

Was Epicurus Influenced by Xenophanes?

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 6, 2026 at 9:30 AM

We can see the Epicurean understanding of the gods in Principal Doctrine 01, the Letter to Menoecus, and in Lucretius. And perhaps Epicurus was influenced by Xenophanes ideas (which also came down through Plato/Aristotle, but Epicurus forms different conclusions). I'm thinking that by studying this we can come to a greater understanding of [PD01](#). Do we already have threads on this elsewhere? [Bryan](#) ?

The following is a quote from Stanford.edu website:

Quote

...we may infer from the concluding call to pay due honor to the gods in Xenophanes' B1 that an attribution of scandalous conduct would be incompatible with the goodness or perfection any divine being must be assumed to possess (cf. Aristotle *Meta.* 1072b; Plato, *Rep.* 379b.)

In the well-known fragments B14–16, Xenophanes comments on the general tendency of human beings to conceive of divine beings in human form:

Quote

But mortals suppose that gods are born,
wear their own clothers and have a voice and body. (B14)

Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black;
Thracians that theirs are are blue-eyed and red-haired. (B16)

B15 adds, probably in a satirical vein, that if horses and oxen had hands and could draw pictures, their gods would look remarkably like horses and oxen.

Source:

[Xenophanes \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Post by “Cassius” of April 6, 2026 at 10:33 AM

What conclusion would you reach if there were such influence?

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 6, 2026 at 12:25 PM

I have yet to find Xenophanes in the extent works of Epíkouros, Metródōros, Hermarkhos, Polyainos, Polystratos, Karneiskos, Dēmētrios of Lakonia, Zēnon, Philódēmos, or either Diogénēs.

Lucretius **does** allude to Xenophanes (but not by name) somewhere around Book 1 Line 715 in describing the philosopher who supposed the world to be composed of "earth with water" (as opposed to particles, or water like Thales, or fire like Herakleitos, etc.).

I personally love Xenophanes' notion that gods look like believers in the mind of believers. Epicureans would **loosely** agree with Xenophanes here. As Philódēmos writes, through a process of ὑπερβάσεως (*hyperbáseōs*) “transposition” (*On Piety*, Col. 12.9, 324-5), transposed formations have been ἀποτετελεσμένωι (*ápotetelesménōi*) “rendered” to human souls in human forms. Just like centaurs (in being horse + human) a god is (blessedness + human), and that suggests to me that a rational being on another planet would perceive a god to be a blessed example of their species.

It's a loose connection, and I think the Epicureans were making an inference from the fact that the human form contains a rational intellect, and that is a pre-requisite for a blessed being (because anything irrational is going to have a painful life), so I do **not** believe that Epicureans would agree that a conceptual triangle, or a cow could, in any way, actually qualify as a god. Plus, realistically, and practically, Xenophanes mixes the notion of human happiness with a triangle, so....

It definitely holds for the comment about different human cultures, such as Ethiopians and Thracians. I maintain that part of Epíkouros' theology is an anthropology of religion triggered by Alexander's expansion to India, so the knowledge that Indians, and Persians (etc.) have god-like concepts supports part of Xenophanes' statement about Africans and Europeans.