

However having said that I agree with Godfrey's and Joshua's comments and in the end I think it's fair to say that trying to develop a precise POSITIVE position on the [Epicurean gods](#) is not a priority. There's a lot to be learned from the process in which Epicurus evaluates the issue, but since we don't have the details of his final conclusions those aren't nearly as important.

For example, it's very unclear exactly what participation in "religious" ceremonies Epicurus engaged in himself or approved of for his people, and in the absence of good information on that I think it's very sketchy to try to take a firm position on how his statements apply to religious participation today.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 15, 2025 at 9:31 PM**

Oh one more thing deriving from my Stewart reasoning. The idea of the possible existence of supernatural gods seems to be tied in most people's minds to the possibility of the soul surviving death. Even as the Deists were proclaiming freedom from religion they were undercutting their own positions by continuing to talk about the possibility that there might be a life after death.

As I see it, the possibility of an afterlife is about as opposite to the views of Epicurus as anything can be. The Deists seemed to want to entertain the possibility that their "natural god" might somehow have a mechanism to also allow life after death. Maybe they felt like they had to do so for political or survival reasons, and maybe what they did was reasonable under their circumstances, but I think it led to very bad results, and essentially helped with those who wanted to keep the discussion of Epicurus under a tight lid.

Any kind of position that allows for the possibility of life after death, or supernatural forces of any kind, is going to lead to the kind of murkiness and ambiguity that ultimately led to the shortcomings of Deism. To the extent that that kind of thinking hangs around even today, in my

view it cannot be reconciled with Epicurean philosophy and needs to be clearly stated to be incompatible with it.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of April 16, 2025 at 12:09 AM**

Quote from Cassius

While it's a certainty in Epicurean philosophy that there is life elsewhere in the infinite and eternal universe, and it seems likewise a certainty that we as humans are the best and the brightest,

[Cassius](#) did you mean to say "we as humans are *not* the best and the brightest"? That would be my understanding....

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### **Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 3:47 AM**

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The major problem with casting the gods aside is that doing so challenges Epicurus' view of the anticipations (prolepsis) as a canonic or epistemological faculty parallel to the senses (aisthesis) and feelings (pathe).

Why is this? What relation to the gods have to anticipations?

Thanks for your replies everyone. To be honest, I'm still rather confused on this issue, but I imagine I'll understand better once I've read more epicurean physics (canonics?).

I'm not entirely opposed to the idea of believing in the existence of some non-interventional, mundane, not at all supernatural “gods” on a theoretical basis. The “living between worlds” (intermundia?) part throws me off a bit though.

Do you folks tend to just not think so much about the idea of gods, or how does it play out for you? I suppose it's like you said Cassius - we don't have the full picture of what Epicurus believed on this matter. But still...

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## **Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 3:53 AM**

You know, my issue here might be that I’m applying my modern view of the idea of “gods” onto Epicurus when he talks about gods. Gods were of course a major aspect of the society he lived in, and it makes sense that he would be required to start from the societal perspective that gods do exist and they have xyz characteristics. He wasn’t living in a society where secularity and atheism is assumed like many of us do today.

So perhaps it’s best for me to drop my modern understanding of the term “gods” when I read what Epicurus and his fellow philosophers have to say on this point. He was reacting to the contemporary understanding of “gods” by redefining what they are and what they are not.

I’m still hazy on this. I hope I’m explaining myself clearly.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 6:42 AM**

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Cassius did you mean to say "we as humans are not the best and the brightest"? That would be my understanding..

GEEZ what a mistake. THank you! Of course I meant "not" and i will edit the original now! thank you!

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## **Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 6:58 AM**

### [Quote from Rolf](#)

Why is this? What relation to the gods have to anticipations?

You'll need to read at least the DeWitt material before you get a more informed view on this. As I recall there's not much on it in Emily Austin.

As to how it relates to anticipations, that's part of Epicurus' theory of knowledge that responds to Plato's ridiculous theory of forms and pre-existence of the soul and the impossibility of knowledge without both of those working together. Plato held only the eternal is real and only the ideas/forms are eternal. Thus nothing revealed by the senses and rational processing of the sensory data is truly real.

Epicurus rejects that totally and says there are three faculties of contact with the real world - the 5 senses, pain and pleasure, and anticipations. Anything they present to you is "real" and but it's up to you to understand in what way they impact you and react accordingly. Epicurus concluded that in putting all the evidence together it's obvious that nature never makes a single thing of a kind, that space is infinite and eternal, and that it is simply logical to believe that earth and humanity are not the only location of life in the universe, or the highest life. Some forms of life are more successful than we are at living happily, even to the point of conquering death -- but nothing and no one is SUPERNATURAL.

If you start saying "there's no direct evidence of life anywhere else that I've ever seen" then you're eliminating many logical conclusions that flow from the evidence we do have. It's not necessary for us to have seen or touched everything to believe that it exists -- we believe atoms exist without ever seeing or touching them.

So there are many deep implications of the physics and epistemology that you never get to until you get past the superficial idea that Epicurus only cared about "pleasure" and nothing else.

#### [Quote from Rolf](#)

So perhaps it's best for me to drop my modern understanding of the term "gods" when I read what Epicurus and his fellow philosophers have to say on this point.

That's absolutely essential and you'll see that as you read more. To repeat, that's the danger of focusing only on the ethics -- you miss the major part of the philosophy, including the parts that establish the ethics in the first place.

The letter to Menoeceus is only a part of the philosophy. It's presented much more fully in Lucretius, but most people aren't going to be able to pick up Lucretius and get the full point because it's so unfamiliar to modern ways of thinking. That is why I suggest reading the DeWitt book very early in the process of studying Epicurus so you can begin to see the outlines of the full picture as quickly as possible. It's far from perfect but it doesn't focus exclusively on the ethics and dismiss the rest of the philosophy like many other approaches do.

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**Post by "Don" of April 16, 2025 at 7:25 AM**

Great discussion, and one that can never be revisited too many times. This topic is always an opportunity to revise, rethink, and refocus. Here's my perspective (as of, checks clock, 7:02 am on a random Wednesday morning):

Epicurus places a correct understanding of the gods in a place of paramount and foundational importance in his philosophy. It is the first Principal Doctrine. It is discussed first in the Letter to Menoikeus. And so on.

However, what is shown to be paramount and foundational is the firm knowledge and conviction that:

- the universe was not created by gods
- the gods neither bestow blessings nor dole out punishment
- Therefore, we have *nothing* to fear from the gods

Epicurus reasons all these out, but this is specifically to get rid of the fear of the gods so prevalent in so many people, both in ancient times and still in our own.

That said, whether you take a realist or idealist position on [Epicurean gods](#) is secondary - in my opinion. David Sedley is the main popularizer of this position, but I believe it was floating around prior to his and A.A. Long's exposition of it. I usually go to Lucretius point about "you can use Bacchus to refer to wine, Ceres to refer to the grain harvest, etc, but know you're using metaphors" kind of thing. I can walk into a cathedral and be awed by the grandeur. That doesn't mean I need to accept the theology inherent in the architecture. I can enjoy religious music but don't need to believe in gods. I probably think of myself as a functional atheist. I find it unlikely there are gods of any kind with an objective physical existence. Are there aliens more intelligent than humans? Sure, I can believe that. But they are not "gods" but simply other beings in the infinite universe.

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## Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 5:04 PM

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That's a reasonable explanation. I'd say my thoughts align with yours on this Don, at least at this stage. I agree that the important thing here is the materialistic view of reality (ie. The three points you listed). Thanks for the great write-up!

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

So there are many deep implications of the physics and epistemology that you never get to until you get past the superficial idea that Epicurus only cared about "pleasure" and nothing else.

Ahh okay, I see where you're coming from. Is this what's known as "canonics"? I hadn't heard that term before coming here. I ought to read up on this area of the philosophy. DeWitt's book is on its way so I'll dive in once I'm finished with Austin's.

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

even to the point of conquering death

Woah, I was following until this part. What's the logic here?

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### **Post by “Don” of April 16, 2025 at 5:31 PM**

#### [Quote from Rolf](#)

Woah, I was following until this part. What's the logic here?



[Cassius](#) "...even to the point of conquering death." drops the mic, walks offstage.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 7:11 PM**

LOL --

I am referring to the point that just as our own medical technology is extending our life spans (or maybe I should say it USED to be doing that) I see no theoretical limit to how far an advanced civilization /species could extend its own life spans.

Naturally, of course!



Sorry it has been a busy day!