

Why Epicurus Railed Against Atheists And Questioned Their Sanity

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2026 at 10:23 AM

Those who don't dive deeper into understanding Epicurus' precise views of things are likely to be taken aback by the fact (reported by Philodemus) that Epicurus "railed against" and "questioned the very sanity" of atheists. (Quoted by Philodemus, Piet. col. 19, Obbink 1996, 142-143.

Many readers of Epicurus are atheists and don't like this position, and they are even willing to resort to the argument that Epicurus was "playing it safe" so as to avoid the fate of Socrates and Anaxagorus. I categorically reject that explanation and think it's insulting to Epicurus and to anyone who takes Epicurus seriously.

But it's also on its face insufficient to say that Epicurus held that "there are gods because everyone thinks there are." What is meant by "gods" and what is meant by "everyone thinks there are."

I'm starting this thread so we'll have a prominent place to collect references and arguments as to why, from Epicurus' point of view, those who flatly and totally deny the existence of all gods are essentially insane.

And if they are insane, in what constitutes sanity?

Although it doesn't focus on this issue there is a lot of good background information about this topic in David Sedley's ["The Atheist Underground"](#), which is what prompted this thread now.

Of course Epicurus' larger position on the nature of divinity is explained in greatest length by [Velleius in Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods,"](#) so pending further discussion that's the best source of the answer.

The earliest list of atheists

The standard ancient list of supposed atheists is in its earliest form attributed to Epicurus at the end of the fourth century BC, and includes the names of Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias. Epicurus is reported to have railed against them in Book 12 of his *On Nature*, questioning their very sanity.² It would be a mistake to assume, as many have done, that the

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 7, 2026 at 12:13 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And if they are insane, in what constitutes sanity?

From my readings, I interpret this: "insanity" is the *rejection of reality*, and "sanity" is *observance of reality*. An "insane" person is full of *pseudodoxies*, false beliefs and opinions. A "sane" person makes "true" statements which properly correspond with the physical reality around them.

One such physical reality in post-Alexandrian Greece was the exchange of foreign forms of piety, and the need to explain the existence of these foreign, yet recognizably spiritual institutions. Surely *something* natural exists at the source of this seemingly-universal sense of piety.

Epíkouros calls this *the divine nature*. (Whether or not that corresponds with theoretical super-humans is up to you, **but at least this much is true**: a natural phenomena is responsible for the evolution of religion). Philódēmos records this as something like *visions during dreams*.

I *believe* that Epicureans dismissed atheists as being "insane" because they interpret atheists to be "rejecting the existence of the naturally-occurring, universal, awe-inspiring dream visions", as well as "reducing the practice of piety to a delusional narrative that has no basis in physics."

In that regard, I think he is making more of an anthropological observation than a theological proposition. I ... wonder if it is possible that they were, sort of, talking *passed* each other? They were both anti-creationist, anti-interventionist, anti-superstition, anti-metaphysics, etc.

I get the feeling that ancient atheists didn't buy into Epíkouros' definition of "the gods". I think, maybe, the interpretation of Epicurean Philosophy by ancient atheists was similar to ancient Christians: 'god must be seen as a supernatural super-being' is what they're observing.

Post by "Cassius" of January 7, 2026 at 1:11 PM

I think you and I are on essentially the same wavelength Eikadistes. Epicurus is saying that there is a mechanism going on in the human brain which senses or conceptualizes or recognizes a partter as "divinity." It's as improper to reject the existence of that mechanism as it would be to reject the feelings of pleasure or pain or sight and sound. Epicurus participated in ceremonies (at least in some way) and had a view of a "true piety." But seemingly never once endorsed a specific statement about the actions of an individual god, and the fact that he may have made general references in an allegorical way (as did Lucretius) to a Zeus or a Venus

don't conflict with that.

As to whether they were talking past each other in the ancient world I am not sure. However I think we can say that's happening today. It's one thing to specifically reject Allah or Jehovah or some other specific assertion about a particular god. I feel sure that Epicurus would agree with rejecting all those assertions. But "modern atheism" seems to be stuck in the same pattern of dismissing all talk of any kind of "gods" whatsoever as improper. Maybe worse, modern atheists also seem to consider all talk of divinity to be essentially a disease or a sickness. That is the equivalent of seeing pleasure or pain as a disease or a sickness instead of being inherent parts of our nature as human beings to be understood and developed properly.

So I'd say as an analogy that Epicurus would say that it's as insane to reject all discussion of divinity as it would be to reject all discussion of pleasure and pain.

This is an area where Epicurus has a lot to teach many people with whom most of us here agree on many things. In many cases the the modern diagnosis of the problems caused by religion are less advanced than was the diagnosis of Epicurus 2000 years ago.

It's not a matter of protecting oneself from religious zealots by playing along with their fantasies. The more important issue is to work *with* human nature, rather than *against* it.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 7, 2026 at 2:07 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

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Post by “Bryan” of January 8, 2026 at 3:54 PM

To get started, let me add some quotes that we are discussing.

From Philodemus:

"...having proposed that we pay attention to the writings of our own men – Epicurus reproached all the madness of those who abolish the divine from existing things – just as, in the 12th [book]: he finds fault with Prodikos, Diagoras, Kritias, and others – saying that they are deranged and insane (παρακόπτειν καὶ μάλινεσθαι). He even likens them to those who go bacchating, commanding [them] to cause no trouble for us, and to not be irritating (ἐνοχλεῖν). Indeed, they rewrite the names of the gods – just as Antisthenes, insisting on the most general [conception of the gods], attributes the particular [conceptions] to an establishment [by human convention] – and prior to that [an establishment] through some deception."
[Philodemus (fl.c. 70 BCE), On Piety, 1.18.514 – 1.19.541]

*Prodikos, Diagoras, and Kritias were well-known atheists. Antisthenes (fl. 406 BCE) "began the Cynic way of life." He was known for "often" saying "**I would rather be insane than feel pleasure**" [Laertius 6.3]*

And from Epicurus, where he does not say that the Gods are detectible/manifest -- but only that our knowledge of them is:

"Gods, indeed, exist: for our knowledge (ἡ Γνώσις) of them is detectible (ἐναργῆς)." [123c]

And it is good to remember that Epicurus does not call the ideas people develop about gods "false anticipations" -- but instead he says:

"the assertions of the many about the gods are not anticipations (προλήψεις) but **false suppositions (hypolépseis)**." [D.L. 124a]

Post by “kochiekoch” of January 12, 2026 at 8:41 PM

In this subject I recalled that religion in ancient societies like the Greeks and Romans had religion DEEPLY intertwined with public life. Denying the gods was unthinkable and, in their view, dangerous as it invited retaliation from the gods. There might not have been a more

antisocial attitude in Epicurus' time than denying the gods.

A little like, during the height of the McCarthy red scare in the United States, standing up and saying you're a communist. 😊