

DREAMS, VISIONS AND EPICUREAN GODS

The Epicureans, far from being atheists, did believe in gods, and were atheistic only in the sense that they did not believe in the gods that society at large accepted—the orthodox, traditional Olympians of Hesiod and Homer.¹ However, the evidence that the Epicureans put forward as demonstrating the existence of their gods is curious, and has since, justifiably, been the subject of ridicule. The evidence is encapsulated by the term *πρόληψις*, which comes from the Greek *προλαμβάνω*, meaning ‘to take beforehand’ or ‘to obtain first’.²

It is perhaps most famously Cicero who conveys this term, through his Epicurean spokesman Gaius Velleius, in the *De natura deorum*. Velleius says that

“such notions Epicurus designates by the word *prolepsis*, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing ... [although] Epicurus himself employed the word *prolepsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before.”³

What notions are these? That “gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there but possesses untaught some ‘preconception’ of the gods?”⁴ Velleius continues, that

“it [this preconception] is perceived not by the senses but by the mind ... by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams to us from the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of a being both blessed and eternal.”⁵

¹ As asserted in Obbink (1989).

² Liddell & Scott (1997, 593).

³ “Quam appellat *πρόληψιν* Epicurus, id est anteceptam animo rei quendam informationem” (DND I.16).

⁴ “Esse deos, quod in omnium animis eorum notionem impressisset ipsa natura. Quae est enim gens aut quod genus hominum, quod non habeat sine doctrina anticipationem quendam deorum?” (DND I.16). The translations used can be found in the bibliography.

⁵ “Non sensu sed mente cernantur...sed imaginibus similitudine et transitione perceptis, cum infinita simillarum imaginum series ex innumerabilibus individuis existat et ad deos adfluat, cum maximis voluptatibus in eas imagines mentem intentam infixamque nostram intelligentiam capere quae sit et beata natura et aeterna” (DRN I.49).

The notion, though, can be traced back to the fragments of Epicurus, if one is wary of Cicero's testimony. In his letter to Menoeceus, he writes that "gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision [...] (for the statements of the many about the gods) are not *conceptions derived from sensation*,"⁶ using Bailey's translation of *πρόληψις*. Epicurus implies then that his concept of gods *does* derive from sensation.

Other testimony is available in support of the above, describing *πρόληψις* without using the term though: Aetius writes that "Epicurus [says that] the gods are anthropomorphic and can be contemplated by reason as a result of the fineness of the nature of their images."⁷ Sextus Empiricus writes that "since large anthropomorphic images strike them while they sleep they [Epicureans] supposed that some such anthropomorphic gods also existed in reality."⁸ Demetrius Lacon writes that the mind "has direct apprehension of the same things,"⁹ in his book *De forma dei, On the Form of God*¹⁰. And there is a scholion in Diogenes Laertius, where the biographer writes that

"elsewhere he [Epicurus] says that the gods are discernible by reason alone, some being numerically distinct, while others result uniformly from the continuous influx of similar images directed to the same spot and in human form."¹¹

What of those two Epicurean heavyweights of the first century BC, Philodemus and Lucretius? In his *De pietate, On piety*,¹² Philodemus writes of "the object of thought as a thing perceived in relation to a solid body ... understanding perception that can be grasped by corporeal sensation, which they [early humans] also knew to

⁶ "θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσὶν· ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ γνῶσις...οὐ γὰρ πρόληψεις εἰσὶν" (123-4).

⁷ Text 106: Aetius 1.7.34 = *Dox. Gr.* P. 306 (355 U), in Inwood & Gerson and Hutchinson (1994, 96).

⁸ Text 105: Sextus M 9.25 (353 U), in Inwood, Gerson and Hutchinson (1994, 96).

⁹ "διὰ τοῦτο δ' ὁμ[ο]ίων ἔχει κατάληψιν."

¹⁰ P.Herc. 1055.

¹¹ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.139.

¹² P. Herc. 1428.

be derived from a physical entity;¹³ and that “in truth declared [...] affairs [...] the images were true.”¹⁴ In his *De signis, On methods of inference*,¹⁵ he writes that

“he who recalls that mental perceptions occur in this circumstance, namely, apart from perceptions and present objects, and he who says that it is doubtful whether this occurrence comes about through images or is illusionary, will not prove that these perceptions are not what they appear. Images can exist either by chance or as products of solid bodies, but they cannot be false.”¹⁶

And also that “we should refer our notion of the gods to the revelations which take place by mental perception and which guarantee clearly that heavenly and eternal beings exist.”¹⁷ Lacy (1941: 204) comments on this that “although the extant fragments of Philodemus’ treatise on the gods contain no sure mention of this *πρόληψις*, it very probably lies behind his references to their bliss and immortality.”

In his *De rerum natura, On the nature of things*, Lucretius writes that

“the truth is that even in those days the generations of men used to see with waking mind, and still more in sleep, gods conspicuous in beauty, and of marvellous bodily stature ... because there was always a succession of visions coming up in which the shape remained the same.”¹⁸

Further he says “the nature of the gods, being thin and far removed from our senses, is hardly seen by the mind’s intelligence; and since it eludes the touch and impact of

¹³ “ὄσλο[... ..]πα[... ..]ς ν[... ..]των των [... ..]νων μηδ[... ..]σι παρετι[... ..]μενον τὸ μ[ῆ] ...]τον εἶναι νοε[πὸν αἰσ]θανόμενον τ’εἰς τὸ στερέμ[... ..]ημα ἔχειν αὐτ[... ..] δ[ια]νοουμένουσ τὴν παραισθήσει σαρκ[ι]νηι περιληπτὴν περιληπτὴν αἰσ[θη]σιν, ἦν καὶ ἀπ[ὸ] φύσεως ἔγ[νωσ]αν ε[ἰσ]αυαπέμπεσθαι” (15).

¹⁴ “οἰσθ’ ὑπα[ρχ]... ..]των [... ..] κατ’ ἀλή[θει]α[ν]... ..] ἀπεφα[ν]... ..] ὑποζωμ[... ..] ὄλης αὐτ[... ..]να πραγμα[... ..] τὰς φαντασ[ί]ας ἀλήθειαι εἶναι ” (24).

¹⁵ P.Herc 1065.

¹⁶ “ὁ μνημονεύων] σὺν τούτῳ [γ]ε[ῖ]νε[σθαι τὰς τῆ]ς διανοίας φαντασία[ς σὺν τῷ μῆ] διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων κα[ὶ] τῶν πα[ρόντων αὐτὰς γεννᾶσθαι, εἴ]τε ὑπ’ εἰδ[ώ]λων τ[οῦτ’] ἢ κεν[όν] τι τὸ γεν[νηθέν], ἀμφ[ί]βολου εἶναι λέγων, [δείξει] ταύ[τας οὐ]χ ἄς φαί[νεσθ’] ὑπάρχειν, εἴ[τε] α[ὐτομά]τω[ς] φύντα εἶδωλα, δυν[ατὸν] εἶναι, ψευδεῖς δὲ] οὐ δ[υνατόν]...έλαβεν [...ὀ]ρθῶς [...] νομ[...].” (Fr. VI, in De Lacy, 1941, 116-9).

¹⁷ “[τὴν τῶν θεῶν ἐπί[νοια]ν δεῖν ἐπανάγειν ἐπὶ τὰ πε]ριληπτικῶς τῆ [διανοία γινόμε]να κατε[ναρ]γ[ή]ματ’, ἃ δια[σαφεῖ] προσανῶς τὸ δ[ια]ιμόνια καὶ] αἴδια [ζῶα εἶναι]” (Fr. VIII, in De Lacy, 1941, 118-9).

¹⁸ “Quippe etenim iam tum divom mortalia saecula egregias animo facies vigilante videbant, et magis in somnis mirando corporis auctu... aeternamque dabant vitam, quia semper eorum subpeditabatur facies et forma manebat” (DRN V.1169-1176).

the hands, it cannot possibly touch anything that we can touch; for that cannot touch which cannot be touched itself [...] being thin in accord with their bodies.”¹⁹

To summarise the ancient testimony to this point, the Epicureans assert that all humans have a *preconception* of the gods. This is not something learnt, but something that everyone acquires naturally and independently. This is the only evidence that the Epicureans assert for proof of the existence of the gods, that although peoples might grow up distinctly and apart, all acquire this same preconception.

According to Obbink (1995: 196), “in Book XII of *On Nature* he [Epicurus] is reported to have said that the first humans originally formed ideas of the gods as existing, but later contaminated these with ideas about fear and death,” which is *religio*, superstition, expounded by priests and leaders for financial gain and control. This original and pure image of divinity can only be perceived by the mind, given the nature of the gods and their images.

At this juncture a reminder of Epicurean physics²⁰ and their explanation of vision²¹ would be useful. The Epicureans believed that *things* come about, are created, by the collisions and thus compounding of atoms. Such atoms, even when compounded, are in continual motion, and so the compounds themselves are continually losing atoms, whilst also replenishing themselves at the same time. The atoms on the outside of the compound are of course most liable to be lost, through continual collisions from without, and it is these atoms, or rather thin films of these atoms, that escape and then come to collide with the sensitive eye, and thus allow

¹⁹ “tenvis enim natura deum longeque remota
sensibus ab nostris animi vix mente videtur;
quae quoniam manuum tactum suffugit et ictum,
tactile nil nobis quod sit contingere debet;
tangere enim non quit quod tangi non licet ipsum [...]
tenues de corpore eorum” (DRN V.148-154).

²⁰ DRN I.1021ff

²¹ DRN IV.230ff

sight. However, there are various *types* of atoms, or rather, atoms of varying size and shape, within limits.²² The atoms that come to make up mind and soul, and indeed gods, are said to be the slightest, lightest and swiftest of atoms,²³ and so it is that these are undetectable to the eye, but can only be detected by that most sensitive organ, the mind itself.²⁴

To return to Cicero then, and his derision of Epicureanism, his Academic spokesman Gaius Cotta mockingly labels these gods “shadow-deities”²⁵ and “empty imaginations,”²⁶ writing of images for men to worship and asking whether these images were different to others, like unbidden dreams and purposeful thoughts. This charge seems justifiable, valid and fair, against what is the only evidence which the Epicureans assert for the existence of their gods, so it is especially interesting to consider what the Epicureans might write on this.

Two very closely related Epicurean theories must be included at this point, on dreams and on ghosts. Lucretius writes of being “buried in sleep, [so that] we seem to see and to hear in very presence those who have encountered death, whose bones rest in earth’s embrace.”²⁷ This can also be extended to day-dreams, as Lucretius writes that “even while awake they seem to perceive dancers swaying their supple limbs.”²⁸ As to why this is, and why such dreams of ghosts, and monsters even, are false, Lucretius writes that “certainly no image of a Centaur comes from one living, since there never was a living thing of this nature; but when the images of man and horse meet by accident, they easily adhere at once, as I said before, on

²² DRN II.333ff.

²³ DRN III.177ff.

²⁴ Epicurus’ theory on vision is to be found in his *Letter to Herodotus*, 46a-52, and indeed on soul 63-68.

²⁵ “Adumbratorum deorum” (I.75).

²⁶ “Motum animi...inanem” (I.106).

²⁷ “somnoque sepultis,
cernere uti videamur eos audireque coram,
morte obita quorum tellus amplectitur ossa” (DRN I.133-5).

²⁸ “etiam vigilantes ut videantur
cernere saltantis et mollia membra moventis” (DRN IV.979-80).

account of their fine nature and thin texture.”²⁹ What, then, is the difference between *visions of gods* and these dreams and apparitions?

In two fragments from his inscription, Diogenes of Oenoanda writes of feeling

gladness from them [visions of gods] because we are asleep. So he says that these are not empty shades since so much power belongs to them as well. On the other hand, if they are not empty, they certainly do not possess sensation and reasoning and really speak to us ... for it is impossible for these (abilities) to belong to thin membranes in this way, membranes which do not possess the depth of a solid nature. So these men are misled in opposite ways, I mean the Stoics and Democritus. For the Stoics take away from the images even the power that they do have, while Democritus bestows on them a power they do not have,³⁰

and that the “images [in sleep] are not then empty figments of the imagination, as the Stoics claim. For indeed if they call them empty for the reason that although they do have a bodily nature yet it is extremely thin and does not impinge on the senses, then the expression they employ is wrong since these too, thin as they are, should have been called ‘makers of visible shapes’. But if they are so thin that they do not have a bodily nature at all—which is what they really want to say rather than the former—how can the empty be depicted if it does not even exist? Images do indeed have a thin constitution and one that has escaped our sight.”³¹ And so for Diogenes of Oenoanda, there is no confusing the visions of gods with dreams or ghosts, in that such confusion would deprive these gods of their inherent power.

But there are further issues to be considered. Firstly, in Lucretius’ exposition of soul, he writes that “we see the mind liable to carking care and grief and fear;”³² and Lucretius warns of not imputing “to the eyes this fault of the mind.”³³ Therefore, due to emotions, the mind is fallible, but the senses must be trusted. Indeed, perhaps one

²⁹ “certe ex vivo Centauri non fit imago,
nulla fuit quoniam talis natura animalis;
verum ubi equi atque hominis casu convenit imago,
haerescit facile extemplo, quod diximus ante,
propter subtilem naturam et tenuia texta” (DRN IV.739-43).

³⁰ New fragment 1, from Chilton (1971: 125).

³¹ Fragment 7, from Chilton (1971: 5-6).

³² “Sic animum curas acris luctumque metumque” (DRN III.461).

³³ “Proinde animi vitium hoc oculis adfingere noli” (DRN IV.386).

has no choice but to trust in the senses.³⁴ And to return to Lucretius' theory on vision, he writes that, of images, "there are others which arise of themselves in this part of the sky called the air."³⁵ Here, Lucretius describes images that seem to arise spontaneously, and do not have their origins in anything real or tangible. However, I interpret this as suggesting how things can be misconstrued, as the section immediately following suggests how clouds can seem to take the shape of monsters, rather than suggesting that images can arise out of nothing, for "nothing is produced from nothing"³⁶ in Epicurean physics.

Considering the latter reference, Lucretius suggests that the image seen by the eye is true, but that the mind interprets it falsely, and so this agrees with the former reference. But, if the gods can only be perceived by the mind, how can one be sure that these images are not also false? This is a very difficult area, and the Epicureans seem to simply distinguish between dreams, ghosts and misinterpretations on the one hand, and visions of gods on the other.

And a further issue presents itself when one considers the gods continuously losing atoms in producing this continuous stream of images, if one is to consider the visions of gods as being real. Is there a point where a god might lose all of its constituent atoms? My notion of *replenishment*, whereby the Epicurean gods can replenish lost atoms with like-for-like material from the surrounding *intermundia*, *μετακοσμίαι*, would alleviate this; moreover, the very nature of the gods, composed of very tenuous atoms, would limit the amount of atoms that could be lost anyway, in their avoidance of, and thus reducing of, collisions; and the physiological compatibility of *similar* atoms, with the Epicurean gods only being composed of two types of atoms, one soul-atom and one body-atom, would also increase their

³⁴ DRN IV.469ff

³⁵ "Sunt etiam quae sponte sua gignuntur et ipsa constituuntur in hoc caelo qui dicitur aer" (DRN IV.131-2).

³⁶ "nullam rem e nilo gigni" (DRN I.150).

resistance. But regardless, is there a point where a god might have replenished all of its original atoms, bringing to mind the *Ship of Theseus* paradox,³⁷ as to whether the god was still the same god as he once was? I had originally concluded that he would be, in terms of continuity. However, Demetrius Lacon, in questioning how it can be that memories, which are atomic, can be retained if there were a constant interchange of atoms, concludes “that memories are kept;”³⁸ and what is more, “it is possible for a certain number of bodies to be kept.”³⁹ So, by extension, gods could always retain some of their original self, and thus identity.

Some, though, do not think of the visions of gods as being real. Sedley (1998: 66) suggests that the gods are merely thought-constructs, and do not really exist as living beings, alive in the universe. Stallings (2007: ix) perhaps has Sedley in mind when he writes that “some think that he (Epicurus) believed them (gods) to exist merely as concepts.” And each echoes Strodach (1963: 51), writing that “the gods perform. This function is ethical; they are paragons of the good life, exemplifying in their own existence the highest Epicurean ideals.” Merlan (1960: 50) questions whether it is “not entirely possible that they were ready to invoke Zeus and all the other divinities of popular religion, not to insure their benevolence but just to express their admiration for these perfect beings?”

I would not entirely agree with any of these stances: although the Epicurean gods were not benevolent; did not receive beneficence; did not listen to or heed humans; and were not interested in or need humans; however, indirectly, these very gods could induce pleasure and pain in humans, and it was through *πρόληψις* and

³⁷ “The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel” (Plutarch’s *Lives I, Theseus*, XXIII, 1, in Perrin, B. (trans.), 1967).

³⁸ “τὰς μνήμας φυλάττεσθα[ι]” (XIII).

³⁹ “δυνατόν ἐστι φυλάττεσθαι ποσὰ τῶν σωμάτων” (XII).

πρόληψις alone that this was possible and occurred. For, beholding these gods, their remove, being free from pain, living in *ἀταραξία*, in contemplation and meditation, the Epicureans could try to imitate these gods. In this way the gods were ethically and morally valuable. However, if this belief stemmed from a falsehood, that the gods they imitated did not actually exist, then the belief itself would be inherently flawed. Therefore the Epicureans must have believed that these gods existed. Furthermore, these gods had a sizeable effect upon the daily lives of the Epicureans, and their piety, as Philodemus informs us at great length in his *De pietate* of Epicurus' activities, worshipping in the temple, encouraging the same of his disciples, and indeed even writing about the virtues of piety himself.

Therefore, despite the Epicurean theories on physics, the mind, vision, ghosts, dreams and misinterpretation, I do not think that their theory on *πρόληψις* is harmed. I think that *πρόληψις* does, for Epicureans, convey the true image of existing gods. It does not contradict Epicurean physics, and it is not a misinterpretation or a false vision. This vision of gods is distinct from vision via the eyes, from dreams and from purposeful thoughts, and is only purposefully falsified by *religio*. And given that *πρόληψις* represents empirical truth, these gods can be, and indeed were, worshipped and emulated.

P.JACKSON
Open University
pjacks@ntlworld.com

Bibliography

- Cicero. (1951). *De Natura Deorum, Academica*, (H. Rackham, trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Demetrius Lacon. (2000). *La forma del dio*, (M. Santoro, trans). La Scuola di Epicuro 17. Naples: Officina dei papiri ercolanes.
- Diogenes Laertius. (1950). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers II*, (R.D. Hicks, trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Diogenes of Oenanda. (1971). *The Fragments*, (C.W. Chilton, trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Epicurus. (1989). *The Extant Remains, with short critical apparatus*, (C. Bailey, trans.). Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.
- Inwood, B., L.P. Gerson and D.S. Hutchinson, eds. (1994). *The Epicurus Reader*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Liddell, H.G. and R. Scott. (1997). *A Lexicon*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.
- Lucretius. (2006). *De rerum natura*, (W.H.D Rouse, trans., revised by M.F. Smith). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lucretius. (2007). *The Nature of Things*, (R.J. Stallings, trans.). London: Penguin.
- Merlan, P. (1960). *Studies in Epicurus and Aristotle*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Obbink, D. (1989). "The Atheism of Epicurus," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 30(2):187-223.
- Obbink, D. (1995). *Philodemus and poetry: poetic thought and practice in Lucretius, Philodemus and Horace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Philodemus. (1941). *On methods of inference: a study in ancient empiricism*, (P.H. De Lacy, trans.). Oxford: B.H. Blackwell.
- Philodemus. (1996). *On piety, Part 1*, (D. Obbink, ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Plutarch. (1967). *Lives*, (B. Perrin, trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sedley, D. (1998). *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek wisdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strodach, G.K. (1963). *The Philosophy of Epicurus*. [Evanston, IL.]: Northwestern University Press.