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Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Theology

Book I of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* summarizes many theological doctrines that were being investigated during this time. Through the character of Velleius, Cicero presents the Epicurean perspective on particular properties of their god(s)' existence. Cicero also demonstrates the numerous theological schools that have formed other notions regarding god(s) that do not align with Epicurean philosophy. One main argument that runs throughout these rival schools is that they believe god(s) to have created the world¹. Velleius proposes many points for why this is a flawed argument. Two assertions that are key to Epicurean theology are also heavily remarked upon in Velleius' monologue: the necessity for gods to have a means for sensation and thus a divine shape. The three characters, Velleius, Balbus, and Cotta, talking amongst themselves is another demonstration of Cicero's desire to encourage his Roman reader to question these historic Greek theological schools.

Velleius employs many counterarguments to the belief that the gods created the universe. The gods' non-involvement in creating the human world and thus in human activity is one of the key tenets of Epicureanism². Epicureans think of the gods as existing in an *intermundia*, a place where they can remain in a completely blessed and quiet state³. In order to establish this, Velleius challenges Plato's belief that the gods are round and thus turning so fast that no quickness can be perceived to be equal⁴. Velleius' counters this with, *in qua non video ubinam mens constant et vita beata possit insistere*⁵. Velleius also disassembles Plato's belief that it was the gods who constructed the world by asking, *quae molito, qual ferramenta, qui vectes, quae machinae, qui ministri tanti muneris fuerunt; quem ad modum autem oboedire et parere volentati*

¹ Holger Essler, "Cicero's Use and Abuse of Epicurean Theology," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, eds. Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 130-131.

² James Warren, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2 - 5.

³ Holger Essler, "Cicero's Use and Abuse of Epicurean Theology," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, eds. Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 134.

⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 24].
Nempe ut ea celeritate contorqueatus, cui par nulla ne cogitari quidem possit

⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 24].
In such a life I do not see how a constant mind and a blessed life are able to establish themselves.

*architecti aer, ignis, aqua, terra potuerunt*⁶. These lines underline the improbability for the highly revered gods to have ever lowered themselves to use such workman tools and means of negotiation with lesser earthly elements.

The existence of the universe before the god(s) decided to produce it provides another key argument for Velleius and the Epicureans. In many doctrines in which the god(s) have created the world, they have also existed since infinity. Velleius questions under what conditions the god(s) had been living before they decided to create the universe and what were the motivations for creating the universe in that particular moment. Velleius proposes to Balbus several reasons: *innumerable saecla dormierint*⁷, *laboremne fugiat*⁸, *ut deus melius habitaret*⁹, creating beauty and pleasures for foolish humans¹⁰. Velleius even suggests that [the god] *videlicet tempore infinito in tenebriosis tamquam in gurgustio habitaverat*¹¹. These suggestions are a rhetorical strategy to reduce the argument to simple terms and use borderline absurd refutations in order to firstly degrade the proposition that the god(s) had created the world. Since the answer seems so clear due to its newfound simplicity, the listener is also incited with a high level of certainty about the answer.

A shape is essential to the Epicurean notion of a divinity, especially since this shape connotes other necessary features of the god. Velleius lists many philosophers who have assigned the gods to other natural elements. Anaximenes holds that the god is air and has no form just like air¹². Diogenes of Apollonia also says that air is god¹³. Crotonates of Alcmaeon attributed divinity to the sun, the moon, the relics, the stars, and living beings¹⁴. Velleius especially mocks Parmenides' *stephané*, a god of a

⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 19].

what grinding, what iron tools, what levers, what machines, what builders has made the so many walls: how were air, fire, water, and earth able to obey and to comply with the will of the architect.

⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 21].
they have slept for innumerable ages

⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 22].
Fleeing from work?

⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 22].
so that the god may live better

¹⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 23].
An haec, ut fere dicitis, hominum causa a deo constituta sunt? Sapientiumne?

¹¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 22].
clearly [the god] had lived before for an infinite time as in a hut

¹² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 26].
Anaximenes aera deum statuit [...] quasi aut aer sine ulla forma deus esse possit.

¹³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 29].
Quid aer, quo Diogenes Apolloniates utitur deo

¹⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 27].
Crotoniatae autem Alcmaeo, qui soli et lunae reliquisque sideribus animoque praeterea divinitatem dedit.

continuous ring of lights of fires surrounding the sky¹⁵. While these philosophers have at least attached some form, no matter how abstract, to the god, there are those cited that disregarded to disallowed the god's form. Xenocrates, a pupil of Aristotle, does not describe the divine form¹⁶ and Aristonis takes this further by also stating that no sensation is in the gods¹⁷.

According to Epicurian theology, the form is crucial to how the gods can have sensation. The form, a quasi body, is the intermediary for collecting and processing sensation by which intelligence can be formed. In Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*, he thoroughly explains, "the existence of bodies everywhere is attested by sense itself, and it is upon sensation that reason must rely when it attempts to infer the unknown from the known"¹⁸. Velleius cites Anaxagoras claiming that the divine power has no sensation¹⁹ and furthermore snickers as Empedocles *opinione turpissime labitur*²⁰ when he again notes that the gods lack sensation²¹. Velleius connects Epicurus' point of the mind collecting knowledge through sensation to a central point for the god(s) to acquire knowledge.

In the congregation-style setting that Cicero has enacted, we as both readers (active) and listeners (passive) are meant to question and talk about these doctrines to the others of different philosophical schools. Cicero has set up a virtual realm in which the listener has transformed us from passive listeners into an active readers through his text. Although one may be tempted to take Velleius' words as Cicero's own, the way that Cicero structures Velleius' words communicates quite the opposite. Velleius, throughout these many criticisms of rival doctrines, comes across as overly confident, pompous, and potentially delusional. When he begins his monologue, Cicero describes him as *sane*

¹⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 28].
coronae similem efficit (stephanen appellat) continentem ardorem lucis orbem, qui cingit caelum, quem appellat deum

¹⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 34].
nulla species divina describitur

¹⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 37].
qui neque formam dei intellegi posse censeat neque in dis sensum esse dicat dubitetque omnino, deus animans necne sit

¹⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, [39 - 40].
Translation to English: <http://www.epicurus.net/en/herodotus.html>

¹⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 26].
neque sensum omnino

²⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 29].
slips in the most foul opinion

²¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 29].
sensu omni carere

fidenter and *nihil tam verens*²². Velleius also speaks negatively about the other philosophers that he counters, Parmenides was devising *quidem commenticium quiddam*²³ and Empedocles *opinione turpissime labitur*²⁴. Although the Epicureans' postulations about sensation and its connection to intelligence were also connected to their assertion on the existence of the atoms, it becomes clear that this doctrinal school was not highly esteemed during the time of Cicero.

Bibliography

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²² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 18].
wholly confident, fearing nothing so much

²³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 28].
assuredly something fictional

²⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, [I, 29].
slips in the most foul opinion