

An Exchange involving the Ontological Argument For The Existence of a Supernatural God

Post by "Cassius" of July 6, 2018 at 6:19 AM

[Facebook Exchange on existence of gods / ontology:](#)

Poster T: Can and do some Epicureans believe the God(s) created the laws of the universe? They just let it unfold from there and because that would be contradictory to a supreme being who is devoid of all pain they do not interfere with it.

Poster I: The gods exist within the universe, so they couldn't have created the laws of nature that govern themselves.

Poster A: No. The universe evolved all animals, including us, including the gods.

Poster T: I was coming from the point of view that they existed outside of time and space, therefore, require no creation and thus the first cause that created the universe. But I did not know whether Epicureans believed that they existed outside or inside our universe.

Cassius. I agree with I and A. Epicurean "physics" is a consistent whole. The elemental particles are eternal, nothing comes or goes to nothing - which means the universe is eternal and therefore was never "created" by anything outside of it. There IS nothing outside of it, because anything that exists is part of the universe - nothing else exists - not gods, not eternal ideals/forms, not eternal universal morality. Nothing that would contradict that fundamental view of the universe would be allowed in the philosophy. Any modern conclusion about ethics or epistemology that would appear to contradict that fundamental core is in all likelihood a misunderstanding of what the Epicureans thought. That's the way you reconstruct the philosophy - just like Lucretius and Epicurus did - with logical consistency starting at the eternal infinite universe of elemental particles. Think Earth/humanity has a special place in the universe? Wrong, ruled out by the infinite eternity of the universe. Think morality exists universally, or apart from the particular humans you're considering it applies to? Wrong, ruled out by nothing being eternal but particles and void. As DeWitt points out, even the "gods" are not clearly stated by Epicurus to be eternal, just deathless.

Poster N: I wonder from where Epicurus got the knowledge of Eternal or deathless "Gods" because there is no evidence or proof of theirs existence even in other worlds, even though, believing in such "Gods" does not affect the epicurean Philosophy but still kind of theism. I think also the existing of Eternal Gods contradict with Eternal infinite universe of elemental particles, if both exist so the Universe will be made by those Eternal particles+ Eternal "Gods " or we can say the eternal Gods are the same Eternal particles because Both are not created and Both are Eternal

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/480-an-exchange-involving-the-ontological-argument-for-the-existence-of-a-supernatur/>

Poster T: I believe Epicurus got the idea because we believe their are gods the concept exists so there must be gods. If I recall accurately.

Poster N: with the same logic we can approve all religious superstitions, for example as we believe in Eternal souls so it must be life after death.

Poster I: Laertius 123:

"First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind;"

The truth is that we don't exactly know... From the remaining texts it appears that Tyler is right. Because all humans believe in gods _something_ like that has to exist. However! The texts where Epicurus talks about this in length, have been destroyed. The speculation that is most convincing is that Epicurus thought that the gods were natural creatures that existed just beyond our world in perfect happiness that they could maintain by will.

They would be made of the same elementary particles that everything is. Remember that they didn't have the periodic table of the elements in those days, so there was no reason to think that there couldn't have been "god-atoms" that didn't exist on Earth.

The gods wouldn't have been eternal in the sense that the universe is eternal. The closest they might be was "deathless": they could maintain themselves bodily at will. Control the flow of atoms perfectly, you might say.

Cassius: I agree with what I. wrote but I am not sure that Tyler's statement is exactly right to state in these terms: "because we believe their are gods the concept exists so there must be gods." That sounds very close to the "ontological" argument for god based, as Tyler said, on "concepts": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontological_argument (" Anselm defined God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought", and argued that this being must exist in the mind, even in the mind of the person who denies the existence of God. He suggested that, if the greatest possible being exists in the mind, it must also exist in reality.")

We probably do not have enough information to resolve this question, but DeWitt argues that "concept" is not an accurate description of Epicurus' argument for the evidence of gods, but rather "preconception" / anticipation, which arguably is much different than simply a concept asserted in words.

Note: As often the case I am posting this not to say who is right or wrong, but to make people aware of DeWitt's alternative argument, which deserves consideration. Here is a part from Cicero in which this subtlety is present:

"Anyone pondering on the baseless and irrational character of these doctrines ought to regard Epicurus with reverence, and to rank him as one of the very gods about whom we are inquiring. For he alone perceived, first, that the gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there

but possesses untaught some 'preconception' of the gods? Such notions Epicurus designates by the word prolepsis, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing, without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed. The force and value of this argument we learn in that work of genius, Epicurus's Rule or Standard of Judgment.

"You see therefore that the foundation (for such it is) of our inquiry has been well and truly laid. For the belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom, or law, but rests on the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind; their existence is therefore a necessary inference, since we possess an instinctive or rather an innate concept of them; but a belief which all men by nature share must necessarily be true; therefore it must be admitted that the gods exist. And since this truth is almost universally accepted not only among philosophers but also among the unlearned, we must admit it as also being an accepted truth that we possess a 'preconception,' as I called it above, or 'prior notion,' of the gods. (For we are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word prolepsis in a sense in which no one had ever used it before). We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that 'that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak.'"

So to emphasize only one point: "nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind" does not seem to me to be a statement of the ontological argument / position. It is NATURE in Epicurus' view, not us as logical / speculative thinkers, that has created this preconception/anticipation of the existence of deathless / painless / happy beings.

Note also: I am omitting reference here to the rest of the argument, which involves isonomia and the argument that nature never makes only a single thing of a kind (as a result of which we should have confidence that the Earth is not the only location of life in the universe)

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Cassius: Poster N, respectfully you seem to be presuming things about "gods" which Epicurus specifically rejected - the supernatural aspect. Why is it impossible that there is other life in the universe, not from this Earth, which is another race of being that is superior in intelligence to us, deathless and does not experience pain, but only pleasure? Those are the only attributes which Epicurus is recorded to have given these beings. Agree or disagree with Epicurus, but first state his position accurately. And his argument for their existence was not based on the existence of a "concept" of a God. The best evidence we have for his argument is contained mostly in Cicero's On the Nature of the Gods and is summarized best by DeWitt. We don't have the full argument by any means but we have much more than these comments suggest.

Cassius: Poster N wrote: "because there is no evidence or proof of theirs existence even in other worlds" Naw Ka, have you been throughout the universe to other worlds to have authority to make such a statement? I suspect you have not, and neither had Epicurus. Epicurus'

argument was based on observations he made in THIS world, and meeting and refuting those arguments would require stating them accurately and describing their defects, which you have not done.

The material we have from Cicero is here: <http://www.epicurus.net/en/deorum.html>

And the material from DeWitt's reconstruction of the Epicurean argument is here in Chapter 12 "The True Piety" (unfortunately you need the book) - <https://books.google.com/books?id=MSu2w...epage&q&f=false>

Poster T: What do you think about this?? The debate of whether Epicureans were atheists or not. The argument is that they just use the logic they created about the gods so that it didn't contradict their beliefs and that they could still believe in them so that they didn't get prosecuted for being nonbelievers. What are your thoughts on that? I read this debate going both ways but wanted to know what other fellow Epicureans think.

Poster I: The Epicurean philosophy is functional atheism. The gods exist but they don't have anything to do with human life. You could be a theist and an Epicurean, though being an atheist is easier (especially today).

Poster A2 Agree. And I would add that the Epicureans - with knowledge from scientific advances - might have determined that gods don't exist.

Poster W: So if the original Epicureans believed a deity exists but has no interaction with people would that make them Deists?

Poster I: That's probably the closest modern term for it.

Cassius Amicus: A. how far out do your telescopes go? Are you prepared to say with certainty that there are no other Earths / planets with life on them in the universe anywhere? Are you prepared to say with certainty that Humans are the most highly-evolved species in the universe? I agree with Epicurus - Nature does not create only one thing of a kind, and there is no reason to think that Earth is the only place with life. Likewise, there is no reason to think that the up and down progression of complexity of life we see here on Earth stops with humanity as the end point. Those observations we make here on Earth lead me to expect with confidence that these processes take place throughout the universe, so I expect that there are superior (NOT supernatural) beings elsewhere in the universe. There's nothing in Epicurean "theology" that really goes beyond that, and in fact it seems to me to be very dangerous epistemology to conclude that because we personally have not observed the results of a process here on Earth, (such as the observations I listed above) that those processes have not continued throughout the universe. The evidence that we already have, in my opinion, is enough to expect otherwise.

Cassius Amicus Poster W, virtually every common definition I have ever seen of "deists" includes the aspect that these gods created the universe before they "stepped away." That is

clearly ruled OUT in Epicurean "theology" - [Epicurean gods](#) are NOT supernatural and did NOT create this or any other universe. So while Ilkka is definitely correct that that is probably the closest modern term, it is woefully inaccurate to describe the Epicurean position, and I would argue totally misleading. A proper appreciation for Epicurean philosophy requires us to at least understand Epicurus' position, even if we disagree with it.

Poster W: Cassius Amicus Perhaps I am misinterpreting. But to me it seems like you are arguing for the existence of Aliens. I would agree that aliens exist. But I'm not sure I would consider them deities even if there are aliens with superior intellects than ours.

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Cassius Amicus Poster W: the answer to this question comes only from reading what the Epicurean texts say about the gods. The texts only say that these living beings are deathless, and that they have evolved to a state of total happiness (presumably meaning experiencing nothing but pleasure and no pain). These gods are NOT supernatural and NOT "omnipotent." Epicurus held nothing more about the "gods" than that in so far as the texts indicate. We can call them "aliens" if we like, but again the point is to discuss what Epicurus actually taught, not whether we think it comports with Judaism or Christianity or Islam or other conventional mystical religions. Epicurus was DEMystifying religion and our positions on "gods." He used the same term as did the supernaturalists, but he specifically re-defined it.

Cassius Amicus Poseter W wrote: "But I'm not sure I would consider them deities even if there are aliens with superior intellects than ours." I think you're seeing the point. The issue is definitions such as "gods" and "deities." Epicurus and his school defined these terms strictly in NATURAL and not supernatural terms, so in discussing these terms Epicurus stripped them of all the added-on mystical qualities which he taught would contradict the nature of the universe. Again, we can agree or we can disagree with his conclusions, but I don't think you can find Epicurean texts which contradict the point I am making here.

"First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, you shall not affirm of him anything that is foreign to his immortality or that is repugnant to his blessedness. Believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious. For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions; hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, seeing that they are always favorable to their own good qualities and take pleasure in men like themselves, but reject as alien whatever is not of their kind."

Cassius Amicus: To follow further on this "it seems to me to be very dangerous epistemology to conclude that because we personally have not observed the results of a process here on Earth,

(such as the observations I listed above) that those processes have not continued throughout the universe. The evidence that we already have, in my opinion, is enough to expect otherwise." I would argue that it would have led to much more success in human experience if people had accepted "atomism" from the days of Democritus, and worked to expand their knowledge of the way things work based on those scientific principles, rather than on the idea of gods/divinity. And that means that people should have accepted "atomism" over 2000 years ago, even though - even today - we have not seen or touched an "atom" in the sense of an ultimate particle.

Our senses/tools have not been sufficient to allow us to do that yet, but it is reasonable to expect that one day our resources will allow us to verify the existence of those "ultimate particles" in a way that makes us even more confident that the theory is correct. Same with the existence of life elsewhere in the universe which is deathless, happy, and painless - the expectation based on evidence we already have is that we should expect to find such life. We WON'T find that life to be supernatural, or creating universes, or showing favor or anger to beings that fall beneath its scope of reference, and we should reject all speculations/religions/philosophies which accept the existence of supernatural beings who have chosen peoples and chosen enemies. That seems to me to be the thrust of what Epicurus was arguing, and it all still seems very valid to me.

Cassius: Poster A - Are we together that (1) Epicurus held there to be no supernatural beings, and (2) that [Epicurean gods](#) are not supernatural, and (3) [Epicurean gods](#) are not omnipotent and have no "magical" (meaning supernatural) powers whatsoever? That is the main issue that generally arises, because people think that the word "gods" necessarily implies supernatural powers. But there is also another issue -----

The second issue is the question of what to do when we have evidence that appears insufficient to form a positive conclusion. That's where we have the most disagreement even here about what direction to go. Philodemus devoted a lot of attention to this in "On Methods of Inference." We don't now, and will never know (if the universe is indeed infinite in size) everything that exists in the universe. So we have to think about what position we are going to take on the unknown - whether we are going to admit the possibility that the unknown may be supernatural or not. That was the point of my "how far do your telescopes go" comment - We're never in our lifetimes or ever going to be able to say "I have seen the entire universe and there are no deathless perfectly happy beings." So since we aren't going to be able to do that, we may or may not in our lifetimes see far enough out to establish life on other planets/areas of space.

The key point that I think Epicurus made was that we should NOT admit the possibility of anything supernatural out there, because we have no evidence of anything supernatural anywhere, and we also have lots of evidence that the universe operates on natural principles. On the other hand, we do have evidence that nature does not make only one thing of a kind, and if we apply that to the Earth we can say with confidence that there are other Earths out there, even if we haven't found them yet.

We can also say that we have evidence that intelligent life has developed in a progression from lower consciousness (birds for example) to higher consciousness (humans). And we can also say (I contend) that there is no reason to think that these processes of development are limited to what we see here on Earth in 2018. The likelihood in an infinite and eternal universe would be that these processes, and other processes analogous to them, have and will operate throughout the universe, and if so then it is entirely reasonable to expect that intelligent life will overcome all the issues of death and pain that we face as humans.

And Epicurus seems to have held (and I agree) that it is important for us to think about our place in the universe and in that continuum, and not simply wonder if we are the only life in the universe, and if there are gods putting us in the center of it and directing us.

So it seems to me that the issue of "gods" is a lot more complex than just rejecting the existence of Yahweh and Allah and the like. Those are important steps, but just because we have rejected nonsense does not mean we are at the end of the road of what to consider, and that's where (in my opinion) Epicurus was going with his redefinition of "gods."