

Episode 240 - Cicero's OTNOTG 15 - The False Allegation That "General Assent" Was The Epicurean Basis For Divinity

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Welcome to Episode 240 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we have a thread to discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

Today we are continuing to review Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," which began with the Epicurean spokesman Velleius defending the Epicurean point of view. This week will continue into Section 21 as Cotta, the Academic Skeptic, responds to Velleius, and we - in turn - will respond to Cotta in particular and the Skeptical argument in general.

For the main text we are using primarily the [Yonge translation, available here at Archive.org](#). The text which we include in these posts is available [here](#). We will also refer to the public domain version of the Loeb series, which contains both Latin and English, [as translated by H. Rackham](#).

Additional versions can be found here:

- [Frances Brooks 1896 translation at Online Library of Liberty](#)
- [Lacus Curtius Edition \(Rackham\)](#)
- [PDF Of Loeb Edition at Archive.org by Rackham](#)
- [Gutenberg.org version by CD Yonge](#)

A list of arguments presented [will eventually be put together here](#).

Today's Text

XXIII. You have said that the general assent of men of all nations and all degrees is an argument strong enough to induce us to acknowledge the being of the Gods. This is not only a weak, but a false, argument; for, first of all, how do you know the opinions of all nations? I really believe there are many people so savage that they have no thoughts of a Deity. What think you of Diagoras, who was called the atheist; and of Theodorus after him? Did not they plainly deny

the very essence of a Deity? Protagoras of Abdera, whom you just now mentioned, the greatest sophist of his age, was banished by order of the Athenians from their city and territories, and his books were publicly burned, because these words were in the beginning of his treatise concerning the Gods: "I am unable to arrive at any knowledge whether there are, or are not, any Gods." This treatment of him, I imagine, restrained many from professing their disbelief of a Deity, since the doubt of it only could not escape punishment. What shall we say of the sacrilegious, the impious, and the perjured? If Tubulus Lucius, Lupus, or Carbo the son of Neptune, as Lucilius says, had believed that there were Gods, would either of them have carried his perjuries and impieties to such excess? Your reasoning, therefore, to confirm your assertion is not so conclusive as you think it is. But as this is the manner in which other philosophers have argued on the same subject, I will take no further notice of it at present; I rather choose to proceed to what is properly your own.

I allow that there are Gods. Instruct me, then, concerning their origin; inform me where they are, what sort of body, what mind, they have, and what is their course of life; for these I am desirous of knowing. You attribute the most absolute power and efficacy to atoms. Out of them you pretend that everything is made. But there are no atoms, for there is nothing without body; every place is occupied by body, therefore there can be no such thing as a vacuum or an atom.

XXIV. I advance these principles of the naturalists without knowing whether they are true or false; yet they are more like truth than those statements of yours; for they are the absurdities in which Democritus, or before him Leucippus, used to indulge, saying that there are certain light corpuscles—some smooth, some rough, some round, some square, some crooked and bent as bows—which by a fortuitous concourse made heaven and earth, without the influence of any natural power. This opinion, C. Velleius, you have brought down to these our times; and you would sooner be deprived of the greatest advantages of life than of that authority; for before you were acquainted with those tenets, you thought that you ought to profess yourself an Epicurean; so that it was necessary that you should either embrace these absurdities or lose the philosophical character which you had taken upon you; and what could bribe you to renounce the Epicurean opinion? Nothing, you say, can prevail on you to forsake the truth and the sure means of a happy life. But is that the truth? for I shall not contest your happy life, which you think the Deity himself does not enjoy unless he languishes in idleness.

But where is truth? Is it in your innumerable worlds, some of which are rising, some falling, at every moment of time? Or is it in your atomical corpuscles, which form such excellent works without the direction of any natural power or reason? But I was forgetting my liberality, which I had promised to exert in your case, and exceeding the bounds which I at first proposed to myself. Granting, then, everything to be made of atoms, what advantage is that to your argument? For we are searching after the nature of the Gods; and allowing them to be made of atoms, they cannot be eternal, because whatever is made of atoms must have had a beginning: if so, there were no Gods till there was this beginning; and if the Gods have had a beginning, they must necessarily have an end, as you have before contended when you were discussing Plato's world. Where, then, is your beatitude and immortality, in which two words you say that God is expressed, the endeavor to prove which reduces you to the greatest perplexities? For

you said that God had no body, but something like body; and no blood, but something like blood.

XXV. It is a frequent practice among you, when you assert anything that has no resemblance to truth, and wish to avoid reprehension, to advance something else which is absolutely and utterly impossible, in order that it may seem to your adversaries better to grant that point which has been a matter of doubt than to keep on pertinaciously contradicting you on every point: like Epicurus, who, when he found that if his atoms were allowed to descend by their own weight, our actions could not be in our own power, because their motions would be certain and necessary, invented an expedient, which escaped Democritus, to avoid necessity. He says that when the atoms descend by their own weight and gravity, they move a little obliquely. Surely, to make such an assertion as this is what one ought more to be ashamed of than the acknowledging ourselves unable to defend the proposition. His practice is the same against the logicians, who say that in all propositions in which yes or no is required, one of them must be true; he was afraid that if this were granted, then, in such a proposition as "Epicurus will be alive or dead to-morrow," either one or the other must necessarily be admitted; therefore he absolutely denied the necessity of yes or no.

Can anything show stupidity in a greater degree? Zeno, being pressed by Arcesilas, who pronounced all things to be false which are perceived by the senses, said that some things were false, but not all. Epicurus was afraid that if any one thing seen should be false, nothing could be true; and therefore he asserted all the senses to be infallible directors of truth. Nothing can be more rash than this; for by endeavoring to repel a light stroke, he receives a heavy blow. On the subject of the nature of the Gods, he falls into the same errors. While he would avoid the concretion of individual bodies, lest death and dissolution should be the consequence, he denies that the Gods have body, but says they have something like body; and says they have no blood, but something like blood."

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60936295>