EPICURUS AS DEUS MORTALIS:  
HOMOIOSIS THEOI AND EPICUREAN SELF-CULTIVATION

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1. The concept of ὁμοίωσις θεῶ, of 'becoming like god so far as it is possible', constitutes the goal of Plato's ethics. A major part in the Platonic tradition was played by the ideal of 'likeness to God', which was derived from the locus classicus of this topic: Theaetetus 176b. It became a τέλος formula with the middle Platonists, which probably originated in the first century B.C. It remained the distinctive Platonic definition of the telos ever after. Though acknowledged as the nucleus of Platonic philosophy Origines can say that becoming like god also represents the summum bonum of almost every other philosophical school, to which one should add however that those other schools poured 'new wine into old bottles'.

In fact for Plato and the Platonists assimilation to god means the embodiment of moral ideas as far as it is possible for man, whereas Aristotle and the Peripatetics stress the contemplative way of life and the Stoics the fulfilment of moral duties and obedience to virtue.


3 Cf. Orig., De prin. III vi 1.

The concept of *homoiosis theoi* was of importance for the Epicureans as well. Testimonies about the veneration of Epicurus himself within the *garden* and remarks by Cicero affirm that the divine is regarded as a ‘norm of moral emulation’. Since the gods represent the Epicurean ideal of tranquillity and pleasure, they are paradigms of moral excellence which are to be imitated. Despite his inability to attain the immortal existence of the gods and without hope of their helpful intervention in the world, the Epicurean man is able to achieve a state through imitation of a constitution which comes close to divinity by preserving a true conception of the true nature of the gods. Most of the information about how to achieve assimilation to god is to be found in the religious treatises of Philodemus.

In what follows however I would like to suggest that some more information can be added, if one reads the proem of the fifth book of Lucretius *De rerum natura* in the context of the Epicurean *homoiosis*-concept. Of course this passage has been interpreted very often mostly with respect to its literary implications. Recently Monica Gale offered a very interesting account. She seeks to prove that Lucretius was writing against a Euhemerian background.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest an alternative reading. I shall argue that at the beginning of book five Lucretius presents us with the result of a successful *homoiosis theoi*, and gives an idea about the conditions which are to be fulfilled if one is to become like god. These prescriptions are less general than those that we can find in other Epicurean texts. And I think there is further evidence: in

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Epicurus and the Epicureans see Epicur., *Ep. Men.* 135. *Gnom. Vat.* 33 and G. Arrighetti (ed.), *Epicuro. Opera*, Torino 1973², 563. The Epicureans and Aristotle are more optimistic in how far man can get by *homoiosis theoi*. Plato restricts the endeavour by the addition ‘so far as is possible’ (κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν) (cf. *R. 500c*. 613a, *Lg. 716c*). The Stoics are pessimistic that anyone can reach the status of a sage at all (Chrys. *SVF II* 1011 = Cic., *N.D.* III 10, 25; *SVF II* 1012 = Cic., *N.D.* II 6, 16). Aristotle and the Epicureans are more optimistic. As Epicurus claims, time does not matter in terms of happiness (RD XIX), cf. Schmid 1951, 139f. A strong difference in Athenian religion between the Classical and Hellenistic age, argued for by Festugière 1968², has been challenged recently by J.D. Mikalon, *Religion in Helenistic Athens*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1998, 1ff.


⁵ Cf. Schmid 1951, 148; Festugière 1968², 36-100.