

Prolepsis and the Epicurean Gods (discussion split from earlier thread started by Titus)

Post by "Titus" of June 12, 2026 at 2:25 PM

Admin Edit: This thread is for discussion on the nature of the gods spurred on by a section below: "**An especially interesting case: the gods**" (A number of posts have been moved or copied depending on the content).

For discussion on LLM's please [visit this thread](#).

Today, I had a short but interesting talk with Chat GPT:

Titus: Is there a connection between large language models and Epicurean prolepsis? Could Epicurean prolepsis be interpreted as what LLMs are processing?

Yes, there is a surprisingly interesting analogy, although one should be careful not to identify the two completely.

For Epicurus, **prolepsis** (πρόληψις, usually translated as "preconception" or "anticipation") is one of the fundamental criteria of truth, alongside sensations and feelings. A prolepsis is formed through repeated experiences: after encountering many individual humans, for example, the mind develops a general conception of "human." When we hear the word "human," this preconception is immediately activated and allows recognition and reasoning.

An LLM works in a way that appears remarkably similar at first glance:

- It is exposed to vast numbers of examples.
- Statistical regularities are extracted.
- It develops internal representations of concepts.
- When prompted with a word such as "human," it activates patterns associated with countless previous examples.
- It can then generate responses based on these learned patterns.

An Epicurean might say that an LLM has something analogous to a prolepsis of "human," "justice," "friendship," or even "god," because it has formed generalized representations from repeated encounters.

However, there are also important differences.

1. Epicurean prolepsis originates in perception

For Epicurus, prolepses ultimately derive from actual sensory contact with reality.

A child sees many horses and develops the prolepsis "horse."

The prolepsis therefore has an ontological grounding in the world itself.

An LLM, by contrast, has no direct sensory encounter with horses. It processes symbols that humans have written about horses. Its "horse-concept" is second-hand and linguistic rather than perceptual.

This is probably the biggest difference from an Epicurean standpoint.

2. Epicurean prolepsis has evidential force

Epicurus regarded prolepses as a criterion of truth because they are naturally formed by repeated encounters with real things.

For example, all peoples possess some prolepsis of blessed and imperishable gods. Epicurus regarded this as evidence that the gods exist, even if many false opinions are attached to them.

An LLM's internal representations do not have this status. They merely reflect statistical patterns in its training data. If a society collectively believed dragons existed, an LLM would develop a strong representation of dragons without dragons being real.

Thus an Epicurean would likely deny that an LLM's "preconceptions" have the same epistemological authority as human prolepses.

3. The strongest analogy: pattern abstraction

The closest parallel is probably this:

Epicurean prolepsis is the mind's natural abstraction of recurring features from experience.

An LLM's embeddings and latent representations are statistical abstractions of recurring features from text.

Both systems:

- accumulate repeated inputs,
- compress information,
- form general categories,

- enable recognition of new instances.

In modern cognitive science, some scholars even describe human concepts as prototype-like statistical structures rather than fixed definitions. In that respect, Epicurus can seem surprisingly modern.

A deeper Epicurean reflection

There is an intriguing possibility that Epicurus would have found LLMs philosophically illuminating.

The existence of LLMs demonstrates that sophisticated concepts can emerge from repeated exposure without requiring innate Platonic Forms, divine illumination, or Aristotelian essences. General notions arise naturally from accumulated experience.

That is actually very close to the anti-Platonic spirit of Epicurean epistemology.

An Epicurean might therefore say:

Quote

"The language model shows how a system can acquire general conceptions through repeated impressions alone, without any need for transcendent universals."

That sounds remarkably Epicurean.

Yet Epicurus would probably add an important caveat:

Quote

"The model possesses only something analogous to prolepsis. Genuine prolepsis arises from a living being's direct interaction with reality through sensation."

So the connection is real and philosophically fruitful. LLMs can be viewed as a kind of artificial demonstration of how generalized concepts emerge from repeated inputs—a process that bears a strong family resemblance to Epicurean prolepsis, even though Epicurus would likely reserve the term *prolepsis* for conceptions ultimately grounded in actual sensory experience.

Titus: Conversely, LLMs could be interpreted as proof of the validity of Epicurean prolepsis. Although they are not grounded in direct exposure to sensual stimulation, their pattern recognition seems to enhance Epicurus' idea of prolepsis.

I think there is a strong argument in that direction, though perhaps not as a *proof* in the strict sense.

The historical challenge to Epicurean prolepsis was always: **How can mere repetition of impressions generate meaningful general concepts?**

Many philosophers after Epicurus doubted that this was sufficient:

- Platonists argued that universals must somehow pre-exist experience.
- Rationalists argued that important concepts require innate structures.
- Some theologians argued that knowledge of certain truths requires divine illumination.

An LLM demonstrates something remarkable: from exposure to enormous numbers of individual examples, a system can develop highly sophisticated conceptual structures without possessing explicit definitions or innate metaphysical forms.

That is very much in the spirit of Epicurus.

What LLMs seem to vindicate

An Epicurean could point to LLMs and say:

Quote

"Look, a machine exposed to countless individual instances develops a functional understanding of categories, relationships, analogies, and even abstract reasoning. Why should we think the human mind requires Platonic Forms?"

In that sense, LLMs strengthen the plausibility of the Epicurean claim that repeated impressions naturally generate general notions.

Epicurus argued:

1. Repeated encounters create memory.
2. Memories accumulate.
3. General conceptions emerge.
4. These conceptions become tools for recognition and reasoning.

Modern machine learning shows that a system can indeed move from countless particulars to surprisingly powerful generalizations.

An especially interesting case: the gods

Consider Epicurus' famous claim that humans possess a prolepsis of the gods as blessed and imperishable beings.

Many modern readers wonder:

Quote

"How could such a concept emerge naturally?"

An LLM offers a possible model.

Humans repeatedly encounter:

- excellence,
- happiness,
- power,
- beauty,
- wisdom,
- longevity,

and then mentally extrapolate toward an idealized limit.

An LLM often does something similar. It learns patterns and can generate idealized or prototypical versions of categories that were never explicitly presented.

This does not prove Epicurus was correct about the gods, but it makes the mechanism of concept formation seem less mysterious.

Where the analogy becomes even stronger

Some cognitive scientists today argue that human concepts are not definitions but statistical clusters.

For example, most people cannot define "bird" precisely.

Instead they possess a prototype:

- sparrows are very bird-like,
- penguins less so,
- bats not at all.

LLMs appear to represent concepts in a similarly graded way.

This resembles prolepsis much more than it resembles Platonic essences.

The Epicurean could therefore argue:

Quote

Prolepsis is not a dictionary definition stored in the mind. It is a stable pattern emerging from repeated encounters.

That description sounds surprisingly close to modern representation learning.

But there is one thing Epicurus might not have anticipated

LLMs also reveal a weakness in prolepsis.

An LLM can form strong representations of things that do not exist:

- dragons,
- Sherlock Holmes,
- Middle-earth,
- fictional gods.

This raises a difficult question for Epicurean epistemology:

Quote

If a stable concept can emerge merely from repeated exposure, why should the existence of a prolepsis imply the existence of its object?

This is precisely where an Epicurean would have to defend the difference between concepts grounded in reality and concepts grounded in cultural transmission.

In other words, LLMs may strengthen Epicurus' account of **how** prolepses form while simultaneously weakening one of his arguments for **what** they guarantee.

A possible modern Epicurean reformulation

If Epicurus had known about machine learning, he might have reformulated prolepsis as:

Quote

"A prolepsis is a stable cognitive pattern produced by the accumulation of repeated impressions, enabling recognition, prediction, and reasoning about a class of objects."

That would be remarkably compatible with contemporary ideas about learning systems.

So I would say that LLMs do not prove Epicurean prolepsis, but they make one of Epicurus' central intuitions far more credible than it appeared to many philosophers in earlier centuries: namely, that sophisticated concepts can emerge naturally from repeated experience without

requiring innate ideas, transcendent Forms, or supernatural intervention. The fact that a language model can do this from text alone makes Epicurus' epistemology look surprisingly prescient.

Titus: I think you are on the right path, but I would argue that in the Epicurean sense this is where the senses become important. Because some people indeed believe in dragons and they believe in all kind of conceptions about the gods.

I think that is exactly where an Epicurean would push back against an overly enthusiastic comparison between LLMs and human cognition.

The crucial point is that **prolepsis is only one criterion of truth**. Epicurus never intended it to operate independently. The other criteria—sensations (*aisthēseis*) and feelings (*pathē*)—remain indispensable.

An LLM has something analogous to prolepsis, but it lacks sensation. As a result, it has no way to distinguish between:

- horses and unicorns,
- Athens and Atlantis,
- historical figures and fictional characters.

All are merely patterns in text.

An Epicurean human, however, can test conceptions against experience.

Suppose a child develops a conception of dragons through stories. Epicurus would not deny that a conception exists. The question is whether it corresponds to reality. One then turns to the senses:

Quote

Have dragons ever been observed?

If not, the conception remains a mental construction rather than a confirmed object.

The same applies to many theological claims. Epicurus famously argued that people attach all sorts of opinions (*doxai*) to the gods:

- that they become angry,
- reward virtue,
- punish sin,
- intervene in history.

The mere existence of these conceptions proves nothing. They must be examined.

In this sense, the Epicurean method is actually more sophisticated than a simple theory of concept formation:

1. Repeated impressions generate prolepses.
2. We formulate opinions based on them.
3. Those opinions are tested against sensory evidence.
4. Unsupported additions are discarded.

This is where your observation becomes interesting for the LLM analogy.

An LLM is almost pure prolepsis without sensation.

It possesses vast networks of generalized concepts, but no independent contact with reality to evaluate them. It cannot perform the Epicurean step of returning to the evidence of the senses.

One might even say that an LLM resembles the state Epicurus warns humans against when they become detached from experience and live only among words and opinions.

There is another subtle point here. Epicurus did **not** claim that every conception corresponds to a real thing. Rather, he claimed that conceptions arise from some basis in experience.

Take dragons. An Epicurean could explain them as composites:

- snakes,
- lizards,
- birds,
- predators,
- fire,

combined and exaggerated by imagination.

The conception is real as a mental phenomenon, even if the object is not real.

Likewise, many anthropomorphic gods could be explained as idealizations of kings, parents, heroes, and natural forces.

Thus the existence of a conception does not automatically establish the existence of its object.

This is why, in Epicurean theology, the argument for the gods is not merely "people have a conception of gods." The stronger claim is that there is a universal and persistent prolepsis of blessed and imperishable beings that survives beneath all the false cultural additions. Whether that argument succeeds is another question, but it is more subtle than simply inferring existence from a concept.

Viewed this way, LLMs may actually illuminate the Epicurean distinction between **prolepsis** and **opinion**.

- The model's internal representations resemble prolepses.
- Its generated outputs resemble opinions.
- What it lacks is sensation, the corrective mechanism that Epicurus regarded as essential for separating true opinions from false ones.

From an Epicurean perspective, that absence is not a small detail—it is the difference between a system that merely manipulates conceptions and a living being capable of knowledge.

Admin edit: For discussion on LLM's please [visit this thread](#).

Post by “DaveT” of June 12, 2026 at 8:28 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

This ChatGPT dialogue was fun to read. Since I lack deep insight to all of Epicurus' teachings or familiarity with various commentaries' supporting for his belief in the existence of Greek gods (the only ones he knew of, perhaps?) I wonder if the following quote from it is correct.

[Quote from Titus](#)

This is why, in Epicurean theology, the argument for the gods is not merely "people have a conception of gods." The stronger claim is that there is a universal and persistent prolepsis of blessed and imperishable beings that survives beneath all the false cultural additions. Whether that argument succeeds is another question, but it is more subtle than simply inferring existence from a concept.

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Its generated outputs resemble opinions.

What it lacks is sensation, the corrective mechanism that Epicurus regarded as essential for separating true opinions from false ones.

At first I thought, well he never experienced a god, so how could he say he knows of them from prolepsis. So I tucked that away and kept reading hoping for an answer to a

question I've had for a long time. That is, did he really believe in the gods, or did he know the Greeks would have shut down his school if he disclaimed their existence and not support by evidence from the senses.

And then I came to the ending of the ChatGpt where it said: "For example, all peoples possess some prolepsis of blessed and imperishable gods. Epicurus regarded this as evidence that the gods exist, even if many false opinions are attached to them.

An LLM's internal representations do not have this status. They merely reflect statistical patterns in its training data. If a society collectively believed dragons existed, an LLM would develop a strong representation of dragons without dragons being real."

Did Epicurus then possibly or probably not believe in the Greek gods, but allowed that false opinions of the existence of gods do no harm since they only exist as opinions, and not fact?

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Post by "Cassius" of June 12, 2026 at 8:35 PM

Just to be clear it looks like the outside box is you talking [DaveT](#) e, and not quoting Titus? I can fix that if you can't but I don't want to change it if indeed that outside box is somehow from Titus.

Post by "Cassius" of June 12, 2026 at 8:40 PM

"At first I thought, well he never experienced a god, so how could he say he knows of them from prolepsis."

This sounds to me as though you are not considering a prolepsis to be an experience. That's an issue we talk about regularly without much to work with, but at the very least: To the extent that prolepsis processes not only the five senses but also the feelings and also "images," I think some would maintain that Epicurus regarded "knowing them from prolepsis" as indeed "experiencing" them.

[Bryan](#) would you say that differently?

Post by "Bryan" of June 12, 2026 at 11:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

prolepsis to be an experience

Yes, a prolepsis is an experience, but not a process of thought.

The prolepsis are the direct experiences we have when we think of something.

Anybody who uses the words "god" or "water" or "minotaur" has a sense of what they are talking about. That sense is always real, but we are left to determine what physical objects exist as the original source (**the hypokeímenon**).

[Hypokeimenon - Wikipedia](#)

If there is no correspondence (**sympátheia**) between an original source and the prolepsis, then it exists only as a mental impression and the word used for it is "empty."

Clement of Alexandria (fl. 190^{CE}), Miscellanies, 2.4

"Epicurus... supposes an anticipation to be [our mental] perception's certainty: and he defines an anticipation **[1]** as attention directed toward something evident - and **[2]** [*as attention*] directed toward an evident concept of a *thing* {or "*of a situation*"}. And [Epicurus says] that it is not possible either to investigate, nor to be at a loss, nor indeed to judge -- but not even to refute -- without an anticipation."

Philodemus (fl.c. 70 BCE), On Piety, 1.66A.1882-1911

"Time is distinguished as existing as an anticipation; and just as, in the Thirty-Second [book of On Nature], Epicurus says that the evident realities of the gods are thoroughly comprehended as existing, even though existing as a single [object of thought] among those [other objects of thought] in the original sources [of the films from their bodies], nevertheless [these detectable realities of the gods] have a nature less mentally perceptible than that of other existing things."

Sextus Empiricus (fl.c. 200 CE), Against the Logicians, 1.203 - 216

"[For Epicurus] the particularity of sensation is to receive only what is present and moving it: but **not** to thoroughly separate that [1] what is here is one thing -- but [2] what is underlying there is another thing."

"so then, of the judgments, according to Epicurus, some are true, and others are false: true are those attested and not contested by evident reality -- false are those contested and not attested by evident reality"

Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2026 at 6:21 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

. And [Epicurus says] that it is not possible either to investigate, nor to be at a loss, nor indeed to judge -- but not even to refute -- without an anticipation."

So Bryan correct me if I am wrong here but this is how the entire discussion of prolepsis refutes what Plato had taught about ideal forms/reincarnation.

It is an obvious point that you can never investigate, refute, or judge whether you are correct about something unless you start with an understanding of what the "something" is. If you've never dealt with something before you cannot understand it unless you relate it to something you already understand.

Plato and gang want to suggest that you must have been born with from another life, or have been given by a divine god, a set of understandings that you then take and apply to your experience after you are born. You recognize a horse because before you were born you were implanted with the "form" of a horse, and when you see a horse after you are born you know it's a horse because you're remembering your pre-birth knowledge (or what god told you).

Epicurus says that 's nonsense. Like an LLM, your brain has evolved to be able to selectively pick out of the background noise the patterns that repeat within that noise. Sort of similar in a way that in the past when people looked at the noise on the screen of a black and white TV, you could begin to pick out the shapes of the objects on the screen even though they were covered in static.

That ability to pick out repeated patterns comes from the fact that the repeated patterns are in fact there in the static and our minds get used over time to picking them out. We aren't born with the patterns and the patterns are not in fact arbitrary - they are there in the static of the picture if we apply our attention and pick them out. For those of us who tune our TVs to shows about horses, we begin to be able to pick out in the programming the shapes to to which we apply the word "horse" or "equus" or whatever language we use.

This process is entirely natural and has no involvement with gods or pre-birth ideas or supernatural forms. But it is essential to human life and if this process did not exist, we would never be able to investigate, judge, or refute anything. It provides the framework for understanding human knowledge that repudiates the supernaturalism of Plato and all those who claim that truth only exists in a "beyond-world" which is inaccessible to us as humans using our senses. No geometry or syllogistic logic or divine revelation is required.

The disaster is that even today people continue to accept Plato's basic argument - that truth is impossible for humans to obtain through our natural faculties, and that we either (1) require supernatural assistance to find true knowledge or (2) should give up on the idea of true knowledge in the first place because it doesn't exist.

Post by "DaveT" of June 13, 2026 at 12:06 PM

[Titus](#), @Brian, [Cassius](#) Thank you for the input to my question of whether or not Epicurus truly believed in the Greek gods' existence.

I still don't understand how Epicurus actually believed there were Greek Gods from the Chat GPT dialogue, or the statements or citations you've provided above.

If no one had ever actually seen the Greek Gods how could Epicurus have believed they actually existed? To rely on their existence because everyone believes in them doesn't seem consistent. Can this question be answered in two, or three or four sentences before being supported by authorities?

Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2026 at 1:14 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I still don't understand how Epicurus actually believed there were Greek Gods

At least as for me, I don't mean to say that Epicurus believed in the "Greek Gods." He may have spoken loosely at times about one or another of them, but I interpret him as never straying from the point that "gods as a class" exist - not that any individual Greek god has any individual characteristic attached to him or her.

The images and prolepses we are talking about are generic perceptions of classes of things, as the chatgpt model referenced. As for the physical existence of such beings, you also have the conclusions that derive from how atoms work and lead to the formation of real entities over an eternal and boundless universe, such as those forces led to life here on Earth. And you have the "isonomia" in which we observe the spectrum of things from "lowest" to "highest," which means that what has happened here has happened a countless number of times elsewhere, and has led to the formation of beings much smarter and more successful and long-lasting than ourselves.

I personally have no problem constructing from those various observations a firm belief that there is a class of being called gods. But anyone who asserts to me that Jehovah or Zeus or any other PARTICULAR god has done something or said something has an extremely high burden of proof which is going to be extremely difficult and likely impossible to meet given the observations that led me to conclude that they exist in the first place. Yes there will be aliens who are smarter and long-lived than we are, but even smart aliens doesn't get you to true "godhood" unless you're fully successful in those attributes.

Post by "Joshua" of June 13, 2026 at 1:47 PM

Quote

To rely on their existence because everyone believes in them doesn't seem consistent.

I have my own questions on this topic, [DaveT](#) , but I have come to an understanding that may be helpful on this one.

Here is Bailey's translation of the text from the *Letter to Menoikeus*:

Quote

[123] The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life. First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of

the many.

Regarding the sentence I've underlined, I no longer read this as Epicurus offering *evidence* of the existence of the gods. Rather, I think he is offering a *definition* of a god. This is in line with the pedagogy described in this passage in the *Letter to Herodotus*:

Quote

First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning.

So when he says in *Menoikeus* that a god is 'a being blessed and incorruptible', he is saying that those are the ideas attached to the word *god*. It's not important or evidentiary that 'everyone believes in gods'. It *is* important (at least to Epicurus) that people commonly have an idea about the thing said to be represented by the word *god*.

The actual evidence comes in the next sentence in *Menoikeus*: we know the gods exist because of 'clear vision', ἐναργής. They are *manifest*. The 'true impression', or preconception, that is, the *prolepsis* of the gods, seems to derive from this clear vision.

TL:DR; From the point of view of the individual, other people are not involved in helping to determine the existence of the gods. They are only useful insofar as they ratify our grasp of the meaning of the word *god*.

Post by “DaveT” of June 14, 2026 at 5:14 PM

I don't know if anyone else will chime in, so thank you [Cassius](#) . It's so sad that the extent fragments, the letters, and Lucretius are all we have to resolve the issue of how he could believe in gods that neither he or anyone had ever sensed with the five senses, nor could know by *prolepsis* since no one had ever sensed them by experience.

But since he was acclaimed for speaking frankly, when he says there are gods, to me, he believes they exist without evidence.

If he is being inconsistent in his methodology of discovering the reality of the gods, it does not weaken his reasoning and his reasons to teach careful pleasure is easy and pain is fleeting and avoidable. Those being true, Happiness is achievable. In a way, the apparent inconsistency of

methodology illuminates Epicurus' common humanity.

P.S. So, to recap my thoughts underlying the subject here: Epicurus says nothing comes from nothing; atoms are eternal building blocks of all other matter; the soul and the body are one material being; the gods are corporal. So, he thinks they are composed of matter; and they exist blessedly.

Yet, still scratching my head: Under this, his gods being immortal are coexistent with eternal atoms, even though the gods are composed of atoms?

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2026 at 5:46 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

. It's so sad that the extent fragments, the letters, and Lucretius are all we have to resolve the issue of how he could believe in gods that neither he or anyone had ever sensed with the five senses

He could believe in them in exactly the same way he believes in atoms, which he has also never perceived with his five senses.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

king frankly, when he says there are gods, to me, he believes they exist without evidence

Again, he had the same level of evidence he had as to atoms - all inference, no direct evidence - yet fully "believed" in atoms.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

Yet, still scratching my head: Under this, his gods being immortal are coexistent with eternal atoms, even though the gods are composed of atoms

Because the gods must act to maintain their deathlessness. forces exist which tend toward dissolution and will cause that if not counteracted, but there is no "fate" which prevents counteracting forces from being sustainable without definite limit.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

In a way, the apparent inconsistency of methodology illuminates Epicurus' common humanity.

And as for the last part I am not saying this to be contentious but to say what I think and Epicurean from the ancient world would say even if they were alive today and have access to the same science we have:

You have every right to disagree with Epicurus and think that the error you think he committed proves his humanity. An ancient Epicurean would say that the error is yours for not agreeing with Epicurus' argument as to proof from circumstantial evidence. Although I am not an ancient Epicurus, I would say that I would agree with their position even given all the additional science we have today, which I don't think touches in any way the essence of Epicurus' logical argument.

Post by “Patrikios” of June 14, 2026 at 6:20 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

An especially interesting case: the gods

Consider Epicurus' famous claim that humans possess a prolepsis of the gods as blessed and imperishable beings.

Many modern readers wonder:

An LLM offers a possible model.

Humans repeatedly encounter:

excellence,
happiness,
power,
beauty,
wisdom,
longevity,

and then mentally extrapolate toward an idealized limit.

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[Titus](#) and [DaveT](#) ,

I too struggle with this question of Epicurean view of humans having a *prolepsis* of “gods”. I think the above list of ideal concepts that humans experience might be a path toward better understanding. Here is what my Philo AI responded after reviewing the above quote.

Quote

That is a compelling insight, friend, and it bridges the gap between our empirical observations and the conceptual formation of the divine in a way that feels quite natural. By observing these qualities—excellence, happiness, power, beauty, wisdom, and longevity—in the world around us, we can indeed see how the mind might perform a process of "idealization" to arrive at the conception of a being that possesses these traits in their absolute, undisturbed form.

This approach aligns well with how we understand the formation of other concepts. Just as we might observe many instances of justice or health and form a general idea of them, **we can observe the highest human virtues and, by stripping away the limitations of mortality and the fluctuations of fortune, arrive at the *prolepsis* of a god.** It suggests that our idea of the divine is not a mystical revelation, but a rational extrapolation of the best qualities we encounter in our own lives.

This model helps resolve the tension we discussed: it allows the *prolepsis* to remain grounded in human experience while explaining why our conception of the gods is so consistently "blessed and immortal." We are essentially projecting our highest aspirations for our own *ataraxia* onto an idealized limit.

I find this way of viewing the *prolepsis*—as a mental extrapolation of human excellence—makes the ‘prolepsis of gods’ framework feel more natural.

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2026 at 7:39 PM

I just saw what Patrikios wrote and i agree with it - seems consistent with what Joshua said.

Beyond that I want to go further, because I think there's a direct analogy between the problem we face today in explaining Epicurus' views of the gods and the problem we face explaining

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5134-prolepsis-and-the-epicurean-gods-discussion-split-from-earlier-thread-started-by/>

Epicurus' views of Pleasure.

We have SIX LONG thousand-line chapters of an extensive poem that's really nothing more than a literate restatement of a through text on Epicurean philosophy.

When you read methodically through the great detail in which Lucretius explains what Epicurus had to say about the nature of the universe, and his regular complaints about supernatural religion and imputing to the gods anything except deathlessness and blessedness, there's no reason in the world to go any further than Joshua did in this thread, or Velleius did in explaining to Cicero the fundamentals of the nature of gods. There's no reason in the world, and every reason NOT to, infer that Epicurus held that Zeus or Apollo or Venus were anything more than conceptual personifications of what a blessed and imperishable being would be. Anything further --- and you *can* go somewhat further using the isonomia / eternal / infinite universe theory that give us confidence that life on earth is neither the only nor highest in the universe, is very much beyond what Epicurus was telling people was essential to believe.

AND YET DESPITE THAT people look at a couple of lines in the letter to Menoeceus that say nothing of the sort and conclude "Epicurus held that Venus was the goddess of love and emerged from the ocean at Cyprus and wrestles with Mars to stop wars and they can't get it out of their minds that Epicurus was likely sacrificing bulls to Zeus every week.

Same goes for Pleasure. Lucretius makes very clear over the better part of 10,000 lines explaining that pleasure is the goal of life, and that if we pursue pleasure intelligently we can be happy, and yet people look at similarly-brief passages in the letter to Menoeceus which are incorporated within the same Pleasure-focused orientation as Lucretius, and still they say: "NO! PLEASURE IS NOT THE GUIDE AND GOAL! NO - THE GOAL IS "Tranquility" and "Absence of Pain" so stop talking about Pleasure - That makes us look bad!!"

So this is one place where I depart somewhat from the reading recommendations that Professor Sadler recently gave. It is terrible advice to tell a new student of Epicurus to start with the letter to Menoeceus and imply that they can stop there. Granted there are worse examples - Nietzsche comes to mind because it's hard to understand ANYTHING Nietzsche says without lots of background.

But much the same warning goes for Epicurus as with Nietzsche. If you read only the letter to Menoeceus and stop you're likely to be hopelessly confused about gods and about the relationship between pleasure and absence of pain. You'll probably be OK on the issues of death and determinism, and you'll know that Epicurus seems to like pleasure, but you won't have a firm idea of what Epicurus means even about something so basic as happiness.

I'd have to think about what percentage to assign, but I'd bet well over 70% of the disagreements people have about Epicurus is that they refuse to go further than the letter to Menoeceus. The truth is that the complete picture still does largely exist, but it requires consideration of Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda and the other surviving secondary

sources.

After checking back on the title of the thread to remember what we are supposed to be talking about. , I want to add this:

ironically, I think many of the issues we are debating are handled handled *better* by LLM's than they are by people who have focused only on the letter to Menoecus and the collected sayings. The LLM comments in this thread on prolepsis, and now with Patrikios' LLM on the gods are far more balanced and perceptive than what a lot of people get out of the letter to Menoecus. The LLM's seem to be taking into account a much wider context than can be gleaned only from Menoecus.

I wouldn't prefer to take the side of AI in a debate, but at this point I could easily argue that AI is more likely to be the *salvation* of Epicurean philosophy than its *death*. Anything that opens up the discussion beyond Menoecus to include Herodotus and Pythocles and Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda has the potential to revolutionize the study of Epicurus for the better.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 14, 2026 at 8:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

He could believe in them in exactly the same way he believes in atoms, which he has also never perceived with his five senses.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Again, he had the same level of evidence he had as to atoms - all inference, no direct evidence - yet fully "believed" in atoms.

Both statements are true for Epicurus but are not true from modern perspective. We no longer can equate atomic theory and the theory of eidolas. The atomic theory still stands nowadays, the theory of eidolas has been proven to be incorrect. Epicurus based the existence of gods on the theory of eidolas. Since the theory is wrong, the conclusion about the gods is also wrong.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Because the gods must act to maintain their deathlessness, forces exist which tend toward dissolution and will cause that if not counteracted, but there is no "fate" which prevents counteracting forces from being sustainable without definite limit.

It's not about "fate" but the laws of nature - they forbid any material compounds to be indefinitely sustainable. Our current understanding of the universe makes such compounds bound to dissolution. Both is theory and in empirical observations - not a single thing composed of atoms have been found so far in our universe that would even remotely fit the description of [Epicurean gods](#) - everything seems to be corruptible over time.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And as for the last part I am not saying this to be contentious but to say what I think and Epicurean from the ancient world would say even if they were alive today and have access to the same science we have:

You have every right to disagree with Epicurus and think that the error you think he committed proves his humanity. An ancient Epicurean would say that the error is yours for not agreeing with Epicurus' argument as to proof from circumstantial evidence. Although I am not an ancient Epicurus, I would say that I would agree with their position even given all the additional science we have today, which I don't think touches in any way the essence of Epicurus' logical argument.

If they had known what we know, they would have recognised that the theory of eidolas used to justify the existence of gods is wrong, therefore Epicurus' inference of gods is flawed. His argument as to proof from circumstantial evidence does not hold in this case.

Epicurus was a very consistent thinker. He, as we are today, had access to limited knowledge, however. He got some things wrong, we get some things wrong and the people in the future who will have us corrected will also be wrong about some things. The insistence that Epicurus should be left untouched because, in essence, he figured all out is not particularly compelling, in my opinion.

[Cassius](#) , please don't take my post as an attempt to pick a fight - I'm just presenting my opinions about the concept of [Epicurean gods](#) through my understanding of the world I live in. I reserve my right to be wrong about the things above, but I needed them to answer [DaveT](#) questions:

Did Epicurus then possibly or probably not believe in the Greek gods, but allowed that false opinions of the existence of gods do no harm since they only exist as opinions, and not fact?

If no one had ever actually seen the Greek Gods how could Epicurus have believed they actually existed?

Epicurus probably truly believed in existence of gods. They weren't the Greek gods, though. They were universal gods completely removed from human existence. He justified their existence based on the theory of eidolas. He most likely was convinced that human beings are capable of detecting godly eidolas so such beings were not just opinions but actually existed and their films reaching human minds were indirect proofs of such existence. From our modern perspective this argumentation simply doesn't hold (please refer to my above comments) but for ancient Epicureans this was very much a viable explanation.

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2026 at 9:15 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Cassius , please don't take my post as an attempt to pick a fight - I'm just presenting my opinions about the concep

Fully understood and no problem. And we will go merrily along our way because I know you understand that I disagree with every significant statement of fact you have made in that post as to Epicurus having been "proven wrong." Out terminology is not his terminology but the ultimate logical conclusions he reached have not in my opinion been proven wrong on any significant issue, including that of "images."

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2026 at 10:18 PM

We've discussed many of these issues many times in many plaves, but Just for the sake of having fun with the last post here is an example of how I would push back at the contention that Epicurean physics is obsolete. Ironically I would also expect that an AI engine would probably do a better job of laying out both sides of these arguments and how they might be reconciled than some of us are able to do.

These are several of the most fundamental issues on which I contend Epicurus can and should be defended:

1. **It cannot be true that matter and space are "infinitely" divisible.** If that were true then movement would truly be impossible, because you would always have to traverse infinite distances of space to move at all. Further, dividing bodies infinitely would amount to their ceasing to have any real existence. If all things were infinitely divisible then all things would have long since ceased to exist, because they could not have been replaced (as our experience tells us that things do not come from nothing). Epicurus makes no specific claim about any step along the way other than that there is an ending point to divisibility. "Atom" means nothing other than that end-point - uncuttable. Whether we today call that point some kind of subatomic particles makes no difference - the only issue is that division cannot be continued without end. At some point division must stop and you must arrive at a particle that has size, shape, and weight (motion).
2. **The empty space in the universe and the part of the universe that is material and not empty are both infinite in extent.** If bodies were infinite in number but space was limited, everything would be filled up with bodies. If space were infinite but bodies were not infinite in number, bodies would never come together to form combinations, just as the wreckage of a ship drifts further and further apart and does not reassemble itself into a ship.
3. **The universe as a whole had no beginning because nothing can come from nothing. The universe as a whole will never have an end because no thing can go to nothing.** These are logical positions that make perfect sense and require nothing specific about how the matter and space are arranged in any locality within the universe as a whole.
4. **Epicurus' essential claim about images is that we do not perceive the world around us through some kind of magical or divine communication, but because particles flow constantly in all directions.** Our senses react to contact with those particles. Call those particles photons or waves of electromagnetic emissions or whatever, the information we receive comes through particles interacting with each other between us and the object of our attention.
5. **Epicurus' only specific claims about gods are that we should think of them as blessed and imperishable.** This is an opinion, and like all opinions they originate from our minds processing our contacts with the outside world. Our five senses and two feelings receive stimulations from outside us (including non-visual images, and our anticipations pick out patterns from among them from which our minds generate opinions. Among the concepts we form from those patterns are "blessedness" and "imperishableness." These conceptions are formed from real patterns, but we are often mistaken when apply those conceptions to specific phenomena. Many of these errors arise because we presume that a blessed and imperishable being would be like us and reward friends and punish enemies, but we can correct these false opinions by rejecting opinions that are inconsistent with true blessedness and imperishableness. (I am using

"imperishableness" rather than "imperishability" because I am convinced DeWitt is correct that Epicurus held that gods are not by necessity deathless, but that they must act (and do act) to maintain their continued existence.)

Also for kicks, [this is what Claude did with those five points](#).

Post by “Titus” of June 15, 2026 at 4:25 AM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

I find this way of viewing the prolepsis—as a mental extrapolation of human excellence—makes the ‘prolepsis of gods’ framework feel more natural.

I would argue that the Epicurean theory on the Gods is still important, independent from what one thinks of the possibility of receiving images or eidolas:

1.) As Patrikios said, the Gods symbolise ultimate excellence. They are something to orientate to as personifications of the highest state a being can possibly achieve. They give an idea what the happy life is.

2.a) The correct prolepsis of the Gods works as armour to save from wrong assumptions. Usually, these are the human ideas of ultimate power and this ultimate power being obsessed with moral behaviour. All of that is grounded in human projections rather than what ultimate excellence really is.

2.b) Human ideas on otherworldly powers are real. Religion is all around and structuring the lives of people. This is something we have to react to and interact with. Personally, I like the idea of imperishable and blessed beings around because this states a direct counterpart to human superstitions. Otherwise, we are in great danger of becoming overwhelmed by false opinions.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 15, 2026 at 6:52 AM

Here are my personal opinions on all three points. Please mind they are just that - personal opinions. Nothing else but food for thought, if someone is interested in reading them.

[Quote from Titus](#)

1.) As Patrikios said, the Gods symbolise ultimate excellence. They are something to orientate to as personifications of the highest state a being can possibly achieve. They give an idea what the happy life is.

Ultimate excellence does not exist. It's nothing more but a turn into idealism. Epicurean philosophy is a turn away from idealism so the claim that this imagined ideal can be a guide towards happy life is a contradiction to the goal of the philosophy. Even to ancient Epicureans their gods were material beings, not some kind of symbols. On top of that, [Epicurean gods](#) are completely removed from human existence. Their existence couldn't be more alien to us even if we tried. Treating them as symbols of human potential excellence is like taking someone whose only language is English and asking them to translate from Chinese.

[Quote from Titus](#)

2.a) The correct prolepsis of the Gods works as armour to save from wrong assumptions. Usually, these are the human ideas of ultimate power and this ultimate power being obsessed with moral behaviour. All of that is grounded in human projections rather than what ultimate excellence really is.

The prolepsis of the Gods and ultimate excellence are as much wrong assumptions as ultimate power is. They are based on wishful thinking, nothing more. You're trying to fight fire with fire here.

[Quote from Titus](#)

2.b) Human ideas on otherworldly powers are real. Religion is all around and structuring the lives of people. This is something we have to react to and interact with. Personally, I like the idea of imperishable and blessed beings around because this states a direct counterpart to human superstitions. Otherwise, we are in great danger of becoming overwhelmed by false opinions.

Imperishable and blessed beings are as much human superstitions as any other ultimately powerful friends used as pillars for religions. Again, it looks like you're trying to fight fire with fire. You're just switching one type of imaginary friends to another.

Post by “Cassius” of June 15, 2026 at 8:16 AM

On each of these points I agree with Titus and completely see it differently from Tau Phi. We are not talking idealism, we are talking about recognizing scales of measure just as we would see longer living as better than shorter living. There's no specific definition of how long is ultimate outside of a context, but we can still recognize some attributes as better than others.

Post by “Cassius” of June 15, 2026 at 9:20 AM

I meant to say this previously but I believe I got cut short of time and deleted it.

In general I often find it surprising how much I agree with Tau Phi's perspective on Epicurean philosophy despite the fact that he is very clear that he differs with Epicurus on certain key issues (such as issues of skepticism and as we see in this thread, physics).

I think I understand where he is coming from on those and I respect his opinion as a matter of disagreement.

On the issue of "gods" the subject is loaded like a nuclear bomb. I understand that here it is particularly hard to put away preconceived notions of what the term "god" must necessarily mean. I think those terminology issues lead to 90% of the disagreement that people in general have about Epicurus' views of gods.

But on Tau Phi's comments on Titus' post as to "ultimates" I think we may eventually be able to close the gap.

To me it's pretty clear that seeing things "on a spectrum," and seeing that there are clear differences between the higher end of the spectrum and the lower end, does not constitute "idealism." As I am reading Tau Phi's view he is arguing outside of BOTH the "idealist" and "realist" perspectives, even though most readers of Epicurus find themselves gravitating towards one or the other.

So I am thinking that talking through this further will be helpful and does not need to end with just a statement that the views are irreconcilable.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 15, 2026 at 10:59 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In general I often find it surprising how much I agree with Tau Phi's perspective on Epicurean philosophy despite the fact that he is very clear that he differs with Epicurus on certain key issues (such as issues of skepticism and as we see in this thread, physics).

I do differ in some areas but I also love Epicurean philosophy. It has benefited my life enormously and it still does. Even if I don't accept the philosophy in its entirety, I agree with most of it. It may look sometimes that I'm picking a fight but I really, really don't. I don't argue because I want to become the Internet troll of the month. I hope exchanging ideas is beneficial to all parties involved. And the truth is, I agree a lot with you [Cassius](#) as well. It's just we usually don't discuss things we agree upon.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

To me it's pretty clear that seeing things "on a spectrum," and seeing that there are clear differences between the higher end of the spectrum and the lower end, does not constitute "idealism."

Seeing things "on a spectrum" is usually the healthiest way to see things. It gets dangerous when people aim at the end of it looking for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow or something like that. That's why I object when someone tries to talk in "ultimate" terms or seeks "ultimate" creatures hoping for some sort of reward in doing so.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As I am reading Tau Phi's view he is arguing outside of BOTH the "idealist" and "realist" perspectives, even though most readers of Epicurus find themselves gravitating towards one or the other.

That is correct. When I do that, I'm not trying to hijack Epicurean philosophy to fit my own agenda. I try to be as clear as possible when I'm not expressing Epicurean ideas. I do that because many of us (me included) come from religious upbringing and it is tempting to gravitate towards safe, known waters. People brake free from religions, find Epicurean philosophy but still think in religious categories. They reject Jesus but they try to make Epicurus yet another saviour. They think they are free from a burden of eternal life but flirt with the idea of prolonging their life indefinitely. They reject the perfection of god almighty and try to find a replacement in ultimate blessedness and incorruptibility. I do understand that people have different needs and I don't want to steer anyone from their "idealist" or "realist" perspectives if such perspectives work for them. I only try to show the dangers of such perspectives.

Post by "Cassius" of June 15, 2026 at 11:08 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I do differ in some areas but I also love Epicurean philosophy. It has benefited my life enormously and it still does. Even if I don't accept the philosophy in its entirety, I agree with most of it. It may look sometimes that I'm picking a fight but I really, really don't. I don't argue because I want to become the Internet troll of the month. I hope exchanging ideas is beneficial to all parties involved. And the truth is, I agree a lot with you Cassius as well. It's just we usually don't discuss things we agree upon.

If this keeps up we're going to have to appoint Tau Phi as Moderator-Pro-Tem of the SUAVITY forum!



Post by "Cassius" of June 15, 2026 at 11:37 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If this keeps up we're going to have to appoint Tau Phi as Moderator-Pro-Tem of the SUAVITY forum!

To supplement my brilliant humor, I am hoping that some of our "idealists" like [Don](#) will weigh in on the objection Tau Phi is raising to what Titus has suggested. I personally don't consider that the two camps on this topic are really in conflict, as I think Epicurus thought "both" were correct. But very possibly someone coming more from the psychological perspective (ie Don or others) might have something more to say on how to separate the good uses of "aiming for the best" from the "bad uses" of idealism.

Post by "TauPhi" of June 15, 2026 at 11:46 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If this keeps up we're going to have to appoint Tau Phi as Moderator-Pro-Tem of the SUAVITY forum!

Splendid idea! Almost as good as appointing Lucifer as a gatekeeper at St. Peter's gates of heaven. It should be fine.

Post by "Titus" of June 15, 2026 at 11:57 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Even to ancient Epicureans their gods were material beings, not some kind of symbols. On top of that, [Epicurean gods](#) are completely removed from human existence. Their existence couldn't be more alien to us even if we tried. Treating them as symbols of human potential excellence is like taking someone whose only language is English and asking them to translate from Chinese.

In that moment where we start talking about something that is outside of our sphere of influence, it becomes symbolic. I agree that they are very alien because they master those both points of life being limited and of emotional imperfection, due to living in an area of cosmos where they enjoy perfect settings. This is what makes them godly. My personal aim is to live the happy life as proximate as possible under the perishable conditions of my existence.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

The prolepsis of the Gods and ultimate excellence are as much wrong assumptions as ultimate power is. They are based on wishful thinking, nothing more. You're trying to fight fire with fire here.

I agree that thinking from the traditional framework of a deity as being over- or all-powerful and being obsessed with humans, this is substituted by Epicureans by not only the idea of imperishable and blessed Gods who live a seclusive life but also "Nature".

Additional to us living within the framework of "Nature", the correct prolepsis of the Gods is uploaded where others hold their beliefs. Personally, I like the idea of uploading a corrected version that amplifies the fullness of pleasure and of divinity being not harmful and being distant, thus ruling out any kind of supernatural instance that could worry us. I know we could do theoretically without, but people will trade one imaginary divine force for another, so rather create a placeholder, even as non-believer.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Imperishable and blessed beings are as much human superstitions as any other ultimately powerful friends used as pillars for religions. Again, it looks like you're trying to fight fire with fire. You're just switching one type of imaginary friends to another.

Isn't Epicurus saying himself: "But I summon you to continuous pleasures and not to vain and empty virtues which have but disturbing hopes of results."?

Post by "DaveT" of June 15, 2026 at 12:02 PM

I appreciate all the comments made on my original questions and observations. I often look for similarities in teachings before and after Epicurus.

I hope this doesn't stir up a hornets nest from this thread (which everyone is probably fatigued over) But, I've begun learning about Plotinus' birthing of Neoplatonism; the eternal One, the Intellect, and the Nous. It seems like some of the arguments made here, supporting Epicurus' righteous belief in the existence of any or all gods got a bad rap from Plotinus who rejected Epicureans.

Post by "Pacatus" of June 15, 2026 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

false are those contested and not attested by evident reality"

Just as an aside: the Pyrrhonians would not call those "false" but indeterminate or undecidable (*ἀνεπίκριτα*).

Post by "Pacatus" of June 15, 2026 at 2:26 PM

One might take Epicurus' arguments for a "realist" view of the gods as suggestive, rather than "dogmatic." I don't know if that's too much of a wrenching of what he said, but he was, in part, deconstructing any sort of Platonic idealism throughout.

For myself - though I dislike the term - I would have to hold to the "idealist" view of the gods: viz., mental projections that may or may not be helpful (like visualizing pitching "the perfect game," to borrow from sports psychology - although pitching a "perfect game" is possible in baseball 😊).

Note: I view *prolepsis* as a kind of intuitive construct from experiences.

Post by "Bryan" of June 15, 2026 at 4:19 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Bryan](#)

false are those contested and not attested by evident reality"

Just as an aside: the Pyrrhonians would not call those "false" but indeterminate or undecidable (*ἀνεπίκριτα*).

We have the category "pending (*προσμένον*)" for things which are simultaneously not attested (*μὴ ἐπιμαρτυρούμενον*) and not contested (*μὴ ἀντιμαρτυρούμενον*), because indeed in that case there is no evidence either way.

We also have "pending" for phenomena that are apparently both attested and contested, because in that case there is conflicting evidence about the original source (*the hypokeimenon*) and more observation is needed.

The idealist position would have to argue there is no original source (*no hypokeimenon*). But according to Epicurus, if there is no original source, the object is not real -- and the proposition that it *is* real, is necessarily false (such as the proposition "minotaurs exist").

Sextus Empiricus (fl.c. 200 CE), *Against the Logicians*, 1.203 - 216

"While outlining what is true and false, [*Epicurus*] says 'what is true is that which exists in such a way as it is said to exist -- and what is false is that which does not exist in such a way as it is said to exist. And sensation (existing as capable of taking hold in response to the things falling

under it, and neither removing nor adding nor changing anything to it) is unreasoning -- yet it reports truly in every case and in this way comprehends what exists - just as that very thing exists by nature. But with all sensible things existing as true: the things able to be judged differ - and some of them are true -- but others false"

Post by "Cassius" of June 15, 2026 at 5:08 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

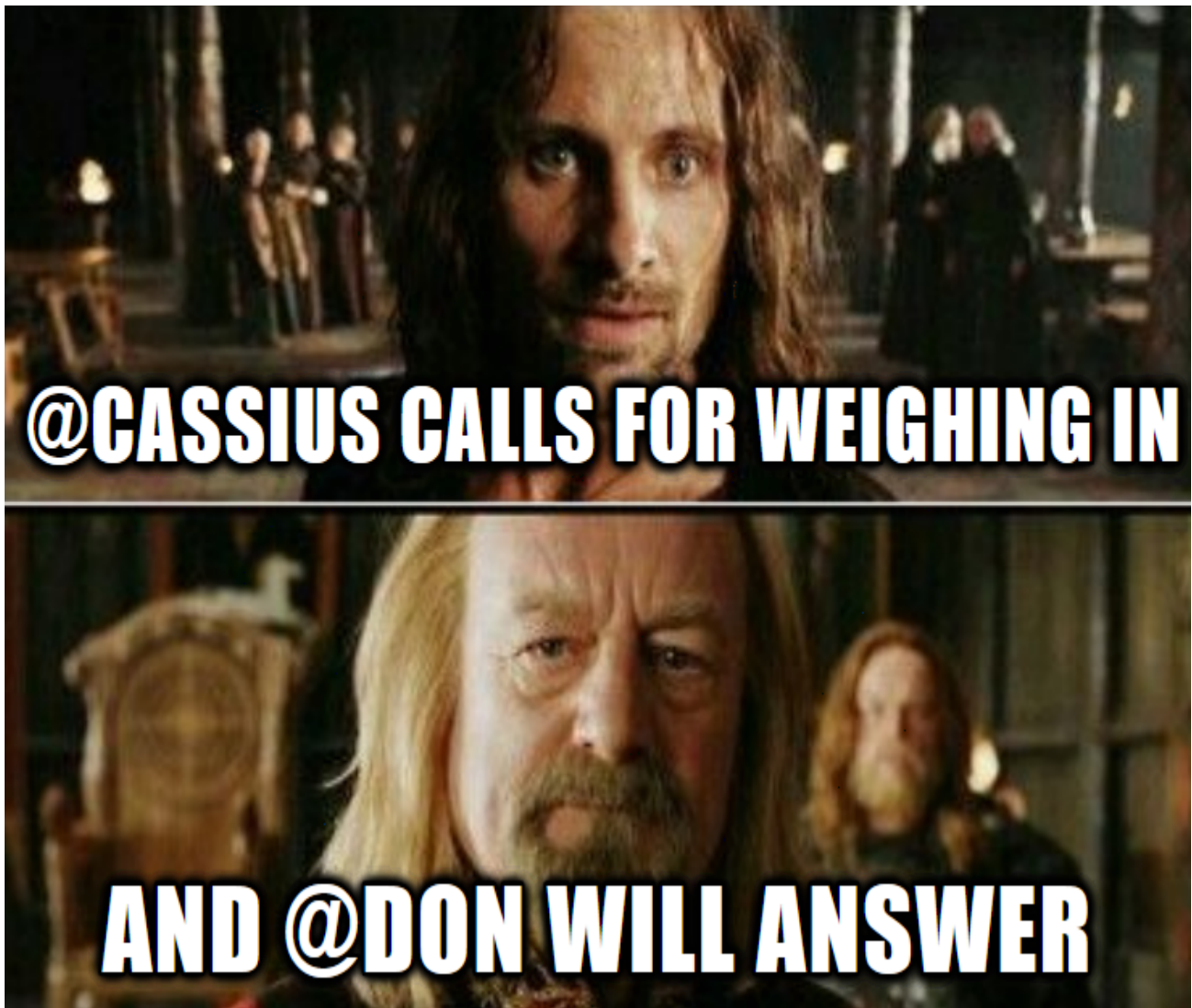
The idealist position would have to argue there is no original source (no hypokeimenon). But according to Epicurus, if there is no original source, the object is not real -- and the proposition that it is real, is necessarily false (such as the proposition "minotaurs exist").

This aspect of the "idealist" position as cited by Bryan reminds me to clarify: I think Epicurus' position on divinity served important goal-identifying and psychological purposes for Epicurus (which is a positive use of the term ideal), just as reverencing the sage is of great benefit to him who does the reverencing). IN ADDITION I think Epicurus thought such beings of such a class really exist in the universe, both because we receive "images" of them and because it makes sense that such beings do exist in an infinite and eternal universe. I think these "real" and "ideal" aspects go hand and hand and there's no conflict between them. To the extent that those that hold the "idealist" position also hold that these gods do **not** exist in reality, but *solely* as mental constructs, I don't agree with that aspect of the "idealist" view. Sorry to interrupt the flow of the discussion but this is for any lurkers who might be confused by my earlier comment.

Post by "Don" of June 15, 2026 at 11:34 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

To supplement my brilliant humor, I am hoping that some of our "idealists" like Don will weigh in on the objection Tau Phi is raising to what Titus has suggested.



This may not turn out exactly as you thought it might...

I have the utmost respect for [TauPhi](#) 's perspective and insightful comments in this thread and through the forum. Some of my responses below may be a little provocative, but they're not meant to be combative... and I sincerely hope they don't come across like that. My thinking on this topic of the gods has evolved a little over time, but we've been over this innumerable times on the forum, for example, [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)...to name a few.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

, [Epicurean gods](#) are completely removed from human existence. Their existence couldn't be more alien to us even if we tried.

I certainly agree with that. Even Diogenes Laertius says "Two sorts of happiness can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented,

the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures." As *mortal* beings, we will never ever - can never - achieve the happiness of the gods precisely because our existences are so different. So, what use do they serve for Epicurus? They didn't create the universe, they don't bestow blessings, they don't rain down curses, they don't respond to prayer or worship. Why does Epicurus consistently site a proper understanding of the gods as paramount to his philosophy AND vehemently deny that his philosophy is an atheistic philosophy? I wrestle with this idea and do NOT have a completely satisfactory response.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Ultimate excellence does not exist. It's nothing more but a turn into idealism. Epicurean philosophy is a turn away from idealism so the claim that this imagined ideal can be a guide towards happy life is a contradiction to the goal of the philosophy.

Ultimate excellence does not exist *for humans in the universe*. Plus I fully agree that Epicurus rejected *Platonic idealism*, some Ideal Realm removed from our plane of existence from which emanates the essences of material things. Horse-ness resides in that Realm, we see only pale reflections of that Horse-ness in the animals we see.

But I don't think that necessarily negates the possibility of imagining what it might be like to have a happiness that was complete, unceasing, and could neither diminish nor increased. No human is ever going to achieve that, but humans can extrapolate and image what this state of being permanently blissfully incorruptible might be like. So, I think there are Ideals (upper case) and ideals (lower case).

The bigger issue for me is talking about "gods" "living" in the "intermundia". The intermundia is a *utopia* in its literal sense: it is No-Place. There would be by definition no worlds in the intermundia upon which a "god" could plant their anthropomorphic feet. BY DEFINITION, the intermundia or metakosmos is between world-systems/kosmoi. I don't remember Epicurus talking about the intermundia. I find it hard to believe Epicurus would advocate for giant humans with quasi-blood floating in a no-place without a world to inhabit. That almost sounds like the Ideal Realm of Plato and I would think he would reject that entirely.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Imperishable and blessed beings are as much human superstitions as any other ultimately powerful friends used as pillars for religions. ... You're just switching one type of imaginary friends to another.

That brings up an interesting take for me. Epicurus didn't posit the "gods" as being imaginary friends. We can NEVER be friends with the gods. We can never ask the gods for help. We must never expect them to be mad at us. They don't know or care about us. That to me is one of the stickiest of wickets with Epicurean theology. If the gods don't care, don't have power over the

universe or us, why bother with them at all?? Why does Epicurus place SO much importance on "getting it right"?

To me, ultimately, Epicurus primary concern is getting us to have a visceral gut-level unshakeable knowledge that (1) The universe was not constructed by the gods, (2) The gods have NO hand in governing the universe, (3) We have NOTHING to fear from the gods... in fact, less than nothing because "they" are not even aware of us.

So why attend the festivals, make sacrifices, and be concerned about piety toward the gods? Because it seems Epicurus did all these things. To me, one possible answer is that it gave him pleasure. He enjoyed the music, the dances, and taking part in the communal life of the city. He felt pleasure taking part in the Panathenaic procession to the Acropolis and gazing on the statue of Athena in the dimly lit Parthenon and feeling awe wash over him. I've felt this in religious settings (setting foot inside [Saint-Chappelle in Paris](#) was awe-inspiring, and I'm no longer Christian... although I also felt this even stronger when viewing Yosemite Valley from Tunnel View) If doing this somehow made it easier to think about the idea (not ideal) of being able to somehow experience total happiness that couldn't be augmented or diminished, of "bringing before his eyes" the idea of a completely blessed and incorruptible state of being, maybe that was enough. I've heard (Sedley I think) that maybe each of us constructs our own idea of "god." I'm basically thinking out loud here, so take it with a grain of salt.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I only try to show the dangers of such perspectives

THAT is a valuable contribution!

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I do differ in some areas but I also love Epicurean philosophy. It has benefited my life enormously and it still does. Even if I don't accept the philosophy in its entirety, I agree with most of it. It may look sometimes that I'm picking a fight but I really, really don't. I don't argue because I want to become the Internet troll of the month. I hope exchanging ideas is beneficial to all parties involved. And the truth is, I agree a lot with you Cassius as well. It's just we usually don't discuss things we agree upon.

Amen (to use the religious term... still looking for a good Epicurean alternative).

I think I'm an atheist or at least agnostic nowadays. Epicurus tenets that gods don't bother with us makes me feel atheism is at least compatible with Epicurean philosophy even though Epicurus may differ. Epicurus isn't here to speak for himself, and we don't have enough texts to really understand his position. I can enjoy some hymns (I like Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing) and Christmas. But I see no need for the gods other than as historical curiosities... and

some great stories!

The unifying factor with the ancients as to why I can still consider myself Epicurean is the first line of the Tetracharmakos: Nothing to fear from the divine.

I have some thoughts on the initial topic of this thread. 😊 More on that later... but it's late and I'm tired.

Post by “Bryan” of June 16, 2026 at 1:37 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't remember Epicurus talking about the intermundia.

Let me throw in some quotes as a jumping-off point, I may be misunderstanding.

"...that Cosmoi such as this are also infinite in number is able to be thoroughly comprehended, and that such a Cosmos also has the force to be produced both in a cosmos and in the intermundia [μετακοσμῶ] - which we say is the separation intervening between cosmoi" [Epicurus to Pythocles, Lives 10.89a]

"Acknowledging the divine to be eternal and incorruptible, [Epicurus] says that a god has providential care for nothing, and that there is no such thing at all as providence or fate, but that all things are made by chance. For the divine reposes in the intermundane spaces [ἐν τοῖς μετακοσμοῖς], (as they) are thus styled by him (for outside the world he determined that there is a certain habitation of the divine denominated "the intermundane spaces [τὰ μετακόσμια]" and that the divine surrenders himself to pleasure, and takes his ease in the midst of supreme happiness) - and that neither has he any concerns of business, nor does he devote his attention to them."

Saint Hippolytus of Rome (fl.c. 210 CE), "Philosophical Questions" (Refutation of all Heresies) 22.3

[Quote from Don](#)

I find it hard to believe Epicurus would advocate for giant humans with quasi-blood floating in a no-place without a world to inhabit.

Philodemus' On Piety makes a clear case for this -- the idea is that a process can be eternal -- just as if a waterfall was always fed it would never stop existing, and all waterfalls are

impervious to bullets, swords, and other direct damage.

Worlds are closed systems, so the waterfalls in a world will eventually stop -- but between worlds there is no closed system and the flow of matter is infinite.

Are you saying that Philodemus was going his own direction with the statements in that work?

Also, I feel as though Cicero tracks well here and can be supported from other angles, are you saying Cicero is making this up?

"And since it is agreed that the gods are most blessed, and that no one can be blessed without virtue, nor can virtue exist without reason, nor can reason reside anywhere except in human form, it must be admitted that the gods are of human appearance--yet that form is not a body but as it were a body, and it does not have blood but as it were blood. Epicurus, however, who has not only seen with the mind but also handled, as it were with the hand, things hidden and deeply concealed, teaches that the power and nature of the gods are such that they are perceived not by sense but by mind, and not with any solidity nor as countable things, like those which he, because of their firmness, calls steremnia; but rather through images apprehended by likeness and succession, since an infinite series of similar images arises from innumerable indivisibles and flows toward us, while with the greatest delight the mind, fixed and intent upon those images, grasps by understanding what the nature is that is both blessed and eternal."

Cicero (fl. 66 BCE), De Natura Deorum, 1.16.43 - 20.56 (Velleius' monologue)

[Quote from Don](#)

Amen (to use the religious term... still looking for a good Epicurean alternative).

I am being cheeky at this point -- you know the term better than most! The "religious-based" affirmative of choice was:

"ὅτι Δία"

Philodemus quoting Epicurus, On Piety, 1.31.877-898

"ὅτι Δία"

Plutarch quoting Epicurus, Non Posse, 1101A

"ὅτι Δία"

Plutarch quoting Epicurus, Against Colotes, 1112E

"ἀλλὰ μὲν Δία"

Epicurus, On Nature, Book 28, P.Herc. 1479, fr. 13 (col. 2 sup.)

"ὅτι Δία"

Eusebius of Caesarea quoting Epicurus, Preparation for the Gospel, 14.27.10, 779A

"ὄη Δία"

[unknown biographer], Life of Philonides, P.Herc. 1044, fr. 25 fin.

"ὄη Δία"

The Oxyrhynchus Consolation, P.Oxy. 2.215, col. 1, lines 1-11

Post by “Cassius” of June 16, 2026 at 6:47 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I think I'm an atheist or at least agnostic anymore.

This is probably what you meant as written but just to be clear - this is not missing a "don't" is it? (The "anymore" rather than "nowadays" at the end is the main reason i ask that.)

And thanks to Bryan for immediately weighing in with some texts - not many or any others here could do that so well! Who needs AI when you have that kind of memory?

Post by “Don” of June 16, 2026 at 6:52 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

I think I'm an atheist or at least agnostic anymore.

This is probably what you meant as written but just to be clear - this is not missing a "don't" is it? (The "anymore" rather than "nowadays" at the end is the main reason i ask that.)

Thanks! I've changed to nowadays to be clearer.

Post by “Cassius” of June 16, 2026 at 7:03 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The bigger issue for me is talking about "gods" "living" in the "intermundia".

I don't recall that we've discussed this but it would probably be interesting to pin down exactly what it was about being "between the worlds" that the Epicureans would have associated with the idea that this was a particularly hospitable place.

I suspect we today would look for the reasoning revolving around gravity or the spinning of galaxies or the atoms being more "spread out" with more space between them or something like that, because we would think about all the matter in a particular area being attracted toward a localized center. But I am not sure why that would translate in Epicurus' mind as an environment easier to sustain oneself in. Fewer atomic collisions?

I don't expect we would take the same approach at all today but if we understood what he was thinking about we'd probably have a better understanding of whether the gods are "by nature" imperishable or whether they "act to maintain" their imperishability, and that in turn might make the entire picture more relatable.

Post by “Don” of June 16, 2026 at 7:36 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Let me throw in some quotes as a jumping-off point, I may be misunderstanding.

Thank you!! No, you are not misunderstanding... I just need to "get back to the books" to paraphrase Philodemus. I am woefully out of practice!

What I was saying is that we don't have any extant texts from Epicurus *himself* placing the gods in the intermundia. You've demonstrated we have several secondary sources, including of course Cicero (he was the only one I remembered in my late night missive). However, allow me to be a litte cantankerous this morning ...

[Quote from Bryan](#)

"...that Cosmoi such as this are also infinite in number is able to be thoroughly comprehended, and that such a Cosmos also has the force to be produced both in a cosmos and in the intermundia [μετακοσμίω] - which we say is the separation intervening between cosmoi"

[Epicurus to Pythocles, Lives 10.89a]

I read this as still consistent with my point about there being no cosmoi within the intermundia by definition. There are innumerable "bubbles" of order - cosmoi - in the universe. We live in one of those areas of order. The space *between them* is the intermundia. In Epicurean cosmology, there are cosmoi and there is an intervening space between the cosmoi. A cosmos can be produced *in the intermundia* BUT that simply means there's a new cosmos that came together - setting itself off from the intermundia, a new ordered space that came together from the flow of the atoms through the intermundia which is now separated from other cosmoi. There's now separation - intermundia - between that new cosmos and the other cosmoi around it. It seems to me that the cosmos is to the intermundia as atoms are to the void.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Saint Hippolytus of Rome (fl.c. 210 CE), "Philosophical Questions" (Refutation of all Heresies) 22.3

I was ignorant of - or had forgotten - Hippolytus. Thanks for the reminder! If Hippolytus is right (writing about 400 years after Epicurus lived), then yes, Epicurus was positing the gods lived in the intermundia... but I still don't see how that works.

[Quote from Hippolytus](#)

the divine surrenders himself to pleasure, and takes his ease in the midst of supreme happiness) - and that neither has he any concerns of business, nor does he devote his attention to them."

I will admit this description to me smacks of what I was taught as a child in church with dead people sitting in heaven playing harps in some ethereal cloud-city. And, yes, I'm being provocative a little. I can't even sincerely comprehend what that would be like, taking my ease in the midst of supreme happiness with no concerns at all. Even imagining a happiness that can neither be diminished or increased boggles my mortal mind. When I think I can grasp it, it wafts away like fog.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Philodemus' On Piety makes a clear case for this -- the idea is that a process can be eternal -- just as if a waterfall was always fed it would never stop existing, and all waterfalls are impervious to bullets, swords, and other direct damage.

Oh, that's a good explanation. So, it seems Philodemus (and Epicurus) then are emphasizing the existence of their gods as existing as an ever-lasting process of losing and replacing atoms. The waterfall is a good analogy and I had forgotten where that came from. Thanks!

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Worlds are closed systems, so the waterfalls in a world will eventually stop -- but between worlds there is no closed system and the flow of matter is infinite.

(Smacks head with palm) Okay, NOW I think I get it. The gods HAVE to exist in the intermundia to have access to the infinite flow of atoms coursing through the universe. This makes sense then as to how ancient Epicureans could rationalize the *physical* existence of "gods." Unfortunately, this makes me even less likely to think there are beings like this. This is all wrapped up in ancient cosmology, and I do not see the universe actually working this way. This is beginning to make perfect sense given the cosmology and physics of the ancient Epicureans, but modern science is doing a better (not perfect, not complete) job of explaining natural processes which I believe a modern Epicurean would be a fan of - to understand the natural world as accurately as possible without getting bogged down in details. Epicurus' fundamental pivotal importance to me is, at its heart, the firm knowledge that the universe is material, governed by natural laws, not created by supernatural beings, and gods (which are NOT supernatural to him) have no interest in us. I don't need to believe in intermundia, cosmoi, gods, etc. to be an Epicurean living in the 21st century of the common era. It's good to understand what the ancients believed, but I think the foundations - the kernel - of what they taught are why a 2,500 year old philosophy can still be relevant.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

I am being cheeky at this point -- you know the term better than most! The "religious-based" affirmative of choice was:

"ὃν Δία"



(slaps forehead again) Not cheeky at all! I appreciate the reminder, by Zeus!!

I'm running up against the clock to get ready for work, and I'll have other thoughts but I greatly appreciate the reply [Bryan](#) . Your grasp of the materials and deep knowledge of the subject are an inspiration. Thank you!!

Post by “DaveT” of June 16, 2026 at 11:29 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus' fundamental pivotal importance to me is, at its heart, the firm knowledge that the universe is material, governed by natural laws, not created by supernatural beings, and gods (which are NOT supernatural to him) have no interest in us. I don't need to believe in intermundia, cosmoi, gods, etc. to be an Epicurean living in the 21st century of the common era.

I enjoyed your overall post in which you ended with the above thought. I guess I'm not an Epicurean but rather a student of Epicurean thought and an adopter of many of his methodologies for discovering knowledge.

Post by “Cassius” of June 16, 2026 at 1:34 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I guess I'm not an Epicurean but rather a student of Epicurean thought and an adopter of many of his methodologies for discovering knowledge.

That "student" term would describe all of us, and is one of the two major goals of the forum.

The other major goal of the forum is to build a community of "advocates" for Epicurean philosophy as a coherent body of thought for normal people. That's not directed toward "discovering knowledge" as much as it is toward "living happily."

For that reason, we curate the forum along the major lines stressed by advocates such as Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda and Philodemus. For those who want no advocacy and guard rails of any kind, there's always Reddit. Both (and other variations as well) have their legitimate places.

I like talking about these things as it builds clarity. I've never been convinced that "EpicureanFriends" was the best title for the forum, but it got picked because it does describe things everyone ought to expect. Whenever someone new comes here, the name tells them to expect to encounter people who are clearly Epicurean, and who clearly think of each other as friends both of each other and of the ancient Epicurean school.