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Towards an Epicurean Atheology

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

Ancient Epicurean tradition held that the Gods were real and even went as far as to hold that they were material beings, that is, made up of atoms. Jefferson reiterated the general presumption behind this belief when he said:

“To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise.” –
Thomas Jefferson, 1820

The belief in the atomic constitution of the Gods was ancient man’s way of saying that, without being anchored in matter somehow, the Gods could not be said to exist in any real or significant manner.

A more or less scientific understanding of the Gods in recent decades emerged from the Jungian school of psychoanalysis. The hypothesis of Gods as archetypes was advanced decades later by mythographer Joseph Campbell. By equating the Gods of the human race with archetypes of the collective unconscious, and therefore as inherited psychological instincts that are, presumably, written in our DNA, we may begin to apprehend the psychological nature of the Gods. In other words, we inherit not only physical traits, but psychological ones. A baby’s inherited, unlearned, memory of the suckling instinct and the changes that occur at puberty are best explained by these archetypes.

In explaining the hypothesis of archetypes as inherited instincts, Joseph Campbell once related how small birds in the Galapagos Islands, when they see a large plane flying over them, experience panic and call for their parents to comfort them. Now, in the Galapagos Islands these birds have no natural predators. But their ancestors, who evolved in South America, did live under the threat of the condor, the largest bird of prey in the continent. And so, natural selection had favored this instinct of panic, and modern descendants in the Galapagos still exhibit a vestige of the instinct.

Notice the many dragon myths in human culture. There are no dragons in nature, but virtually all mythologies have them. The Jungian view is that the memory of the predators we learned to fear in our evolution, perhaps even going back as far as when the first tiny mammals lived under the shadow of the giant dinosaurs, still lives

in the depths of our collective psyche, that through natural selection we inherited the instinctual panic that helped our ancestors survive.

There is recent, very preliminary, epigenetic research that seems to point to cellular memory of a kind other than the chemical language codified in our DNA. It shows that experiences of stress from a great famine, or from an event like 9/11, can have effects on the next generation, and the next one, and so on. As such, the panic that our human, ape, and mammalian ancestors experienced in the presence of saber tooth tigers, large birds of prey, snakes, and other beasts may have embedded itself into our psychological configuration. Further research in epigenetics will confirm or deny this hypothesis. If it confirms it, it will have redeemed Jung from the criticism by the established schools of psychology that consider him unscientific, and it will open up new and fascinating fields of knowledge concerning our myths and our collective unconscious. So far reaching is Jung's influence in contemporary New Age thought that there is a Jungian spirituality movement.

Many of the Gods of Olympus emerged from our relatively recent, urbanized and civilized psychological history (Hermes the God of commerce and of cross-streets, which is where commerce happened; Athena the Goddess of wisdom, etc.), and therefore these Gods resonate deeply with much of today's recognizable cultural reality rather than primitive instinctual panic. Still, even if Jung's theories are confirmed, the Olympians and all the other Gods do not exist except as psychological, transpersonal instincts that we inherited and not as true, independent agents.

Within Epicurean tradition, the polemic on the nature of the Gods has revolved around the realist (the Gods are physical, atomic, real beings) versus the idealist (the Gods are man-made mental constructs) theories. These psychological Gods postulated by the Jungians are fundamentally different from how they were imagined throughout history and can perhaps be classified as fitting within the idealist interpretation of Epicurean (a)theology. Although I do believe the Gods may be useful in therapy, in the end it is still wise to remember the first of Epicurus' remedies: there is no reason to fear them.

Nietzsche went as far as to say famously that 'God is Dead', but for many, like philosopher Michel Onfray, it seems like the vestiges of the biblical God are everywhere and that we still haven't figured out what to do with his corpse. It would seem that the psychological tasks before us, as we stand over the carcasses of all the Gods of history, remain untackled, that the Superman whom Nietzsche predicted would render life valuable and meaningful in the absence of divine agents, has yet to arrive.

At the risk of seeming anachronistic, I believe Epicurus may fulfill the role of Nietzsche's Superman. Yes, he lived 2,300 years ago, but Nietzsche acknowledged that after Epicurus, Western thought only degenerated. He was the apex of classical thought, ergo we can assume Epicurus was at least on to the task of the Superman: it is on his shoulders that we must stand.

What, specifically, is Epicurean atheology?

Epicurus was as much concerned about the nature of the Gods as about their quality, the merit of the object of one's worship. His first official doctrine is as follows:

A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness. – Principal Doctrine 1

This teaching forms the foundation of his rejection of common ideas about the Olympian Gods, as presented in the Homeric works. Epicurus reasoned that whatever Gods there were would not behave in immoral ways, would not engage in rape, adultery, jealousy, and all the other behaviour that the legends attribute to them. As such, I argue that Epicurus' theology is an atheology, that it can not be reconciled with traditional concepts of

theism and that it represents a fundamentally philosophical, secular humanist, and irreligious understanding of the Gods.

A philosophical theology requires that the object of one's worship embody the virtues and perfections idealized in philosophy. The late Roman tradition of personifying and revering abstract virtues like Prudence, Justice, Liberty, and so on, as part of one's civic duty is in line with Epicurean ideals. Epicurus believed that we could cultivate ataraxia by contemplating these virtues, as personified in the Gods. I admit, for instance, that the statue of Liberty does inspire awe, just not in a religious sense.

But both the awkward accommodation of Jungian ideas and the reverence of abstract ideals are likely to do little to revive Epicurean theism as it was lived in the ancient world. It is more accurate to speak today of an Epicurean atheology, in view of how most Epicureans today do not truly believe in the Gods and our naturalist worldview does not comfortably integrate them, except from a strictly secular and philosophical perspective.

I do not think this represents a major reform within our tradition, but in practice it denotes a decreased willingness to conform to societal norms inspired by theism, which is fully in evidence in contemporary Epicureanism.

See also:

Contrasting Realist to Idealist Philosophy by Dr. Stephen Hicks; Parts [One](#), [Two](#), [Three](#), [Four](#), [Five](#), [Six](#)