**The Return of the Epicurean Gods**

Peter S. Groff

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Epicurus, the garden philosopher of antiquity, has emerged in recent years as a key predecessor to whom Nietzsche is uniquely indebted. This is not altogether surprising if we consider the virtually unparalleled ‘outsider’ status he occupied in the Western philosophical tradition for more than two millennia. During the long gestative period between Plato and Nietzsche, when metaphysics was almost universally considered the apex of human knowledge and philosophers were virtually unanimous in their assumption of a moral cosmos, Epicurus was one of the very few defenders of what Laurence Lampert has called the “subterranean tradition” of philosophical naturalism (Lampert 1993, p. 444). Consider the following list of philosophical heresies: Positing only atoms and the void, he denied the existence of any higher supersensible entities that might transcend the realm of nature. He envisioned a purposeless and infinite universe in which human beings occupied a minute, decentered, transient and insignificant place. He rejected all forms of teleology, denied any intelligence, design or divine providence in nature and explained everything, no matter how complex or important, in terms of chance and necessity. He was a severe critic of religious worldviews and believed that their central doctrines merely exploited human ignorance and fear, undermining the possibility of human flourishing. Accordingly, he rejected a widely-accepted cluster of doctrines: that that the gods play a creative or at least guiding role in the cosmos, that they monitor, are interested in, and even occasionally intervene in the affairs of human being, that our souls are deathless, and that there is an afterlife in which we will be rewarded or punished. Instead, he cheerfully embraced the finitude and mortality of human existence. Indeed, he envisioned the human being as an entirely corporeal entity and was arguably the first philosopher to take the body seriously in terms of its actual needs, capacities and limitations. Finally, he rejected any tradition conception of civic responsibility, advocating a quiet, simple, sequestered life, far from the contentions, anxieties and dangers of the political sphere.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The spirit of Epicurus looms largest in Nietzsche’s middle period works, where he is valorized as an ancient predecessor in the art of living,[[2]](#footnote-2) a model of the heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing[[3]](#footnote-3) and a formative naturalist who waged preemptive war on the Christian metaphysico-moral interpretation of the world.[[4]](#footnote-4) His influence lingers even through *Zarathustra*, despite its prophet-legislator’s distinctly Platonic embrace of grand politics.[[5]](#footnote-5) With the post-Zarathustran texts, however, an increasingly critical portrait of the garden philosopher emerges, which links his ataraxic hedonism and materialistic atomism more closely to the sort of impoverished suffering and reactive impulses that animated Christianity. By 1887, Nietzsche will come to see the Epicurean worldview as a kind of exhausted, superficially cheerful antipode to his own Dionysian world-affirmation.

Yet Epicurus will have played a critical role in enabling Nietzsche to attain this yea-saying standpoint, by providing him with formative strategies to help “de-deify” nature and overcome the residual “shadows of God” (GS 109).[[6]](#footnote-6) We can see this debt most clearly in Nietzsche’s critique of Christian monotheism and its various products: the immortal soul, eternal afterworldly reward or punishment, providential design, and of course the notion of a personal God intimately concerned with the most picayune details of human history. The specific aspect of Epicurus’ thought that makes this possible is his radical revisioning of the gods and their relation to human beings. My discussion here will accordingly focus on the way in which Nietzsche strategically retrieves Epicurean ‘theology’ and puts it to work in rethinking both the character of the divine and the perfectibility of the human. Of course, Nietzsche must ultimately move beyond the Epicurean standpoint, in order to found a new Dionysian religiosity.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet Epicurus’ singular experience of the world always remains a live possibility for Nietzsche, and it may remain one for us as well.

**EPICURUS AND THE DEATH OF GOD**

Epicurus plays a formative role inNietzsche’s conception of the death of god, primarily through his therapeutic arguments against fear of the gods and of death.[[8]](#footnote-8) Let us examine the latter first. As his famous therapeutic argument goes, “death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience” (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 125ff).[[9]](#footnote-9) That is to say, the person who fears death mistakenly projects experience and selfhood where there can in fact be none,[[10]](#footnote-10) and from this springs the mistaken belief in the possibility of a post-bodily afterlife. Epicurus’ therapeutic argument is itself predicated on a battery of more fundamental arguments intended to convince us that the soul is deathbound due to its corporeality and functional dependence upon the body.[[11]](#footnote-11) What is of interest to Nietzsche here, however, is not so much Epicurus’ thorough-goingly materialistic ontology (about which he ultimately will have grave reservations), but rather the way in which it serves as a purgative for superstitious fears about reward and punishment in the afterlife. Thus, in a section from *Dawn* entitled “The After Death” (*Das Nach-dem-Tode*), he celebrates his predecessor’s preemptive assault on the doctrine of the immortal soul and its capacity for eternal damnation:

In every corner of the Roman Empire, Christianity met with the representation of punishments in hell: numerous secret cults had brooded over the idea with special satisfaction as on the most fertile egg of their power. Epicurus had been of the opinion that nothing could be of greater service to his followers than to rip out the roots of *this* belief: his triumph, which resounds the most beautifully in the mouth of the somber yet clairvoyant disciple of his teaching, the Roman Lucretius, came too early—Christianity took the belief in subterranean terrors, which had already begun to fade, under its special protection, and it was very clever in so doing!” (D72)[[12]](#footnote-12)

This tactical exploitation of irrational fears was one of the chief causes, on Nietzsche’s account, of Christianity’s triumph over Epicureanism in their struggle for the Roman mind. It is only with the onset of later modernity that the emancipatory idea of a “*final and irrevocable death*” was finally “recaptured” by science: “the ‘after death’ no longer concerns us!” he concludes, “An unspeakable blessing, which is yet still too recent to be experienced far and wide as such.—And Epicurus triumphs anew!” (D 72).[[13]](#footnote-13) It is no coincidence then that two years later, when his prophet Zarathustra casts the soul as a perishable entity born of the earth, he frames his preliminary teaching in unmistakably Epicurean terms: “all you are speaking of does not exist,” he says by way of consolation to the dying tight-rope walker, “there is no Devil and no Hell. Your soul will be dead even sooner than your body: so fear nothing more!” (Z I Prologue 6).[[14]](#footnote-14) Even in his later writings, when Nietzsche had become considerably more critical of his naturalistic predecessor, he continues to recognize and valorize this achievement. In the *Antichrist*, for example, he revisits the claim that Epicurus fought against “the corruption of souls by the concepts of guilt, punishment, and immortality” even before Christianity had coalesced and codified them into a hegemonic metaphysico-moralistic worldview (A 58).[[15]](#footnote-15) In a note from Spring 1888, he puts a finer point on it: “The struggle against the ‘old faith’ as undertaken by Epicurus was, in a strict sense, a struggle against pre-existing Christianity—a struggle against the old world grown senile and sick, already gloomy, moralized, soured by feelings of guilt” (KSA 13:16[15]).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Contrast this gloomy, sour world with the bright, cheerful, unhaunted Earth as Nietzsche believes Epicurus experienced it. One finds several bucolic reconstructions of Epicurus’ world in Nietzsche’s writings. Perhaps the most striking is an aphorism from *The Wanderer and His Shadow* entitled “*Et in Arcadia ego*,” which offers a beautiful portrait of the world of Epicurus, prompted by one of Poussin’s eponymous paintings and informed, no doubt, by Nietzsche’s own rustic wanderings (KSA 8:43[3]). After describing a lush pastoral landscape that could have come straight out of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, he concludes:

All this beauty worked together to create a feeling of awe and of silent worship of the moment of its revelation; involuntarily, as though nothing were more natural, I inserted Greek heroes into this pure, sharp world of light (that had nothing at all of yearning, expectancy, of pro- and retrospectiveness about it); I must have been feeling as Poussin and his students did: heroic and idyllic at the same time.—And individual human beings also *lived* in this way; persistently *felt* themselves to be in the world and the world in them, and among them one of the greatest human beings, the inventor of a heroic-idyllic form of philosophizing: Epicurus. (WS 295)[[17]](#footnote-17)

Nietzsche often associates Epicurus with sunlight and the prospect of a clear, bright, well-lit world.[[18]](#footnote-18) And the lack of “yearning, expectancy, of pro- and retrospectiveness” presumably describes the inexhaustible richness and immeasurable value of the present moment that one unlocks through the practice of Epicurean self-cultivation (Hadot 1995, pp. 223-26). To experience the pleasure of the present as a joyful gift is what it means “to be in the world and [for] the world to be in [you].” As Keith Ansell-Pearson has pointed out, the painting that inspired Nietzsche’s reflection on Epicurus here (“Et in Arcadia ego”) is in fact a *memento mori* of sorts that depicts the ubiquity of death, even in an earthly paradise (Ansell-Pearson 2014, pp. 246-49).[[19]](#footnote-19) Yet Nietzsche surprisingly leaves that crucial detail out of his description, suggesting perhaps the Garden-philosopher’s triumph over the fear of death and his consequent being at home in the world. Not surprisingly, Epicurus’ “heroic-idyllic form of philosophizing,” and the luminous naturalistic worldview it discloses, anticipate in many ways Nietzsche’s own halcyon vision of the innocence of becoming, particularly as exemplified in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.[[20]](#footnote-20) One can see why Nietzsche views Epicurus as a rare exemplar who remained “true to the earth” when others allowed themselves to be seduced by otherworldly hopes (ZPrologue 3).

Nietzsche also recognizes, as did many of his predecessors, that the spirit of Epicureanism, which lay dormant for so many centuries, was a crucial force in the emerging scientific worldview of modernity and the problematizing of Christian faith in the West. Recall his claim that “Epicurus triumphs anew” as modern science reconquers the doctrine of the immortal soul and afterlife (D72). This is part of a broader trend. “How it stands with regard to the greater truth,” he points out, “can be seen from the fact that the awakening sciences have point by point attached themselves to Epicurus’ philosophy, but have point by point rejected Christianity” (HH I 68).[[21]](#footnote-21) One might sum this up by saying that when Nietzsche proclaims the death of God, he is in effect acknowledging the immanent victory of the Epicurean worldview, insofar as it signifies (1) the loss of faith in the possibility of any supersensible world, (2) the lack of any abiding rational, moral or aesthetic order to existence, (3) the absence of any overarching design, purpose or meaning, (4) the exhaustive explanatory power of chance and necessity, (5) the sovereignty of generation and destruction, (6) the inescapable fact of our own radical finitude, and (7) the new experience of a world without the possibility of transcendence.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Now, put this way, one might think that Epicurus’ contribution to Nietzsche’s new worldview is primarily doctrinal. But the deeper connection arguably lies in their shared intellectual temperament, something Nietzsche himself at times acknowledges. For instance, in an aphorism from Book V of *The Gay Science* entitled “Why we look like Epicureans,” Nietzsche explicitly identifies in his own thought “an almost Epicurean bent for knowledge that will not easily let go of the questionable character of things; an aversion to big moral words and gestures; a taste that rejects all crude, four-square opposites [*plumpen vierschrötigen Gegensätze*] and is proudly conscious of its practice in having reservations” (GS 375). Nietzsche’s Epicureanism consists in his own cautious mistrust of “ultimate convictions”—the “enchantments and deceptions of . . . every strong faith, every unconditional Yes and No”—as well as his “jubilant curiosity” (*frohlockende Neugierde*) as a free mind or spirit. In this respect, Epicurus’ cheerful naturalistic investigations, which were never an end in themselves but always in the interest of bettering life, might be understood as a kind of ancient *fröhliche Wissenschaft*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

An earlier passage from the *Wanderer and His Shadow* offers a nice example of this approach:

Epicurus, the soother of souls in late antiquity, had the wonderful insight that is so rarely found nowadays, that solving the ultimate [*letzten und äussersten*] theoretical questions is not at all necessary for soothing the disposition [*Beruhigung des Gemüths*].[[24]](#footnote-24) So it was sufficient for him to tell those who were tormented by “fear of the gods”: “Even if the gods do exist, they do not concern themselves with us”—instead of disputing fruitlessly and from afar about the ultimate question of whether the gods exist at all. That position is much more favorable and more powerful: one gives the other person a few steps advantage and thus makes him more willing to listen and to take it to heart. But as soon as he sets about proving the opposite—that the gods do concern themselves with us—into what labyrinths and thorn bushes the poor fellow must fall, all on his own, without any cunning on the part of his interlocutor, who only has to have enough humanity and refinement to conceal his compassion at this spectacle [*Schauspiele*]. Eventually the other person reaches a point of disgust, the strongest argument against any proposition, disgust with his own assertion: he grows cold and goes away in the same frame of mind as the pure atheist: “what do the gods really matter to me! To the devil with them!” (WS 7).[[25]](#footnote-25)

Epicurus consoles us, Nietzsche points out, not by definitively refuting the gloomy, moralistic, pseudo-scientific worldviews that trouble people’s minds (worldviews Nietzsche describes as “belonging half to physics and half to morals”), but rather simply by showing the possibility of *multiple* hypotheses, and thus the *optionality* of such worldviews. His “two calming formulations,” reduced to their simplest form, are “first, even supposing that this is the case, it matters nothing to us; second, it may be so, it may also be otherwise” (WS 7).[[26]](#footnote-26)

**EPICURUS ON THE GODS**

This may initially seem like an odd characterization of Epicurus’ approach to the question of the divine. One the one hand, his radically naturalistic approach would seem to cut off any such inquiry at the knees: it is virtually axiomatic in his system that there can be no entities that transcend the realm of physical nature.[[27]](#footnote-27) Nor does there seem to be any explanatory *need* for the divine in Epicurus’ worldview: the cosmos is eternal, so there is no need for a first temporal cause, atoms are self-subsistent and indestructible so there is no need for an additional ontological ground, all order and complexity can supposedly be explained from the ground up (in terms of atomic necessity and chance), so the purposiveness and intelligibility of the world seem to stand in no further need of explanation.[[28]](#footnote-28) Indeed, the multiverse is for him a much larger, more imperfect and less providential place than theists typically envision.

Yet in spite of all this, Epicurus seems to concede the existence of the gods even as he teaches us not to fear them—a fact that has sometimes frustrated those who want to enlist him as an early advocate of atheism.[[29]](#footnote-29) This is often explained in terms of Epicurus’ empiricism, his materialist model of perception, and the naïve realism that follows from it (reports of religious experiences in which people ‘see’ anthropomorphic gods must be real, even if they don't necessarily signify what the subjects think).[[30]](#footnote-30) Sometimes it is simply cast as a matter of socio-political expediency.[[31]](#footnote-31) But these explanations may make Epicurus’ approach more dogmatic and less interesting than it really is. As we saw earlier, Nietzsche attributed to him the wonderful insight that to quiet the mind, it is not necessary to have solved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions (WS 7).[[32]](#footnote-32) This is to say that, for Epicurus, philosophy is essentially an “art of living” (*Kunst des Lebens*).[[33]](#footnote-33) That in any case is the way Nietzsche understands Epicureanism, and it is an interpretive tack that some contemporary scholars have recently embraced.[[34]](#footnote-34) Pierre Hadot, for instance, has argued that Greek and Hellenistic philosophy was not first and foremost a theoretical endeavor aimed at the systematic acquisition of knowledge (i.e., offering an accurate and exhaustive account of what is), but rather a ‘way of life’ (*bios*) or ‘art of living’ (*technē tou biou*)—a practice concerned with the therapy, cultivation and transfiguration of the self.[[35]](#footnote-35) Specifically with regard to Epicurus he writes,

Above all we must not imagine Epicurean physics as a scientific theory, intended to reply to objective, disinterested questions. The ancients knew that the Epicureans were hostile to the idea of science studied for its own sake. Indeed philosophical theory is here merely the expression and consequence of the original choice of life, and a means of obtaining peace of mind and pure pleasure. . . . [R]esearch is carried out only to ensure peace of mind, either thanks to the fundamental dogmas which eliminate the fear of the gods and of death; or in the case of the secondary problems, thanks to one or more explanations which will suppress the mind’s worries by showing that such phenomena are merely physical. (Hadot 2002, pp. 118-19)

Epicurus’ doctrines, on the Nietzschean-Hadotian reading at least, are essentially tools in the service of life, and his discourse about the gods is ultimately practical in nature. His primary concern is to cure human beings of the maladies of the soul—fear of the gods, fear of death, fear of pain, unnecessary and groundless desires—and thus make possible an optimal form of life characterized by unperturbedness of the soul and peace of mind (*ataraxia*). The key question, then, is not whether the gods exist, but whether that question itself matters, i.e., whether it makes a difference to us at the end of the day.[[36]](#footnote-36) If there are gods, they “are not such as the many believe them to be” (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 123). This is an old philosophical chestnut, but Epicurus goes well beyond the corrective accounts offered e.g. by Socrates’ bowdlerization of the Greek myths (the gods cannot be the cause of any evils, nor can they lie or shape-shift).[[37]](#footnote-37) On Epicurus’ account the gods cannot be vindictive, micro-managing metaphysical hangmen bent on punishing all too human transgressions, but are rather “blessed and incorruptible animals”: distant, tranquil, painless and self-sufficient (*Letter to Menoeceus* 123-24, cf. *Principal Doctrines* I).[[38]](#footnote-38) As such, they require from us no acknowledgement, sacrifices or honor.[[39]](#footnote-39) Nor are they responsible for the governance of earthly things or with meting out cosmic justice (both of which would be petty and unnecessary nuisances). In short, they are not watching over us and are utterly unconcerned with the drama of the human condition. We might reconstruct his therapeutic argument as follows: if the gods *do not* exist, there is nothing to worry about, if they *do* exist, they surely have better things to worry about than us.[[40]](#footnote-40) Either way, the wise person does not fear them.

She does, however, imitate them. And it is precisely here that we find the sole ‘positive’ dimension of Epicurus’ theology: for him, the gods function first and foremost as exemplars of a good human life. In this respect, Epicurus adopts his adversary Plato’s influential conception of philosophy as “becoming like god so far as it is possible” (*homoiōsis theōi* *kata to dunaton*).[[41]](#footnote-41) But whereas Plato understood this assimilation in terms of cultivating that which is highest, most divine and potentially deathless in us (the intellect and our apprehension of moral ideas),[[42]](#footnote-42) Epicurus conceives of it in terms of approximating the gods’ unperturbedness and painlessness.[[43]](#footnote-43) The sage embodies, to whatever extent possible for a human being, the self-sufficiency, tranquility and blessedness of the gods. She will, as Epicurus famously says, “live as a god among human beings” (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 135).[[44]](#footnote-44) And with that, of course, comes a certain distance from, and lack of concern for, the world of everyday human affairs.

**NIETZSCHE’S STRATEGIC EMBRACE OF THE EPICUREAN GODS**

Nietzsche, unsurprisingly, is quite taken with Epicurus’ perspective on the divine and sees in it a handy tool for dismantling the Christian worldview. “The worthiest conception of the gods was the Epicureans,” he observes in a note from early 1882. “How could the unconditioned have anything to do with the conditioned? How could it be its cause [*Ursache*], or its law, or its righteousness, or its love and providence? ‘If there are gods, they do not care for us’—this is the only true sentence in all philosophy of religion” (KSA 9:16[8]). He also repeatedly emphasizes Epicurus’ teaching of the gods’ self-sufficiency, distance from and lack of concern with the human world. For instance, in reflecting on the often thoughtless ways in which human beings marry, and thus disrupt and squander, their lives, Nietzsche (playfully envisioning himself as a god looking down on all this) concludes, “let us cease to be the enthusiastic spectators [*Zuschauer*] and fools of this spectacle [*Schauspiel*] without a goal!”—It was in this frame of mind that Epicurus’ gods once withdrew into their divine quietude and beatitude [*ihre göttliche Stille und Seligkeit*]: they were tired of human beings and their trafficking in love” (D 150).[[45]](#footnote-45)

Compare this with the omniscient, invasive and judgmental God of Christian monotheism, for whom every human choice is saturated with meaning and consequence (indeed, potentially worthy of eternal punishment)—a tireless, perpetually fascinated spectator from whom not even the smallest pecadillos can be kept private. One finds the most undiluted expression of this divine voyeurism in the Fourth and Last Part of *Zarathustra*, where one of the higher human beings (the “ugliest man”) explains how he finally became the murderer of God:

“[H]e—*had* to die. He saw with eyes that saw *everything*—he saw the depths and grounds of the human, all its veiled disgrace and ugliness.

His pitying knew no shame: he crawled into my filthiest corner. This most inquisitive, overimportunate, over-pitying creature had to die. . . .

The human cannot *endure* that such a witness (*Zeuge*) should live.” (Z IV Man)

Or, to express the same idea in a more light-hearted spirit: “‘Is it true that God is everywhere?’ a little girl asked her mother; ‘I think that’s indecent’” (GS Preface 4). In order to find a way out of this indecency, Nietzsche will occasionally entertain pre-Christian forms of polytheism. The immediate appeal of ancient paganism is obvious: it offers an irreducible multiplicity of gods, none of whom has the market cornered on power, goodness or knowledge.[[46]](#footnote-46) Of course, the Greek pantheon itself constituted a gaggle of “divine spectators,” even if in their case there was a world-historical spectacle that deserved and perhaps even demanded an audience.[[47]](#footnote-47) Epicurus’ gods, on the other hand, simply don’t care.

There is thus something refreshing and liberating—a kind of intellectual-spiritual ‘cleanliness’—about the Epicurean doctrine of the distant gods. And so Nietzsche adopts it provisionally, as a countermyth of sorts, to destabilize the hegemony of the Christian worldview by showing us a radically different alternative. Yet there are times when Nietzsche will again feel, at least for a passing moment, the seductiveness of the omniscient, micromanaging, infinitely-solicitous Christian God. This polarity between the radically opposed worldviews of Christianity and Epicureanism is perhaps best captured in an aphorism from the *Gay Science* entitled “Personal providence.”ThereNietzsche half-jokingly describes what he says may pose the “greatest danger” to his own yea-saying worldview—a danger that could ultimately rob him of his hard-won spiritual freedom. Having as a good modern Epicurean embraced the “beautiful chaos of existence” and rejected all providential reason and goodness, he admits that he is more inclined than ever to recognize an almost perfectly-calibrated design and purpose imbedded within every chance occurrence:

For it is only now that the idea of a personal providence confronts us with the most penetrating force . . . now that we can see how palpably always everything that happens to us turns out for the best. Every day and every hour, life seems to have no other wish than to prove this proposition again and again. Whatever it is, bad weather or good, the loss of a friend, sickness, slander, the failure of some letter to arrive, the spraining of an ankle, a glance into a shop, a counter-argument, the opening of book, a dream, a fraud—either immediately or very soon after it proves to be something that ‘must not be missing’; it has a profound significance and use precisely for *us*. Is there any more dangerous seduction that might tempt one to renounce one’s faith in the gods of Epicurus who have no care and are unknown, and to believe instead in some petty deity who is full of care and personally knows every little hair on our head and finds nothing nauseous in the most miserable small service? (GS 277)

In order to feel the full force of this passage, one must bear in mind its placement within the text. It is preceded by GS 276, which opens Book IV of the *Gay Science* and offers the first articulation of Nietzsche’s teaching of *amor fati.* And it is followed by GS 278, which—in a rather Epicurean spirit—reflects on the ubiquity and inescapability of death. The *amor fati* doctrine—seeing as beautiful what is necessary in things—opens up the possibility of saying ‘yes’ to everything: imperfection, suffering, injustice, even one’s own inescapable finitude and mortality.[[48]](#footnote-48) The power of this affirmative doctrine, however, threatens to disrupt or radically transform the disenchanted, naturalistic world in which it emerges, in this case by leading Nietzsche back to a kind of re-deified, providential worldview. However, he backs off in the final reflection, concludes that we should “leave the gods in peace” and writes it off to our own highly-developed skill in interpreting our experiences: “good old chance; now and then chance guides our hand, and the wisest providence could not think up a more beautiful music than that which our foolish hand produces then.” (GS 277).

In spite of the nascent tension mentioned above, then, Nietzsche and Epicurus still appear to be fellow travelers, united by their exceptional distrust of metaphysico-moral worldviews. Epicurus’ ‘negative’ portrait of the gods as distant, unconcerned and disengaged serves as a useful provisional tool in Nietzsche’s multipronged assault on Christian monotheism. But interestingly, Nietzsche also appropriates Epicurus’ ‘positive’ conception of the gods as exemplars for human life. Epicurus, as we saw, envisions in the sage a virtually divine form of life that shares in the blessed unperturbedness and equanimity of the gods themselves. In this respect Epicurean self-sculpture takes as its imitative model a stable, pre-existing kind of being just as much as Plato’s did. But what could *homoiōsis theōi* mean in the Nietzschean cosmos? The death of God appears to eliminate the possibility of any such normative model. Nietzschean perfectionism thus becomes an open-ended, nonteleological, experimental ascent to some as yet unknown, undetermined nature. And yet Nietzsche nonetheless retains the language of spiritual titanism. For instance, after identifying humankind itself (or at least some subsection thereof) as God’s murderers, the madman reflects, “Must we ourselves not become gods to appear worthy of it?” (GS 125).[[49]](#footnote-49) This may at first seem to be an excessive bit of rhetoric. But one finds notes from the period of *Zarathustra* that compare both Zarathustra and the figure of the superhuman (*Übermensch*) to a kind of Epicurean god.

For instance, in a suggestive fragment from the spring of 1883, Nietzsche differentiates the “last human” (the nadir of human potentiality) from the superhuman (the apex) and then adds, “The goal is **not** *at all* to conceive of the latter as the masters of the former, but rather: the two kinds should exist alongside one another, if possible, separated; the one like *the Epicurean gods, not taking care of the other* [*sich um die andere nicht kümmerd*]” (KSA 10:7[21]). The superhumans are then not the masters (*Herren*) of lesser humanity, just as the Epicurean gods are not the overseers of humanity or the cosmos itself. They do not “take care” of them; they have no concern for them. They have better things to do. And like the gods, they are self-sufficient in their blessedness: they do not need care or worship or sacrifices from lesser humanity—indeed, such recognition would be effectively meaningless to them.

A note from Autumn 1883 describes Zarathustra’s convalescence in the conclusion of the Third Part of the book (after he has articulated and affirmed the teaching of the eternal recurrence):

Zarathustra musing like a *god* about whether he will communicate his thought to human beings. What motives does a god feel for human beings?

To reinterpret religion from this point of view: the god in his relationship to human beings.

Zarathustra 3. ‘*I* myself am happy’ – when he has **abandoned** human beings, *he returns to himself*. . . . *How* the superhuman must typically *live*, like an Epicurean god. (KSA 10:16 [85])[[50]](#footnote-50)

An interesting tangle of associations presents itself here. First, Zarathustra, in his capacity as prophet-legislator, is likened to a god. Second, Nietzsche broaches the ancient question of prophetic communication (and by extension, evokes the problem of prophetic misunderstanding that haunts *Zarathustra*). Third, he touches upon the relationship between a god and its creatures or believers, viewed from the perspective of the former. The suggestion here, as in the afore-mentioned note where Nietzsche first praises the Epicurean conception of the divine (KSA 9:16[8]), is that because of the radical heterogeneity between god and human, it can at best be extremely remote. Hence the divine Zarathustra’s discomfort with humanity, even his own children-disciples, and his recurrent desire for solitude. Finally, and most importantly, we have the way of life of the Epicurean gods held up as a provisional model for the superhuman: self-sufficient, blissful, distant and unconcerned with the dramas of lesser beings.

A third note from May-July 1885 again likens the *Übermensch* to an Epicurean god: “Emerging from them here and there, entirely [*ganz*] Epicurean god, the superhuman, the transfigurer of existence **[***der Verklärer des Daseins***]**” (KSA 11:35[73]).[[51]](#footnote-51) We thus see the paradigm of the Epicurean gods functioning as a resource for Nietzsche’s ideas of human perfectability in the early- to mid-1880s. In the wake of *Zarathustra* (Fall 1885-Spring 1886), they represent for Nietzsche the enviable ability “to stand aside and look aside,” the standpoint that looks down from on high unmoved, without negative, reactive emotions like pity or guilt or the desire to intervene and solve the problems of others (KSA 12:1[108]). During this period, he will begin to describe this as the “pathos of distance” (*Pathos der Distanz*), which will come to play a vital role in the development of his idea of the noble.[[52]](#footnote-52)

**NIETZSCHE BIDS THE EPICUREAN GODS ADIEU**

Yet it is this very distance and noble lack of concern that finally drives a wedge between Nietzsche and the gods of Epicurus. From *Zarathustra* onwards, one finds a growing impatience in Nietzsche’s thought—an inability to abide the unperfectable human types produced by the blind impress of nature and two thousand years of uninformed self-experimentation.[[53]](#footnote-53) The diminution and degeneration of the human being—its “ultimate mediocritization” (*Vermittelmäßigung*)—tarted up as improvement and even ascent to godliness may constitute a great “human comedy for an Epicurean spectator god” (*commedia umana für einen* *epikurischen* *Zuschauer-Gott*), but for Nietzsche it is an avoidable tragedy (KSA 12:2[13], cf. GS 1).[[54]](#footnote-54) The enfeeblement of humanity under Christian moral regimens must be halted and reversed. Nietzsche thus grows increasingly unsatisfied with the privatized, pluralistic experiments in therapeutic self-cultivation that had characterized his more Epicurean middle-period texts, and he appears increasingly committed to intervening in the aleatory course of natural history.[[55]](#footnote-55) Embracing the venerable Platonic conceit of the philosopher as “commander and legislator,” he attempts to shape the future of humanity (BGE 211, cf. 203 and 61). The Epicurean sage eschewed politics, much as the gods eschew governance of earthly affairs. She simply looked down from afar with a vast perspective, as Lucretius’ philosophical spectator looks on safely at the distant shipwreck (*On the Nature of Things*, II.7-10).[[56]](#footnote-56) But Nietzsche cannot maintain such a stance. As he confesses in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he can no longer passively observe the diminution of the human being with “the mocking and disinterested eye of an Epicurean god” (BGE 62):[[57]](#footnote-57)

[I]f someone with opposite needs, no longer Epicurean but with a divine hammer in hand, approached this almost willful degeneration and atrophy of the human being that is the Christian European . . . would he not have to cry out with rage, compassion and horror: “Oh, you clumsy oafs, you presumptuous pitiful oafs, what have you done! Was this a job for your hands! Look at how you’ve battered and botched my beautiful stone! How could *you* presume!” (BGE 62).[[58]](#footnote-58)

We thus see a deepening tension. On the one hand, there is Nietzsche’s desire to affirm the world as it is (in accordance with the doctrines of *amor fati* and the eternal recurrence), to see everything as perfect or at least simply “look away” from (GS 276) or “pass by” (Z III Passing) what he cannot affirm. This presupposes a kind of nobility and pathos of distance that he once associated with the Epicurean gods. On the other hand, we have Nietzsche’s pretensions to great politics: a desire to transform humanity (or at least select human beings) into the kinds of creatures capable of such affirmation—a desire which is arguably rooted in an inability to affirm the world as it is.[[59]](#footnote-59) As I have argued elsewhere, Epicurus is ultimately content to leave natural history without a driver; Nietzsche is not.[[60]](#footnote-60)

**NIETZSCHE’S NATURALISTIC ANTIPODE**

Nietzsche’s break with Epicurus becomes increasingly explicit in his post-Zarathustran texts, and it goes well beyond frustrations with his apolitical quietism. He points out the shortcomings of his predecessor’s atomism, materialism and ethical hedonism, all of which he will ultimately trace back to physiological inadequacies (weariness, suffering, lack).[[61]](#footnote-61) The blessed state of *ataraxia* which the gods once exemplified becomes reinterpreted as a symptom of decadence. He now emphasizes Epicurus’ spiritual proximity and kinship to Christianity, rather than their profound historic conflict (A 30, cf. GM III 17). This new, uncharitable portrait of the Garden philosopher becomes codified in the stark and simplistic opposition he ultimately posits between Epicurean optimism and Dionysian pessimism (BT Preface 4, cf. GS 370).[[62]](#footnote-62)

But despite the ungrateful revisionism of Nietzsche’s final texts, Epicurus played a crucial role in helping him find “the exit out of the labyrinth of thousands of years” and free himself from the claustrophobic metaphysico-moral horizon of Christianity (A 1, GS 343). In that respect at least, Nietzsche owed his ancient predecessor a great debt. Nietzsche once observed that Epicurus’ thought seemed to him “eternally lively,” more alive than the living themselves (AOM 408), and those who seek a suitably naturalistic way of life or art of living might very well agree even today.[[63]](#footnote-63) It may be that, when viewed from a certain perspective, Nietzsche and Epicurus appear as antipodes. But as Nietzsche himself acknowledged, “antipodes, too, have the right to exist”—and they make for a vaster, subtler and more interesting world (GS 289). It could be that Epicurus’ bright, cheerful, purposeless multiverse, with its calm, distant, exemplary gods remains both an anticipation and an antipode—perhaps the only credible naturalistic antipode—to Nietzsche’s Dionysian vision of the world.

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1. There are of course various other philosophical heresies that made Epicurus *persona non grata* in the Western philosophical tradition: his materialism, his ethical hedonism, his conventional account of justice etc, but here I am merely drawing attention to themes or claims that anticipate Nietzsche’s own philosophy. For a useful overview of the hostile historical reaction to such ideas, see DeWitt 1954, pp. 328-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this general theme in Nietzsche, see Hutter 2006, Ure 2008, Ansell-Pearson 2013, 2014, and 2018, Groff 2014, 2108 and 2020a. On the recuperation of this ancient model of philosophy as a way of life or art of living, see Nussbaum 1994, Hadot 1995 and 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Milkowski 1998, Ansell-Pearson 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On this affinity, see Lampert 1993, Caygill 2006, Ansell-Pearson 2013 and Groff 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the residually Epicurean themes, moods and concerns of *Zarathustra*, see Vincenzo 1994, as well as Groff 2018, 2020a and 2020b. On Nietzsche as Platonic political philosopher, see Rosen 2004, Groff 2006 and 2020b and Lampert 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nietzsche quotations are from Stanford University Press, *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* whenever available; Walter Kaufmann’s translations are employed otherwise, except for *Zarathustra*, where I use Graham Parkes’ translation. Translations of passages from the notebooks and letters are my own unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While the de-deification of nature and the naturalization of the human being is a crucial and much recently discussed aspect of Nietzsche’s thought, Graham Parkes has persuasively suggested that what awaits us on the other side of that task is ultimately a “redivinized” Dionysian world (Parkes 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Combatting these fears constitutes a good half of Epicurus’ philosophy. The Tetrapharmakos, a concise summary of his teaching, reads: “Don’t fear god, don’t worry about death; what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure” (Philodemus, *Herculaneum Papyrus* 1005, 4.9-14). All Epicurean texts cited by standard numbering, translation by Inwood and Gerson, from Epicurus 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. *Principle Doctrines* II and Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Bk III, 830. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g., Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Bk III, 865-925. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Given the diminished state of Epicurus’ corpus, we must turn to Lucretius for such arguments (see *On the Nature of Things* Bk III *passim*). Cf. Socrates’ therapeutic arguments for the deathlessness of the soul in the *Phaedo*; starting from radically different premises, both attempt to cure us of our irrational fear of death, thus making possible a proper human life. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lucretius’ prematurity here anticipates the madman’s ineffective announcement of the death of God in GS 125: both of them “came too early” (*kam/komme zu früh*). Cf. KSA 14, pp. 256f for the original Autumn 1881 draft of GS 125, in which Zarathustra himself is the untimely prophet of the death of God. On Nietzsche’s embrace of a deathbound soul and rejection of an afterlife, see Rempel 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In describing modern science’s reclamation of death as “yet still too recent to be experienced far and wide as such,” Nietzsche again anticipates the untimeliness of the madman’s word in GS 125. The death of the immortal soul doctrine is a correlate to the death of God, and like that event, time is required for its consequences and implications fully to unfold. We late moderns may blithely take Epicurus’ ancient “triumph” for granted, but as Nietzsche suggests, the deathbound soul was even in the late nineteenth century a difficult idea to digest, despite the fact that it had lingered on the periphery of philosophical discourse for over two millennia. Like most of Epicurus’ teachings, it was far a long time considered too outlandish even to acknowledge, let alone argue seriously against. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. ZI Despisers: “Body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is merely a word for something about the body.” See also BGE 12 for Nietzsche’s quasi-Epicurean critique of “soul atomism”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Z II Virtuous, where Zarathustra says, “they have lied reward and punishment into the ground of things—and now even into the ground of your souls, you virtuous ones.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Translation Kaufmann and Hollingdale. This note seems to be a rough draft of A 58. Cf. KSA 13:11[295]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. WS 332 and GS 45 (and to a lesser extent, AOM 49 and WS 192), for comparable moods or landscapes. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In addition to WS 295, see HHI 291, WS332 and GS 45. Cf. implicitly Epicurean passages where Nietzsche describes his own predilections, e.g. D 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ansell-Pearson’s reading of this passage actually considers three related paintings entitled “Et in Arcadia ego”: two versions by Poussin (from 1627-28 and 1638-39, respectively) and an earlier one by Guercino (1618-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See e.g. ZIII Sunrise and Convalescent as well as Z IV Midday, in which the Epicurean mood is particularly striking. For an excellent discussion of the last, see Vincenzo 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As James I. Porter points out, the phrase “point by point” (*Punct um Punct*) is a pun on Epicurean atomism (Porter 1992, p. 86, n. 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. On the death of God, see GS 108, 109, 125, 343. Of course, Nietzsche’s own understanding of this event goes far beyond Epicurus’ own naturalized, purposeless, eternal and infinite multiverse. For a comparison of Nietzsche and Epicurus’ post-theistic naturalisms, see Groff 2014, pp. 991-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On this point, cf. KSA 12:9[57], a *Nachlass* note from Fall 1887: “Philosophy as the art of discovering truth: according to Aristotle. Contradicted by the Epicureans, who made use of Aristotle’s sensualistic theory of knowledge: they rejected the search for truth with irony; ‘Philosophy as an art of living’.” In other unpublished notes from this period, Nietzsche will sometimes accordingly cast Epicurus as opposing a scientific view of the world in the interests of practical morality (KSA 12:9[160], 13:14[99] and 13:14[141]). We should also bear in mind the more general context of Nietzsche’s self-comparison with Epicurus in GS 375. It takes place in Book V of *The Gay Science*, which has the additional title, “We Fearless Ones,” evoking Epicurus’ attempts to cure us of the fear of death and the gods (cf. KSA 9:4[204]: “the Epicureans . . . find their happiness not in the feeling of power over themselves, but [in] fearlessness with respect to God and nature”). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Handwerk’s translation here glosses over the specifically Epicurean implication. “Calming the mind” or “pacifying the soul” would be better, insofar as they more precisely capture the ideal of *ataraxia* (cf. Lucretius’ *animi pacem* in *On the Nature of Things,* Bk III, 18-24). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. the “historical,” or perhaps more accurately, proto-genealogical—approach that Nietzsche advocates in HH I 9 in D 95. See Ansell-Pearson 2014, p. 41-43 for a discussion of “cooling down” strategies in Nietzsche’s middle period works. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On Nietzsche’s appropriation of the Epicurean therapeutic technique of multiple explanations (*pleonachos tropos*), see Shearin 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. As he writes in his *Letter to Herodotus*, “there exists nothing in addition to the totality” (39), meaning the basic constituents of physical nature, bodies and the void. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On the *isonomia* principle in Epicurus and the place of the gods in a blind, self-sustaining universe, see Drozdek 2016, pp. 215-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Epicurus has often been misrepresented as an atheist, by Platonists and Stoics (Posidonius, Plutarch, Cicero, etc) even before his later Jewish and Christian critics (Drozdek 2016, p. 225; for a good general overview see Whitmarsh 2015, pp. 173-85). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This in turn raises questions over the precise nature of these divine beings: are they real (i.e., do they actually exist out there in the multiverse as physical atomic compounds?) or are they simply the (still physical) consequence of psychological processes in the human soul? For strong recent statements of each side of this debate, see Konstan 2011 and Sedley 2011 (see also Obbink 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See e.g. DeWitt 1954, pp. 261, 184–185 and Preuss 1994, p. 14. André-Jean Festugière on the other hand has argued that Epicurus’ embrace of traditional religion was very much in earnest and that he was genuinely pious in this respect (Festugière 1956, pp. 58-59). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. what Nietzsche elsewhere refers to as “First and Last Things” (HH I, Ch. 1 *passim*): big questions about metaphysical origins, grounds and final ends, as opposed to the “closest,” “smallest and most everyday” things, e.g., diet, housing, clothing, nutrition, place, climate, recreation, etc—which for him are what really matter the most (WS 5-6 and 16, cf. D 435, D 553, GS 280 and EH Clever 10). On the Epicurean character of this strategy, see Ansell-Pearson 2014 and Marsden 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. KSA 12:9[57]; cf. 13[1]44. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Nietzsche seems to attribute this approach to Greek thought more generally: see especially his early philological lectures on Greek philosophy, where he describes Socrates as “the first philosopher of *life*” (*Lebensphilosoph*): “all schools deriving from him are first of all philosophies of life,” he claims, “Thinking serves life, while among all previous philosophers life had served thought and knowledge” (PPP 17, p. 145) or KSA 9:15[59], in which he characterizes the various Hellenistic moral schools as “laboratories [*Stätten des Experiments*] where a number of artifices of life-wisdom [*Kunstgriffen der Lebensklugheit*] have been thoroughly practiced and thought through to their end.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hadot 1995 and 2002; see also Foucault 1986, Nussbaum 1994 and Nehamas 1998. Hutter 2006, Ure 2008, Ansell-Pearson 2013, 2014 and 2018, and Groff 2004, 2014, 2020a and 2020b all read Nietzsche as resuscitating this conception of philosophy. Hutter and Friedland (eds) 2013 offers an excellent collection of essays on Nietzsche’s thought as a kind of *therapeia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. If this is true, Epicurus would be evading the residual dogmatism of both theism and atheism, insofar as they are tethered to metaphysical claims about the existence or non-existence of god. In this respect, his therapeutic approach anticipates Nietzsche’s as something both more nuanced and more radical than garden-variety atheism. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See e.g. *Republic* 377a-383c; cf. *Euthyphro*, where he tests the popular idea that the gods desire or require our care (12e-15b). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. On Epicurus’ account, they are physical beings and thus part of the natural world—although their precise status and place in this world has perplexed scholars (where exactly is their abode? If they are composite beings constituted of atoms like everything else in nature, how are they immortal? etc). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Epicurus however seems to have believed—or at least taught—that despite the gods’ self-sufficient bliss and indifference to us, we ought not to be indifferent to them, but should rather worship them, observe religious festivals, etc in order to better understand their nature, take them as models, and thus improve our lives. See Festugière 1956, pp. 58-9 as well as Drozdek 2016, p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. As André-Jean Festugière points out, Epicurus viewed the ‘astral religion’ of the Platonic philosophers as just as bad as—perhaps worse than—the vulgar religion of the masses, insofar as it envisioned all things as governed by necessity; hence his attempt to de-divinize the heavenly bodies in the *Letter to Pythocles* and show that they are just more of the same old natural phenomena (Festugière 1956, pp. 73-93). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b-c; cf. *Symposium* 207e-209e, *Republic* 500c-501b, and *Timaeus* 90a-d. For an excellent discussion of this ideal, see Sedley 1999. On its appropriation in Epicurus’ thought, see Erler 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, 1177b30f, which emphasizes a blessed, self-sufficient and quasi-divine activity of contemplation above and beyond the moral virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. It is worth noting here that even those who insist on Epicurus’ piety recognize that his conception of the gods is ultimately derived from his ideal of the serene and painless sage (see e.g., Festugière 1956, p. 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Bk V, 8, where Epicurus himself is praised as a god. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cf. SE 4 (p. 201), where Nietzsche describes the alienating experience of feeling one’s own sacred nature “as remote (*fern*) from him as any Epicurean god.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Zarathustra offers a fitting parable of the transition from polytheism to monotheism: the old gods laugh themselves to death when one of them proclaims himself the one true god. Their reply is a nice summation of Nietzsche’s religiosity: “Is just this not Godliness, that there are Gods, but no God?” (Z III Apostates 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. In GM II 16 e.g., the *Schauspiel* is the “internalization” of the human being and the consequent emergence of the “bad conscience” (cf. GM II 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This is a doctrine that Nietzsche will later call his “formula for greatness in a human being” (EH Wise 10) and somewhat immodestly, his “innermost nature” (EH CW 4). Cf. KSA 9:15[20], 9:16[22], Letter to Franz Overbeck around June 5, 1882 (KSB 6, 236), NCW Epilogue 1, and KSA 13:16[32] and 25[7]. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. This passage points towards Zarathustra’s afore-mentioned parable from Z III Apostates 2, where the dying old gods declare, “Is just this not Godliness, that there are Gods, but no God?” Cf. Z III Tablets 11, where Zarathustra reiterates this punchline but now links it explicitly with the need for a new nobility: “For there is need of many nobles and many kinds of nobles, *that there may be nobility*!” This suggests not only the permeability between god and human, but the pluralistic character of both divinity and nobility. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The note continues, describing the content of the Third Part of *Zarathustra* as “a *divine* suffering,” points out that the human condition of the legislator is “only used for example” (cf. the previous description of Zarathustra as godlike legislator in relation to people) and acknowledges Zarathustra’s discomfort even around friends (presumably his disciple-children). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The remainder of the note points towards the superhuman conception of the world, evoking Dionysus and emphasizing Zarathustra’s blessing (*Segnung*). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The first three mentions of this phrase in the *Nachlass* are KSA 12:1[7], 1[10], and 2[13], which is a rough draft for BGE 257 (as well as several other key sections, including 62 and 203). More broadly, there seems to be some conceptual resonance between the Epicurean gods, the pathos of distance, the notion of rank-order (*Rangordnung*) and the noble (*vornehm*). See e.g. KSA 11:35[73], BGE 257, BGE 287, GM I 2 and GM III 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See e.g., Zarathustra’s shame-inducing notion of the “last human” (ZI Prologue 5) and his nausea at the prospect of the eternal recurrence of the “small human being” (*Z* III Convalescent). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. There is in this note an interesting tension between the ostensible unconcern of the Epicurean gods and what Nietzsche sees as a pressing need for the pathos of distance, rank-ordering, and resuscitation of aristocratic societies in order to reverse the degeneration of the human being. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. For an examination of the tension between Nietzsche’s strategic embrace of the Epicurean maxim *lathe biōsas* (“live unnoticed”) in the middle period works and his Platonic drive to great politics from *Zarathustra* forwards, see Groff 2020a. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. On this popular theme, see Blumenberg 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Note the subtle and uncharitable shift in his description of the Epicurean gods here: they are no longer merely “disinterested” (*unbetheiligten*)but “mocking” (*spöttischen*); cf. the gods’ experience of human diminution and degeneration as a “comedy,” which seems decidedly unlike the Epicurean concept of the divine (KSA 12:2[13]). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On the philosophical-legislator as sculptor motif, cf. *Z* II Isles and BGE 225. For a comparable statement that instead emphasizes correcting or supplementing the blind, aleatory character of nature, see BGE 203 (anticipated in SE 1 and 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. On the apparent tension between these two projects, see Groff 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Groff 2014, p. 997. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See respectively, BGE 12, GS 373 and BGE 225. For psychological-symptomological critiques of Epicurus’ decadence, see BT Preface 4, GS Preface 2; GS 370, GM III 6 and 17, TI Morality 3, and A 30. Cf. HH I 275, GS 45 and 306, BGE 7 and even BGE 270 for earlier, more open-ended and less reductive or dismissive accounts of Epicurus’ suffering. On Nietzsche’s revaluation of Epicurus in his later writings, see Lampert 1992, Caygill 2006, Ansell-Pearson 2014, Groff 2014 and Conway 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. This is perhaps anticipated by a short notebook entry from Spring 1884, jotted down during Nietzsche’s hiatus between the writing of the Third and Fourth Parts of *Zarathustra*: “I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any ‘Epicurean delight’ is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient: *I have been the first to discover the tragic*” (KSA 11:25[95]). In his more thoughtful, nuanced moments, of course, Nietzsche rejects such Manichean oppositional thinking (Epicurean joy vs. Dionysian tragedy, optimism vs. pessimism, hunger vs. superabundance, etc), and prides himself on sharing—with Epicurus himself—“a taste that rejects all crude four-square opposites” (GS 375; cf. HH I 1 and BGE 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See e.g., Hadot 1995, p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)