

# More Thoughts on The "Idealism vs Realism" Question About the Epicurean "Gods"

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2019 at 10:02 AM

Poster: The question of whether Epicureanism is a realist or idealist remains unresolved. Apart from the problems of the exegesis and interpretation, there is the innately thorny nature of the questions themselves. Whether realist or idealist, both positions serve as a grounding for the prescriptive parts of Epicurean ethics and psychology. Idealism seems to provide the stronger case.

Cassius:

Poster, are you quoting someone or just stating your opinion? As to your conclusion, I disagree. If Epicurus had been saying one thing and meaning something entirely different, Epicurus would have been a hypocrite and had no credibility among the very intelligent circles of Greek and Roman philosophers. So it's my opinion that "idealism" as the sole basis for his position - a kind of Platonic "noble myth" would cut the legs out from anyone wishing to take Epicurus seriously - then or now. But we are all entitled to our own opinions, and to which Epicurean texts we choose to take seriously. I simply choose to take them *\*all\** seriously, and not to reject any of them out of hand.

Also: Let me be clear on this aspect: I do think that the texts clearly indicate that the Epicurean theory of "the gods" has an aspect in which discussion of them serves as a motivating "ideal" to which to aspire. Just like Epicurus said that the veneration of wise men is good for those who do the veneration, the contemplation of how life might possibly be serves as a visual goal to which everyone can and should aspire. There's no necessary tension between the two positions - as they should not be, because what worth is an "ideal" that cannot be in any real fashion attained? As far as I can tell from the texts that are left, the "gods" are distinguished mainly from other living beings in that they (1) do not die, and (2) do not appear to have any pains (either they have totally eliminated them or they are insignificant).

In Epicurus' time, and still today, people die, so that aspect of being a god is to this point unattainable. But the goal of living happily as long as possible is still relevant to us. Also, the goal of living in as much pleasure as possible, and with as little pain as possible, is very relevant to us as well.

Thinking about "gods" as an actual embodiment of these goals no doubt served a useful purpose to the ancient Epicureans, and I submit that in some form it still serves a useful

purpose. We are flying blind with very few authoritative texts available on what the Epicureans thought and did, but if someone today isn't visualizing life as they would like to see it exist for them, they are very possibly as lost as they can possibly be. And straightening out that confusion is what a \*full\* understanding of Epicurean philosophy can accomplish.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2019 at 12:40 PM**

And I have another objection: maybe the worst aspect of excessive emphasis on "idealism" is that the very word smacks of an attempt to "Platonize" Epicurus.

There's a good reason that Epicurean philosophy is referred to as a branch of "atomism." That's because it is fundamental to Epicurus that nothing "eternal" exists in reality except the elements and the void through which the elements move. It's part of the essence of Platonism and Stoicism and Aristotelianism to postulate ideals and essences and divine fires emanating from some prime mover, and it is the essence of Epicurean philosophy to call "bull" on all of that.

The very idea that Epicurus would assert the existence of some kind of entities that exist solely "idealistically" without a real essence grounded in atoms and void is offensive to the fundamentals of Epicurean philosophy.

Not saying it's offensive to me personally, of course, or that I take offense to the suggestion, but that if you're going to attempt to understand what Epicurean philosophy was about, you don't succeed by grafting onto it the type of Platonism to which Epicurus objected most strongly.

And I suggest that the abstraction of "pleasure" as something esoteric (under the name "ataraxia" or "absence of pain") unrelated to the every-day experience of normal mental and physical pleasures is also an attempt to Platonize Epicurus as a "hedonist" instead of what Epicurus really was - an observer of reality.

Of course I also think it is misleading to try to peg Epicurus as primarily an "atomist" or primarily a "hedonist." Epicurus was an Epicurean, and those other words have varying meaning according to whoever wants to assert the definition. But one thing seems certain:

Epicurean ethics derive from Epicurean physics and his observations of the nature of man. "Atomism" is in that sense more fundamental to Epicurus than is "hedonism." If Epicurus had decided that the study of nature leads to the conclusion that gods created the universe, and that those gods told us how to live, then Epicurus would have had nothing to do with "pleasure" unless the gods said so. The ethics of pleasure follow from the natural physics of atomism, not the other way around.

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## Post by “bradley.whitley” of April 19, 2019 at 7:54 PM

Platonizing is the very root of all wars. Some buffoon takes over a nation with a vision of an ideal world. Plato and his minions have created a world of division. Platonism is a mental disease.

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## Post by “Elli” of April 20, 2019 at 4:20 AM

Sorry, Bradley but I do not agree totally with you. Plato and his teacher Socrates did not lead the Greeks to a mental disease. Evidence ? The Athenians punished Socrates to death with the hemlock. Plato suffered too in the court of Dionysus at Syracuse and caught as slave, and then he returned to Athens, as a miserable old man. In ancient Greece there was the punishment to those that provoked to people mental disease, because the ancient greeks did not bite lies easily. Something that does not exist in our days, since then came the plague of abrahamic monotheistic religions with their strong basis that is the stoicism. Abrahamic religions that had copied- pasted stoicism totally are feeding - till our days - the people with more lies than Plato and Socrates did in their era. And if we want to be precise there was and an Epicurus for cleaning up the mess of those philosophical ideas. Where is the punishment to the buffoon that took over the half - and much more of the half - of the nations of the world ? Tell me where is the desire of the people to punish e.g. those that hold the Financial Banking System that has strong basis, and spreading the confusion of the stoicism ? Imagine Epicurus and the ancient Athenians to hear that : **[The chief executive of [Goldman Sachs](#), which has attracted widespread media attention over the size of its staff bonuses, says he believes banks serve a social purpose and are “doing God’s work.”]** .

Where is the anger of the people and the punishment when they hear such a provocative phrase that goes against to their mental health? For this, the whole planet and specially the western world is focusing to your Nation first, the huge and great America, waiting the consequences of any punishment if there is any ! We are waiting your nation to born again a new Thomas Jefferson. We are waiting till now for changing your current that writes : **"in god we trust"**. Read of what one of your presidents had said for this phrase : {...}**My own feeling in the matter is due to my very firm conviction that to put such a motto on coins, or to use it in any kindred manner, not only does no good, but does positive harm, and is in effect irreverence, which comes dangerously close to sacrilege.**{...}**Any use which tends to cheapen it, and, above all, any use which tends to secure its being treated in a spirit of levity, is from every standpoint profoundly to be**

regretted.{...}it seems to me eminently unwise to cheapen such a motto by use on coins{...} In all my life I have never heard any human being speak reverently of this motto on the coins or show any signs of its having appealed to any high emotion in him, but I have literally, hundreds of times, heard it used as an occasion of and incitement to{...}sneering{...}Every one must remember the innumerable cartoons and articles based on phrases like 'In God we trust for the 8 cents,'{...}Surely, I am well within bounds when I say that a use of the phrase which invites constant levity of this type is most undesirable.{...}" - Theodore Roosevelt, November 1907

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**Post by “bradley.whitley” of April 20, 2019 at 9:32 AM**

[Elli](#) I bow to your wisdom. I am useless anyway. I know very little. Happy 20th anyway.