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Richard Bett

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Against the Physicists

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[More information](#)*Book 1*

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE ENTIRE WORK (1–12)

1. *Focus on principles* (1–3)

[1] The reason why the physical part of philosophy is brought forward for our inquiry after the logical part, although it seems to come before the others in time, we mentioned above.¹ And here we will again assemble the same method of investigation, not dwelling on the particulars, as Clitomachus and the rest of the chorus of Academics have done (for by jumping into alien material and creating their arguments on the basis of agreement with the dogmatic views of others they prolonged their counter-argument immensely), but attacking the most important and all-encompassing points – by means of which we shall have the rest put into impasse as well. [2] For just as in sieges those who undermine the foundation of the wall get the towers to come down along with it, so those in philosophical inquiries who have defeated the initial assumptions of a subject have in effect ruled out apprehension of the entire subject. [3] Indeed, some people not implausibly compare those who descend into particular investigations to hunters who pursue the animal on foot, or to those who fish with a line or who catch birds with lime and a twig, while they compare those who shake all the particulars by means of the most all-encompassing points to people who put lines, stakes and nets around them.² Hence, just as it is much more skilful to be able to catch many in one go than to labor over every single catch, so it is much more elegant to bring a counter-argument jointly against everything than to be stuck with the particulars.

¹ See *Against the Logicians* 1.20–4. ² I.e., around the animals.

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*Against the Physicists*2. *General distinction between active and material principles (4–12)*

[4] So, since those who are thought to have done the more precise classification of the principles of everything say that some are active, others material³ (and the first to advance their opinion is held to be the poet Homer, and after him Anaxagoras of Clazomenae and Empedocles of Acragas and lots of others. [5] For the poet gives an account of these things when he allegorizes about Proteus and Eidothea,⁴ calling the first [*prôton*] and most original cause Proteus, and the being that is turned into specifics [*eidê*] Eidothea. [6] And Anaxagoras says “All things were together, and Mind came and organized them,”⁵ assuming that Mind, which is god according to him, is an active principle, and the mixture of like-parted things⁶ a material one. [7] And Aristotle says that Hermotimus of Clazomenae and Parmenides of Elea and much earlier Hesiod thought this; for in depicting the coming into being of the universe they brought in Love – that is, the moving and uniting cause of the things that there are.⁷ [8] Hesiod says

Yea, first all Chaos came into being, but then
Broad-chested Earth, steadfast seat of all things for ever,
And Love, who is most beautiful among the immortal gods;⁸

[9] while Parmenides explicitly states

First of all the gods she devised Love.⁹

[10] And Empedocles, as I said before, would also seem to be like this; for he numbers Strife and Love together with the four elements – Love as a cause bringing things together, Strife as one that pulls them apart – and says

³ Mutschmann conjectures a lacuna at this point, with the general sense “let us examine their classification.” I instead follow Heintz and Bury in seeing this sentence as left hanging and picked up in [12] below, with the intervening material constituting a long parenthesis.

⁴ *Odyssey* 4.365ff.

⁵ Probably not an exact quotation from Anaxagoras. But “All things were together” (albeit with a different word order in the Greek) is reported by Simplicius as the opening statement in Anaxagoras’ book (DK 59B1), and Anaxagoras elsewhere uses the word “organized” [*diekosmêse*] in connection with Mind (DK 59B12).

⁶ I.e. things whose parts are of the same character as the whole. Stone, for example, is a “like-parted thing”; a piece of stone broken into pieces is several pieces of stone. A hand cut into pieces, however, is not several hands. The terminology (and the hand example) is Aristotle’s. Aristotle also uses the term to refer to what he takes to be the basic elements in Anaxagoras’ worldview; whether he is right about this is a matter of considerable dispute, but Sextus here is following him.

⁷ *Metaphysics* 984b18ff. Sextus has slightly garbled what Aristotle actually says. Aristotle mentions Hermotimus as perhaps anticipating Anaxagoras in holding Mind to be a fundamental cause; he does not ascribe to him any view concerning love as a principle, though he immediately afterwards cites Hesiod and Parmenides (and a little later Empedocles) as holding such views.

⁸ *Theogony* 116–18.

⁹ DK 28B13 (quoted by several other ancient authors, beginning with Plato’s *Symposium* 178b).

God (13–194)

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Fire and water and earth and the soft height of air,
 And apart from them destructive Strife, everywhere equal in weight,
 And Love among them, equal in length and breadth.¹⁰

[11] Besides, the Stoics say that there are two principles, god and quality-less matter, and suppose that god acts and that matter is affected and undergoes change) – [12] so, since the classification in the best of the physicists is something like this, let us first create impasses concerning the active principles, at one time inquiring as it were dogmatically about god, and at another time more in the spirit of impasse about there being nothing active or affected. But since in the case of every investigation the concept of the subject being investigated comes first, let us see just how we gained the conception of god.

ON GODS

B. GOD (13–194)

1. *Introduction (13)*

[13] The account concerning gods seems absolutely most necessary to those who do philosophy dogmatically. This is why they say that philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of divine and human affairs. Hence if we bring the investigation of gods to an impasse, we will in effect have established that wisdom is not the knowledge of divine and human affairs, nor is philosophy the pursuit of wisdom.

2. *On the origins of our conception of god (14–48)*

a. *Dogmatic philosophers' views on the subject (14–28)*

[14] Well then, some have said that the first people to be in charge of human beings and to inquire into what was advantageous for life, being extremely clever, thought up both the figment about the gods and the imaginary belief about the goings-on in Hades.¹¹ [15] For since life back then was savage and without order (for there was a time, as Orpheus says,

¹⁰ DK 31 B17, ll.18–20 (also quoted by other authors).

¹¹ I retain the mss. reading *mutheuomenên*; Mutschmann, following Bekker, alters to *mutheuomenôn* on the basis of similar phrases in [66] and [74] below.

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When mortals took a flesh-eating life from one another,
And the stronger tore up the weaker mortal),¹²

wishing to deter the doers of injustice they first put in place laws designed to punish those who were openly committing injustice, [16] but after this they thought up gods, observers of all human misdeeds and right actions, so that people would not dare to do injustice even secretly, being convinced that the gods

voyage all over the earth clad in mist,
beholding the outrages and lawful acts of humans.¹³

[17] And Euhemerus, nicknamed Atheist, says “When the life of humans was without order, those who exceeded the others in strength and cleverness, to the point that everyone lived in response to their orders, in their eagerness to achieve more admiration and esteem made up a sort of superlative divine authority belonging to themselves, and thus were thought of by the many as gods.”¹⁴ [18] And Prodicus of Ceos says “The ancients thought of the sun and the moon and rivers and springs, and in general all the things that benefit our lives, as gods because of the benefit that comes from them, just as the Egyptians regard the Nile”; and that for this reason bread was thought of as Demeter, wine as Dionysus, water as Poseidon, fire as Hephaistus, and so on for each of the things that are useful to us.¹⁵ [19] And Democritus says that certain images come into humans’ vicinity, and that some of these are producers of good, others of bad (hence he also prayed to get propitious

¹² Sextus also quotes these lines at *Against the Rhetoricians* (M 2) 31; that quotation makes clear that “there was a time,” here separated from the verse quotation by a few of Sextus’ own words, was in fact the beginning of the first line. The author of the long verse quotation at [54] below (Critias, according to Sextus) – which begins in a very similar vein, and with the same first words, “there was a time” – is likely to have had these or related lines in mind; Sextus, too, probably has Critias in mind among the anonymous holders of the view here summarized. For a brief recent account of the figure of Orpheus and the poetry ascribed to him, see Betegh 2010.

¹³ The first line is line 255 (also line 125, though the Oxford Classical Text deletes this line) of Hesiod, *Works and Days*, with a slight alteration for consistent syntax; the second line is *Odyssey* 17.487. But these lines may well have become incorporated into the same Orphic poem from which Sextus quoted in the previous section. As such they are included in the most recent collection of Orphic verse fragments: see Berabé 2005: fascicle 2, text 643.

¹⁴ For a brief account of Euhemerus and the attitude towards religion to which he gave his name, see the article in *OCD*. Other texts ascribing to him the same view can be found in Winarczyk 1991: texts 25–8. Winarczyk does not, however, regard the present passage or any of these others as containing Euhemerus’ actual words.

¹⁵ Printed as a fragment by Diels (DK 84B5), along with similar passages from several other authors. But at most the part in direct speech can be assumed to give Prodicus’ exact words.

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images), and that these are large, indeed super-large,¹⁶ and difficult to destroy but not indestructible, and that they signify the future to humans, since they are observed and utter sounds. And so the ancients, receiving an appearance of these images, supposed that there was a god – since there is no other god besides these that has an indestructible nature.¹⁷ [20] And Aristotle said that the conception of gods came into being in humans from two starting-points, the things that happen to the soul and the things in the sky. It came from the things that happen to the soul because of its inspirations that take place in sleep and its prophecies. [21] For, he says, when the soul is by itself in sleep, then it takes on its own nature and prophecies and foretells the future. It is also like this in the course of being separated from bodies at death. At any rate he accepts that Homer too noticed this; for he depicted Patroclus at the point of dying foretelling the death of Hector, and Hector foretelling the end of Achilles. From these things, then, he says, human beings supposed that there was something divine, that which is in itself like the soul and most knowledgeable of all things. [22] But it also came from the things in the sky; for having observed the sun taking its course by day, and the well-ordered motion of the other stars at night, they thought that there was some god responsible for such motion and good order.¹⁸

[23] This is what Aristotle is like. But there are others who say that the intellect, sharp and agile as it is, in focusing on its own nature came as well to an impression of the universe and assumed a surpassingly intellect-like power, analogous to itself but divine in nature. [24] And there are those who have supposed that we came to a conception of gods from the extraordinary things that happen in the world. Democritus seems to be of this opinion; he says “For when ancient humans saw the disturbances in the heavens, such as thunder and lightning,¹⁹ conjunctions of stars, and eclipses of sun

¹⁶ I retain the mss. reading *hypermegethê*. Mutschmann, following Bekker and Papencordt, alters to *hyperphue* on the basis of a supposed parallel in [42] below; since neither passage purports to give Democritus’ exact words (both are in indirect speech), this seems unwarranted. Some of the vocabulary may well derive from Democritus himself (and Diels prints part of the present passage as a fragment, DK 68B166), but Sextus nowhere commits himself to this.

¹⁷ I.e., given that there are no indestructible beings, people’s ideas of god must have derived from these beings that are in fact (though this is not generally realized) *not* indestructible but only “difficult to destroy.” On this passage see also Blomqvist 1968: 91–2.

¹⁸ Ross takes this summary as based on a passage from Aristotle’s lost work *On Philosophy*; see Ross 1952: 84. Aristotle’s extant writings include a short work called *On Divination in Sleep*. This is largely dismissive of the phenomenon, but does allow a power of predicting the future in dreams (463b14–22); this is, however, confined to unstable and inferior people, and is clearly seen as non-rational in character. For a brief comparison of this with the present passage (and some evidence of later Aristotelian thinking on the subject), see Sharples 2010: 272–3.

¹⁹ The Greek here includes an additional word for “thunderbolts” (*keraunous*); I see no way to render this in English without intolerable repetition.

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and moon, they were frightened, thinking that gods were responsible for these things.”²⁰ [25] And Epicurus thinks that humans drew the conception of god from appearances while asleep; “For,” he says, “when huge images in human form struck them while asleep, they supposed that there actually are in reality gods like this of human form.”²¹ [26] And some turn to the undeviating and well-ordered motion of the heavenly bodies, and say that the starting-point of conceptions of gods was initially from this. For just as, if someone sitting on Mount Ida at Troy was looking at the Greek army advancing²² on the plain with great order and arrangement,

Knights first with their horses and chariots,
Foot-soldiers behind,²³

such a person would absolutely have come to a conception of the fact that there was someone organizing such an arrangement and commanding the soldiers ordered under him, like Nestor or some other hero, who knew how

To put in order horses and shield-bearing men;²⁴

[27] and in the same way as the person experienced with ships understands, immediately on observing in the distance a ship with a favorable wind behind it and its sails all ready, that there is someone directing it and bringing it to the intended harbor; so those who first looked up at heaven and observed the sun running its course from rising to setting, and the well-ordered dances of the stars, would look for the craftsman of this most beautiful design, guessing that it did not happen by accident, but by some more powerful and imperishable nature, which is god.²⁵

²⁰ Not generally treated as Democritus’ actual words. Diels takes the word “heavens” (*meteôrois*) as Democritean, but claims that the style is generally that of Posidonius (DK 68A75); the attribution to Posidonius is repeated in Graham 2010: vol. I, 610. However, the three-volume edition of Posidonius’ fragments, Edelstein-Kidd 1988–9, neither includes it as a fragment nor mentions it anywhere in the extensive commentary.

²¹ Not generally thought to be an actual quotation from Epicurus. But there is no reason to question it as an accurate report of his ideas, and it is included (as an informative testimonium, rather than a fragment of Epicurus himself) in the Epicurean section of IG (text I–105).

²² I read *proiousan* instead of Mutschmann’s *proiousan* (the manuscripts are divided); the sense with *proiousan* would be “approaching the plain,” which seems unlikely. But perhaps, as Mutschmann conjectures, *en*, “in,” should be supplied before *tois pediois*, “the plain”; in this case the choice between the two participles would be a toss-up and the sense virtually identical either way.

²³ *Iliad* 4.297–8. ²⁴ *Iliad* 2.554.

²⁵ Ross and others treat 26–7 as a fragment of Aristotle (Ross 1952: 85). But although the passage answers to the closing thought in the summary of Aristotle at [20]–[22] above, the ideas are a commonplace that could have come from any of a variety of sources. Mutschmann proposes Posidonius on the basis of the phrase “more recent Stoics” in [28] below (and see the following note). But the occurrence of this phrase does not show that Stoics (of any period) have been either the subject or the source just before.

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[28] And some of the more recent Stoics say that the first humans, who were born from the earth, were in cleverness far beyond those now, as can be learned from a <comparison> of ourselves with those of earlier times, and that those heroes, whose sharpness of thought was like an extra sense-organ, focused on the divine nature and conceived certain powers of the gods.²⁶

b. Objections to these views (29–47)

[29] These, then, are the kinds of things said by the dogmatic philosophers about the conception of gods. But we do not think they need refutation; for the variety of their assertions puts a seal on their ignorance of the entire truth – while there can be many ways of conceiving god, the one among them that is true is not apprehended. Still, if we move to their particular remarks, none of what they have said will be found secure. [30] For a start, those who think that certain lawgivers and clever people instilled the belief in god in the others do not seem in the least to attack the matter in question. For the question was, what starting-point did people take off from when they came to believe in gods? [31] But they²⁷ go off track in saying that certain lawgivers instilled in people the belief in god; they do not realize that the original absurdity²⁸ still awaits them, since someone could have asked from what source the lawgivers came to a conception of god, when no one had handed down gods to them. [32] Besides, all humans have a conception of gods, but not in the same way; rather, the Persians, for example, deify fire, Egyptians water, and others other things like that. It is also implausible that all humans were brought together to the same place by the lawgivers to hear something about gods; for the tribes of humans were not mixed with each other – indeed, they were unknown to each other – and in terms of sea voyages, we learn from history that the Argo was more or less the first ship to sail. [33] Yes, but someone will perhaps say that before all this, the lawgivers and leaders of each group thought up some

²⁶ Something is clearly missing from the text. The simplest way to produce a complete sentence is Hervetus' addition of *sumblēseōs*, "comparison," followed here. Mutschmann instead posits a longer lacuna after "those heroes" (in which case "that" would not belong in the translation), which perhaps elaborated on the superlative intellectual powers of early humans (cf. Seneca, *Letter* 90, 4ff., summarizing Posidonius, whom Seneca goes on to criticize on several points), and concluded with "so one must consider that those people . . ." or words to that effect.

²⁷ I.e., the holders of the view being criticized.

²⁸ I retain the mss. reading *atopon*; Mutschmann, following Heintz, alters to *aporon*, "impassé." Pace Heintz, *atopon* makes perfectly good sense in context.

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such notion, and for this reason different people supposed that there were different gods. Which is silly; for all humans, on the contrary, have a common preconception about god, according to which god is a blessed and imperishable animal, perfect in happiness and not receptive of anything bad, and it is completely unreasonable that everyone intuited the same peculiarities at random, and were not incited in this way naturally. Therefore ancient humans did not accept that there are gods by fiat or by way of some legislation.

[34] And those who say that the people who first led human beings and became the administrators of their common affairs conferred greater power and honor on themselves to make the masses submit to them, and in time, after they died, were taken to be gods, again do not understand what is in question. For how did the people who elevated themselves to gods get the conception of gods into which they inserted themselves? This needs demonstration, but has been passed over. [35] Besides, what is being maintained is implausible. For things generated by leaders, especially those that are false, stay around only while those leaders are alive, and are done away with once they are dead; and it is possible to come upon many who were treated as gods during their lifetime but were despised after their death, unless they appropriated certain names of gods, like Heracles the son of Zeus and Alcmena. [36] For to begin with, they say, his name was Alcaeus, but he took cover under the name of Heracles, who was deemed a god by the people at the time. Hence there is also a story at Thebes that long ago a private statue of Heracles was found possessing the inscription “Alcaeus son of Amphitryon, a thank-offering for Heracles.”²⁹ [37] And they say that the sons of Tyndareus³⁰ assumed the reputation of the Dioscuri, who were again thought to be gods; for the wise among the people at the time would call the two hemispheres (the one above the earth and the one below the earth) Dioscuri. This is why the poet, hinting at this, says in connection with them

At one time they live – every other day – at another in turn
They die, and the honor allotted to them is equal to the gods.³¹

²⁹ In the standard story, Amphitryon was the mortal husband of Alcmena, Heracles’ mother, though Heracles’ father was not Amphitryon but Zeus (temporarily in the shape of Amphitryon).

³⁰ Castor and Pollux, brothers of Helen. But Dioscuri means “sons of Zeus.” The mythological tradition appears inconsistent as to their paternity, but according to *OCD*, s.v. Dioscuri, “Very probably the same conception of their common nature as sons both of Zeus and of Tyndareus” is at work throughout. At any rate, such ambiguity gives point to this second impersonation story.

³¹ *Odyssey* 11.303–4.