

THE PROBLEM OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN EPICURUS

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Resumen. En el sistema atomista de Epicuro los dioses son seres inmortales. Sin embargo, el alma humana es mortal, aunque la mente tenga una composición atómica similar a la de los cuerpos de los dioses. El capítulo investiga la cuestión de por qué los dioses son inmortales, mientras que el alma humana no puede ser inmortal. La inmortalidad de los dioses se debe al principio supra-atómico *de isonomia* que requiere la proporción de seres inmortales y mortales. El alma humana no puede ser inmortal probablemente porque la memoria de las imperfecciones de la vida terrenal sería eventualmente perjudicial a la integridad del alma.

Summary. In the atomistic system of Epicurus, the gods are immortal beings. However, the human soul is mortal, although the mind has a similar atomic composition as the gods' bodies. The chapter investigates the problem why the gods are immortal and the human soul cannot be immortal. The immortality of the gods is due to the supra-atomic *isonomia* principle which requires even proportion of immortal and mortal beings. The human soul cannot be immortal probably because the memory of imperfections of earthly life would eventually be detrimental to the integrity of the soul.

Palabras clave: Epicuro, atomismo, escatología, inmortalidad, alma.

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Epicurus, a philosophical heir of the atomists, viewed everything in the world as composed of atoms which freely float in the void. The soul is no different.

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The soul is a body composed of fine atoms spread throughout the entire body and is comparable to breath ($\pi\nu\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\mu\alpha$) saturated with heat. The mind is one

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part of the soul composed of particularly fine atoms (DL 10.63).¹ This can be taken to mean that the soul is composed of three types of atoms: breath atoms, heat atoms, and mind atoms.² In addition to these three types, Lucretius also mentioned air atoms (L 3.234, 269). Four types of soul atoms are also mentioned by Aetius 4.3.11: a nameless type responsible for sensation, air atoms for rest, heat atoms for the apparent heat of the body, and breath atoms for motion. The nameless type is responsible not only for sensation but also, according to Plutarch, for judgment, memory, love, and hate (*Adv. Col.* 1118e). Atoms of this nameless type are in the deepest, innermost part the body, where they form, as it were, the soul of the soul (L 3.273-275). This soul of the soul can be identified with the rational part (τὸ λογικόν) of the soul that is located in the chest (DL 10.66); the rational part is the mind (*animus, mens*, L 3.139-140), the directing and governing principle that “rules over the entire body” (L 3.138, 281). The irrational part (τὸ ἄλογον, DL 10.66), which is spirit (*anima*),³ is spread throughout the body and serves as the sensory system (L 3.370-380). The rational and irrational parts together form a union (*una natura*) that cannot be separated (L 3.136-137).

The soul atoms are smooth, fine, round atoms that are different from fire atoms (DL 10.66; L 3.179, 186-187, 190, 205, 244, 425-426). The soul atoms are so small and fine they are virtually weightless (L 3.230), so that, when the soul leaves the body after death, there is no appreciable decrease of the weight of the body (L 3.208-214). However, in spite of such a difference in weight between the soul and body, the soul is the principle of life and the principle of motion of the body.

The soul is also the cognitive principle. It is responsible for sensory perception in which it is supported by the sensory organs of the body (DL 10.63-64). The body serves as a protective container, and, in separation from the body, the soul could not sense anything (DL 10.66). The bodily sensory organs need the animating force of the soul to fulfill their role, and, without the soul, the body cannot have sensation (DL 10.65). Thus, the body and soul form a union, and, in separation, their functionality is lost.⁴

¹ Abbreviations used: DL – Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, L – Lucretius, *De rerum naturae*, ND – Cicero, *De natura deorum*.

² J.M. Rist, 1972, *Epicurus: an introduction*, Cambridge, p. 75; the problem of parts of the soul is discussed by G.B. Kerferd, 1971, “Epicurus’ doctrine of the soul”, *Phronesis* 16, pp. 80-96.

³ Lucretius also referred to the entire soul – the union of the rational and irrational parts – as *anima* (L 3.421-424); J. Annas, 1992, *Hellenistic philosophy of mind*, Berkeley, pp. 145, 147.

⁴ Annas, 1992, p. 149.

All sensation can be reduced to touch since “touch, only touch, faithful to us in each moment through the sense of the body” brings sensory information (L 2.434-435). Seeing consists in the εἶδωλα – thin atomic skins emitted constantly by objects of perception to the eye, that is, the *eidola* strike or touch the eye which, as any other body part, comprises soul atoms, and, through these atoms, perception is transmitted to the mind. Upon the contact of atoms coming from an object – the *eidola* in the case of sight – a presentation (φαντασία) arises. Epicurus spoke about the perceptions of sense organs and of the mind (διάνοια, DL 10.38, 51), thereby putting the mind and sensory perception on the same level and thus seeing the operations of the mind as a kind of touch.

Sense perception is irrational and has no memory (DL 10.31). Reason is completely dependent on sensations, and all thoughts (ἐπίνοιαι) are derived from them by coincidence, by analogy, by comparison, and by combination with a little help of reasoning (DL 10.32). That is, “it is necessary to judge the imperceptible (ἄδηλον) by reasoning (λογισμός) in accordance with perception” (DL 10.39). Reasoning makes certain assertions about things inaccessible to the senses and must establish compatibility (agreement) between the imperceptible and the observable phenomena.⁵

Because the soul forms a union with the body, it meets the fate of the body, which is death. The soul cannot exist independently outside the body (L 3.788-789 = 5.132-133), and, when the body dies, the soul must die with it (L 3.417-418, 798-799; Aetius 4.7.4). The soul is simply mortal by nature (L 3.831) and dissolves in the air after death (L 3.455-465).

To show that the soul is mortal, Lucretius listed three imperishable things: atoms, because they are solid and nothing can penetrate and thus destroy them; the void, since no physical contact can affect it; and the totality of things, since there is no place where its parts can escape (L 3.806-818 = 5.351-363). Imperishability is seemingly limited to single atoms, to the void, and to the world as a whole. All atomic compounds eventually disintegrate and perish. However, there is one remarkable exception to this rule, an exception that Lucretius curiously did not include in his list of three imperishable entities, namely the gods, although elsewhere he recognized the gods as immortal. This omission can be attributed to the unfinished character of the *De rerum naturae*, but it is more likely that Lucretius felt uneasy with Epicurus’ permission of the existence of some imperishable atomic aggregates. Probably for this reason, Lucretius seldom mentioned the gods, as he was likely uncertain how to approach the problem of their existence and delayed a

⁵ E. Asmis, 1984, *Epicurus’ scientific method*, Ithaca, p. 178.

discussion of the gods' nature to some more opportune time. In fact, he stated as much explicitly by promising such a discussion (L 5.155) but the promise was never fulfilled.⁶

How is it possible that the gods are immortal? If such an anomaly is permitted in the atomistic system, why is it not extended to the human soul?

2

The gods are beings who are inaccessible to sensory perception – “subtle is the nature of the gods, far removed from the perception of our senses, and with difficulty is it seen by a part of the soul [called] the mind” (L 5.148-149). This is because they comprise much finer atoms than the atoms composing the irrational part of the human soul; they are of a fine nature (*tenuis natura*), so fine that they cannot be perceived by the senses but only by the mind, and even that with some difficulty. This perception takes place in dreams and visions, when the *eidola* of the gods pass through the rough structure of the human body and irrational soul to reach the mind.⁷

The Epicurean gods are anthropomorphic beings (DL 10.139, Aetius 1.7.34). In particular, they are endowed with voice and form bonds among themselves. They breathe, eat, and drink, but require no sleep. They speak in Greek or in “something not far different.”⁸

For Democritus, the gods were not immortal, only difficult to destroy (B166). However, Epicurus explicitly stated that the gods are imperishable: “first believe that a god is an immortal and blessed being” (DL 10.123, 139; Plutarch, *De def. or.* 420e; L 2.646-647). In addition to the three imperishable entities, Lucretius also stated that an immortal entity cannot lose anything, in particular, there should be no outflow of atoms from it (L 3.517-518), since nothing that changes can be immortal (L 3.756). This points to the special status of the gods, who constantly emit *eidola* and yet are immortal, which is also admitted by Lucretius (L 6.76). One element that enhances their immortality is their dwelling place.

The gods live in the *intermundia* (*μετακόσμια*, Hippolytus, *Philos.* 22.3; *ND* 1.18), the space between individual worlds, where they are exposed to a much lesser extent to the motion of atoms as they would in any world. However, as all beings in the Epicurean universe, they constantly emit *eidola*. To maintain the

⁶ Cf. W. Scott, 1883, “The physical constitution of the Epicurean gods”, *Journal of Philology* 12, p. 226.

⁷ DL 10.31, 139; L 4.324-331, 5.148-149, 6.77; *ND* 1.49.

⁸ Philodemus, *De dis* 3, col. 13.36-14.6, Diels; cf. Sextus Empiricus 9.178.

constancy of their existence and their immortality, they rely on “an infinite stream of very similar images formed from the innumerable atoms [which] arises and flows towards the gods” (*ND* 1.49). This provides a feeding mechanism for the gods that assures proper replenishment of their divine bodies with atoms that replace the atoms in the emitted *eidola*. The incoming *eidola* apparently come from the outside, from the existing world. After these *eidola* pass through the atmosphere and, then, the aethereal region of the stars,⁹ they are purified leaving the rough atoms behind so that only fine atoms remain and are able to get through any obstacle. This mechanism has to assure that the gods retain their structure throughout their infinite existence, but atoms used for that end are similar (fine and round, *DL* 10.66) to the atoms that constitute the gods.¹⁰ This is a remarkable mechanism that cannot be explained only in terms of the random motion of atoms. It is a macro mechanism level, irreducible to random atom movement. It must rely on a nonatomic principle, on a law that creates order out of randomness and unpredictability of the swerving motions of atoms. This is the principle of “exact balance in all creation – what Epicurus calls *isonomia* or equal distribution,” according to which “if the destructive elements in the world are countless, the forces of conservation must likewise be countless” (*ND* 1.50; *L* 2.569-576 speaks about the “balanced strife” of the motions of destruction and the motions of creation and increase). That is, the creative processes of the emergence of new entities balanced the destructive processes of perishing and decay. A particular manifestation of the *isonomia* principle is the constant maintenance of the proportion between mortal and immortal creatures: “if there is a specific quantity of mortal creatures, the tally of immortals is no fewer” (*ND*, 1.50). That is, the existence of imperishable beings is required by a very general proportionality principle. The nature of these beings is not determined, but, when the principle is taken on a more specific level, there should be as many anthropomorphic immortal gods as the number of mortals (humans or – in other worlds – nonhuman rational beings)¹¹; but also, there should be at least as many imperishable tree-like entities as the number of currently

⁹ Cf. the route of the *eidola* originating in the gods, K. Kleve, 1963, *Gnosis theon: die Lehre von der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis in der epikureischen Theologie*, Oslo, pp. 51, 55.

¹⁰ Philodemus, *De dis* 3, col. 10.38-11.2, probably also *L* 5.1175-1176; cf. J. Kany-Turpin, 1986, “Les images divines: Cicéron lecteur d’Épicure”, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 176, pp. 48, 53-54. “The gods are not like the pond, but like the river,” Scott, 1883, p. 217; “their identity must be like that of a river or a waterfall in which the form remains though the substance changes,” B. Farrington, 1967, *The faith of Epicurus*, New York, p. 116.

¹¹ More dogmatically, “a god exists because it is necessary that there exists in the world something outstanding, exceptional, and blessed,” said Epicurus (*Lactantius, De ira Dei* 9.4; *ND* 2.46).

growing trees, at least as many imperishable stones as the number of stones in existence, etc. (cf. *ND* 1.109). Moreover, the very general *isonomia* principle does not specify how the immortality of immortal beings should be assured. This is the role of a subsidiary law of nature, which guarantees that the emitted divine *eidola* are promptly and regularly replaced by incoming *eidola*.

However, a physical mechanism of properly balanced exchange of *eidola* is not sufficient to assure the imperishability of the gods.¹² Any trace of destructive processes should be removed from their lives. The gods must not be worried about anything because “trouble, concern, anger, and favor are incompatible with blessedness” (DL 10.77). Undermining their blessedness, i.e., their perfect happiness, amounts to an intrusion of a destructive element into their lives; undermining their blessedness means the existence of imperfection which, if not removed, can have only fatal consequences. And thus, the gods enjoy “immunity from burdensome duties” (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.121), they are free from cares, from earthly catastrophes, etc.,¹³ do not experience any of the suffering found in the human world (L 2.646-651), and know total happiness (DL 10.123). They rejoice in their wisdom and virtue, assured that they will always enjoy supreme and eternal pleasures (*ND* 1.51). This virtue includes a disinterest in human affairs, or any affairs, for that matter. The gods are not concerned with the affairs of this world since the state of eternal blessedness and happiness is incompatible with preoccupations and worries (DL 10.76-77; Aetius 1.7.7; L 2.646-651), and everything in nature is the work of nature itself, with no participation of the gods (L 2.1090-1092). In this, Epicurus follows Aristotle and his unperturbed and detached unmoved mover that is eternally thinking about its own thinking.¹⁴ They are self-absorbed beings who cannot have anything to do with human troubles and joys. This means, on the positive side, that they are not responsible for human unhappiness and do not meddle in human lives (DL 10.139) in the manner of the

¹² “In Epicurus’ system, the purely materialist-mechanist explanation is insufficient to account for the eternity of the gods,” G. Manolidis, 1987, *Die Rolle der Physiologie in der Philosophie Epikurs*, Frankfurt/M., p. 147. By the use in his theology of the *isonomia* principle, the law of “statistical equilibrium,” Epicurus showed his “metaphysical poverty, the powerlessness of empirical philosophy to express the demands of transcendence,” according to J. Moreau, 1968, “Épicure et la physique des dieux”, *Revue des Études Anciennes* 70, p. 294.

¹³ Cicero, *ND* 1.18, *De fin.* 2.75, *De div.* 2.40; L 3.19-22.

¹⁴ Cf. B.A.G. Fuller, 1912, “The gods of Epicurus”, *The Hibbard Journal* 10, p. 901; N.W. DeWitt, 1942, “The gods of Epicurus and the canon”, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* 36, series 3, section 2, p. 43; O. Gigon, 1985, “Zur Psychologie Epikurs”, in *Aspects de la philosophie hellénistique*, H. Flashar, O. Gigon (eds.), Vandoeuvres-Genève, p. 86.

Olympian gods. On the negative side, no help can be expected from the gods, since any interest by the gods in the human world would compromise their perfection and thus their immortal happy existence. What is counted among men as humane treatment of those who suffer is not included as a divine virtue which is a virtue of cold self-absorption with the interest of maintaining immortal existence. The gods experience neither anger nor joy because these emotions could weaken them (DL 10.139) and spend eternity in indifference to one another and to everything beyond the divine sphere.

Detached from the affairs of the world – of any world – the Epicurean gods play no role in the creation of the universe and no role in human life. It would be strange, said Lucretius, if beings who enjoy eternal felicity suddenly wanted to create a world. Therefore, the regularity of the movement of celestial bodies is not the result of the gods' working (DL 10.97). Also, there is no providence. The gods did not prepare the world for the benefit of men (L 5.156-164), as the Stoics believed, and everything that happens is eventually the result of chance (Hippolytus, *Philos.* 22.3), unless directed by laws that assure the validity of the *isonomia* principle. In this, the providential aspect of the traditional theology is fused into the supra-atomic impersonal laws of nature, while the personal gods are absorbed by indifference to anything beyond themselves.

The eternal perfection of the gods is also assured by their power of cognition (*ἡ δύνάμις τῆς διαγνώσεως*, Philodemus, *De dis* fr. 44.16). What this cognition and this knowledge is we can only guess. For example, it may include the recognition of the imminent world formation. The gods live in the *intermundia*, but this is also a place where new worlds are constantly generated from all kinds of atoms. Therefore, there must be initially a large enough concentration of atoms so that the entire world can be formed. These atoms could be potentially detrimental to the gods and to their fine bodies, so they must move somewhere else to avoid any harm.¹⁵ However, such a move may include the formation of a mental scenario of being harmed or destroyed by a strong stream of crude and large atoms. Even forming such a scenario can be disquieting for the blessedness of divine existence and, as such, injurious to the immortality of the gods. Therefore, the structure of divine knowledge appears to include only positive elements. In particular, in order to prevent harm by the incoming stream of atoms, the gods form an image of greener pastures, as it were, somewhere else in the *intermundia*, and move there never knowing that they thereby avoid the danger of destruction. The cognitive apparatus, emphasized in the sources as the basis of divine immortality, seems to be

¹⁵ "The transitory character of worlds threatens the immortality of the gods," R. Philippson, 1916, "Zur epikureischen Götterlehre", *Hermes* 51, p. 596.

different from human cognition in that it does not allow for negative knowledge, automatically filtering out negative elements or transforming them into positive ones. The gods are never troubled since they do not have a concept of a trouble, since potentially troublesome knowledge is expressed positively.

3

Why are human souls not immortal like the gods? Both human souls and the gods are made out of atoms, and because the gods can be perceived by the mind, at least mind atoms are of the same level of fineness. Epicurus could thus send souls to the *intermundia* to reside there detached from worldly affairs, spending eternity in self-centeredness and egotistic preoccupation like the gods. But he did not.

People's lives are full of bad events, misfortunes, mishaps, full of suffering and unhappiness, sickness and worries about the future (L 3.824-829). Because of the fears, worries and pains that fill the soul, the soul is just as mortal as the body (L 3.459-462). Arguably, people remember more clearly the bad than the good in their lives, and the power of the will is hardly sufficient to clear the memory of what one would be very glad to forget. Normally, time is the best physician, but, usually, more time than people have available in their lives is needed for bad memories to completely fade away. Bad memories are disquieting, sometimes to a considerable extent; they adversely affect one's life, wearing people out, not infrequently leading to suicide when a bad conscience is particularly bothersome. Among the gods, there is no room for bad memories, for disquiet, for a troubled conscience. One condition for eternal existence is freedom from trouble. The gods have only happy memories since they have always lived far from earthly troubles. They do not even have the concept of trouble, they do not know that an infinity of different worlds teeming with life – and suffering – exists in the universe. People with their memory simply would not last for eternity, since their memory would always impede an untroubled happiness. A solution that Epicurus might have proposed is to have death wipe out memory altogether, he might have made a death to be the death not only of the body but also of the memory that presumably resides in the soul. However, if this were the case, what would be the connection between the soul before and after death? In what way could the individuality of the dying person be retained? Not by the sameness of atoms which constantly come in and flow out. Certainly not by the remembrance of the past life, because memory has just been erased (cf. L 3.847-853). The sameness of individuality would at best be reduced to the sameness of the soul's form before and after death. This could hardly be considered immortality. This would be a new existence for the soul after death, with its cleaned up memory,

a fresh creation that has nothing to do with the person who just died. This would be pseudo-immortality, an immortality hardly deserving its name. This would be a pretense of immortality which seemingly Epicurus was unwilling to introduce into his system, although it would be perfectly compatible with the immortality of the gods. He could have chosen a middle course by requiring, at death, a cleanup of memory from what is bad and retaining only what is good. But, many a time, some memory is considered to be good when contrasted with a bad memory, although, by itself, it could be neutral. Also, it appears that for most people the amount of bad memories is larger, sometimes much larger, than the amount of good memories. Therefore, the deceased's soul that comprised only memories would be crippled, partial, and imperfectly connected to the soul before death. Could such a soul be considered the soul of the same individual, of the same person? Only partially, which means, ultimately, no: it is not the same person and thus the immortality would also be imperfect. Epicurus might have considered such an immortality unworthy of inclusion into his system.

However, on purely atomistic principles, it is possible to imagine that atoms of the same kind that constitute one's soul and body could occasionally cluster together in the future to reconstitute the same person. Lucretius denied such a possibility because memory would be erased (L 3.847-861). However, his argument is not convincing because memory, as everything else, is caused by a configuration of atoms, and thus it may reappear.¹⁶ Theoretically, therefore, in the Epicurean world, a punctuated immortality – not only of the soul but also of the body – is possible. The possibility of such an imperfect immortality is compatible with the view of the world of atoms and the void. Whether this would be a great consolation for those who want to continue their life after death is debatable. Very likely, this would amount to an undesirable immortality because it would almost certainly take place in a different surrounding, among different beings in a different world, because it also raises the possibility of the concurrent existence of two individuals representing the same person, although these individuals would very likely be worlds apart.

Although Epicurus rejected physical immortality, he supported a moral immortality of sorts. In his final admonition to Menoeceus he urged him to “live like a god among men; for a man living among immortal goods is not at all like a mortal living being” (DL 10.135). These immortal goods are the knowledge about the universe, which is the Epicurean physics. And thus Epicurus could offer this advice: “Remember that you are mortal by nature and one who took a limited time,

¹⁶ P. Preuss, 1994, *Epicurean ethics: katastematic hedonism*, Lewiston, pp. 54-55.

[and yet] you ascended through your investigations of nature to the infinite and to the eternal and have seen ‘what is, what will be, and what was before’ [*Il.* 1.70]” (*Sent. Vat.* 10). Equipped with such knowledge, the sage can find refuge in an untroubled life, the life in which there is no prospect of physical immortality, and thus the fear of the hereafter can disappear.¹⁷ Lacking this fear, the sage can say, “death is nothing to us” (DL 10.124, 139; L 3.830, 926).¹⁸ Epicurus recommended that we should remove the desire for immortality by recognizing the irrelevance of death to leading happy life (DL 10.124). Happiness does not depend on the length of life, and thus a mortal can be as happy as the immortal Zeus (*Sent. Vat.* 33) and infinite time offers the same amount of pleasure as limited time (DL 10.145). Had immortal life been possible, the sage would not have gained anything, since his life would be as happy and as pleasurable as the life that ends with irrevocable death. Therefore, the Epicurean sage is immortal, since he is convinced that “to be immortal is to live without thinking death relevant at all to one’s life.”¹⁹ However, such immortality is based on the mere redefinition of the word, a redefinition that removes the most important element from the concept, namely, unending existence. Can finite life – as happy and fulfilling as it may be – really be called immortal without violating the basic meaning of immortality? Such a life is at best a quasi-immortal, just as the tenuous bodies of the gods are quasi-bodies and their blood is quasi-blood (*ND* 1.49). Calling a mortal life immortal is well nigh to sophistry and offers only false hope to someone seeking true immortality.²⁰ It is difficult to see that many people will be moved by such a verbal device and be convinced that death is really nothing. Folding eschatology into the earthly life of a sage by the statement that immortality really means mortality is a desperate and unconvincing attempt to bridge the gap caused by the lack of eschatology in the Epicurean worldview.

¹⁷ “Someone who lives in the midst of imperishable goods in no manner resembles a mortal being,” J. Brun, 1966, *L’Épicurisme*, Paris, p. 110.

¹⁸ This statement “is only apparently confident and can in fact easily be turned around” ‘Only as long as we live, is death present – even though concealed as the mystery of life,’” H. Küng, 1984, *Eternal life?*, Garden City, p. 163 with a quotation from Eberhard Jüngel.

¹⁹ J. Warren, 2000, “Epicurean immortality”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 18, p. 261. Pleasure of the sage’s soul “is static, wants nothing of time, and is in this sense divine and immortal,” D. Konstan, 1973, *Some aspects of Epicurean psychology*, Leiden, p. 63. Although immortality has only “subjective reference” (p. 68), “men may enjoy a divine and immortal happiness, if this is properly understood” (p. 69). Thus, the proper understanding is subjective and one can define immortality as one wants – and the sage will define it as mortality.

²⁰ A fact recognized by Warren, 2000, 250.