

Episode 321 - EATAQ 03 - The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates For Denouncing Natural Science

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2026 at 3:00 PM

Here are a number of references we're incorporating into the current discussion of Socrates:

Reference to Lucian's statements in "Alexander the Oracle Monger"

Thread

[Lucian: Alexander, The Oracle-Monger](#)

Alexander the Oracle-Monger

By Lucian of Samosata, translated by H. W. and F. G. Fowler (1905)

(other links to this text: [Sacred-texts.com](#), [Lucianofsamosata.info](#), [Epicurism.info](#))

Characters: Lucian, writing a letter to a friend.

Context: Lucian relates the story of a famous fraud.

You, my dear Celsus, possibly suppose yourself to be laying upon me quite a trifling task: Write me down in a book and send me the life and adventures, the tricks and frauds, of the impostor Alexander of...



Cassius

February 14, 2019 at 8:54 AM

- Picture to yourself a little chamber into which no very brilliant light was admitted, with a crowd of people from all quarters, excited, carefully worked up, all aflutter with

expectation. As they came in, they might naturally find a miracle in the development of that little crawling thing of a few days ago into this great, tame, human-looking serpent. Then they had to get on at once towards the exit, being pressed forward by the new arrivals before they could have a good look. An exit had been specially made just opposite the entrance, for all the world like the Macedonian device at Babylon when Alexander was ill. He was in extremis, you remember, and the crowd round the palace were eager to take their last look and give their last greeting. Our scoundrel's exhibition, though, is said to have been given not once, but many times, especially for the benefit of any wealthy new-comers.

- And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics. The poor uneducated 'fat-heads' might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by scepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility.

Reference to Carl Sagan's [Cosmos Episode 7 "Backbone of the Night"](#)

- Start about the 20 minute mark
- 25:00 - Anaximander and evolution (positive)
- 26:27 - Empedocles discovers air; discussion of "water thief" (positive)
- 28:36 - Democritus and atoms (positive)
- 33:30 - Anaxagoras advances in astronomy but was persecuted (positive)
- 34:13 - Pythagoras "The mystics were beginning to win" - continuity between him and Christianity. Mathematical harmony underlies all of nature - "music of the spheres" - "cosmos means 'ordered.'" Pythagoras said laws of nature deduced by PURE THOUGHT - they were mathematicians and thoroughgoing mystics- the dodecahedron - ordinary people to be kept ignorant of the dodecahedron - they suppressed knowledge of the square root of two as "irrational" Pythagoreans ignored "experiment" (highly negative)
- 39:07 Plato — Followed in steps of Pythagoras and extended them - ideas are more real than the natural world - advised ignoring astronomy in favor of thinking - taught contempt for the real world - he and his followers extinguished the light of science and experiment. Unease with the world of the senses and dominated and stifled western philosophy.
- 40:44 - Pythagoras and Plato "provided an intellectually respectable justification for a corrupt social order."
- 41:13 - "Plato and Aristotle were comfortable in a slave society. They offered justifications for oppression. They served tyrants. They taught the alienation of the body from the mind - a natural enough idea I suppose in a slave society. They separated thought from matter. They divorced the earth from the heavens. Divisions which were to dominate western thinking for more than 20 centuries. The Pythagoreans had won. ... The books of

theionian scientists are entirely lost. Their views were suppressed, ridiculed and forgotten by the Platonists and by the Christians who adopted much of the science of Plato.

- Background as to Socrates, in addition to general criticism of Socrates' honesty as contained in "the Epicurean Criticism of Socrates. Just putting this out there so we know the major issues. This is Grok:

What was Socrates' position on whether it is important to study natural science and the nature of the universe?

Socrates did not consider the study of natural science (what the ancient Greeks called *physis* or inquiries into the nature of the cosmos, astronomy, meteorology, the elements, and the physical causes of phenomena) to be important or worthwhile for human life — at least not as a primary pursuit. He famously shifted the focus of philosophy away from these cosmological and physical speculations — which had dominated earlier thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, and Anaxagoras (the so-called pre-Socratics) — toward ethics, the examination of human affairs, virtue, justice, piety, and how one ought to live. Key Evidence from Primary Sources

- In Plato's *Apology* (Socrates' defense speech at his trial), he explicitly denies the popular accusation that he was a natural philosopher who investigated "things in the sky and below the earth." He says he has no interest in or expertise in such matters and that the charge stems from a caricature (like Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*, which mocks him as someone dangling in a basket measuring fleas and speculating about celestial phenomena). Socrates insists his real activity is questioning people about moral and ethical concepts in the marketplace.
- In Plato's *Phaedo* (set on the day of Socrates' death), he gives a more autobiographical account: As a young man, he was enthusiastic about natural philosophy and eagerly studied the works of pre-Socratic thinkers, hoping to discover the true causes of things (e.g., why things grow, why the earth is shaped as it is, or what makes the universe orderly). He became disillusioned when these materialistic explanations (e.g., Anaxagoras' "Mind" as a cosmic force) failed to provide satisfying answers, especially about why things are ordered for the best or good. He abandoned this path as futile or misguided for human concerns and turned instead to examining human life, ethics, and the soul through dialectical questioning. He calls this his "second sailing" — a turn to *logos* (reasoned discourse) rather than direct empirical or physical investigation.
- In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (another student's account of Socrates), Xenophon defends Socrates against similar charges by stating that he did not discuss "the nature of the universe" or speculate about the cosmos "as the others did." Socrates reportedly argued that such inquiries were foolish: humans should focus on what is within their grasp (human affairs, ethics, practical wisdom), while leaving divine or cosmic matters to the gods (via divination if needed). He saw preoccupation with unreachable questions as neglect of more urgent human ones.

Why This Shift? Socrates believed true wisdom and the good life lie in self-knowledge (“know thyself”) and understanding moral concepts like virtue (which he often treated as a kind of knowledge). Speculating about the physical universe or its material causes did little to improve one’s character or make one a better person — it could even distract from ethical living or lead to impiety if it undermined traditional reverence for the divine order. He viewed the cosmos as intelligently ordered (with hints of divine design in Xenophon), but probing its mechanics mechanistically was not the path to virtue or happiness. In short, Socrates regarded the study of natural science and cosmology as largely unimportant — even potentially misguided — for the serious pursuit of wisdom and a good life. He prioritized the human realm (ethics, the soul, and moral improvement) over the natural one. This “Socratic turn” profoundly influenced later philosophy, marking a pivot from pre-Socratic naturalism to ethical and metaphysical inquiry in Plato and beyond.

Confirmed as the common view by Chatgpt:

What was Socrates’ position on whether it is important to study natural science and the nature of the universe?

In the ancient sources, **Socrates** is consistently portrayed as *downplaying* the importance of studying natural science and the physical structure of the universe, especially when compared with ethical inquiry.

According to **Plato’s Apology**, Socrates explicitly denies engaging in investigations “in the sky or below the earth,” distancing himself from the natural philosophers (physikoi) who speculated about cosmology, astronomy, and the ultimate constituents of matter. He presents this denial not merely as a defense against specific charges, but as a principled statement of his philosophical priorities. For Socrates, inquiry into nature was both uncertain and largely irrelevant to the central human task.

Socrates held that the most important questions concern how one ought to live: the nature of virtue, justice, piety, and the proper care of the soul. He believed that studying the cosmos does not reliably improve moral character and may even distract from self-knowledge. This stance is reinforced by later testimonies (such as those in Xenophon), which depict Socrates as skeptical that cosmological speculation yields practical or ethical benefit.

In short, Socrates did not regard the study of natural science or the nature of the universe as intrinsically valuable. He deliberately redirected philosophy away from cosmology and toward ethics, holding that understanding how to live well is far more important than understanding how the universe is structured.

More detail and specific reference to Epicurus from Claude:

Socrates famously argued **against** the importance of studying natural science and cosmology, representing a major shift in Greek philosophy from the natural philosophers (like Thales, Anaximander, and Democritus) who preceded him.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates explicitly distances himself from natural philosophy when defending against charges. He denies investigating “things in the sky and below the earth,” stating he has no knowledge or expertise in such matters (*Apology* 19b-c).

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates describes his youthful interest in natural philosophy and his ultimate disappointment with it. He found that explanations based on material causes (like Anaxagoras's system) failed to answer the questions that truly mattered to him - questions about purpose, goodness, and why things are as they should be (*Phaedo* 96a-99d).

Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (IV.7) records Socrates actively discouraging students from studying astronomy, geometry, and other natural sciences beyond what's practically necessary. He argued that such studies were:

- Endless and possibly futile
- A distraction from more important matters
- Less valuable than self-knowledge and ethical inquiry

Cicero famously credited Socrates with bringing “philosophy down from the heavens” and making it concerned with human life, ethics, and how one should live (*Tusculan Disputations* V.10).

Instead, Socrates insisted on the priority of **self-knowledge** (“Know thyself”) and ethical questions about virtue, justice, and the good life - what he considered truly important for human flourishing.

This represents a stark contrast with later philosophers like Epicurus, who considered natural science essential for removing fear and superstition.

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Socrates' Alternative Focus:

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Diogenes of Oinoanda:

Fr. 4

... [as is supposed by] some of the philosophers and especially the Socratics. They say that pursuing natural science and busying oneself with investigation of [celestial phenomena] is superfluous and unprofitable, and they do [not even] deign [to concern themselves with such matters.]

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

And from Epicurus:

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 37

Wherefore since the method I have described is valuable to all those who are accustomed to the investigation of nature, I who urge upon others the constant occupation in the investigation of nature, and find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied, have composed for you another epitome on these lines, summing up the first principles of the whole doctrine. (Bailey)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 11

Were we not upset by the worries that celestial phenomena and death might matter to us, and

also by failure to appreciate the limits of pains and desires, we would have no need for natural philosophy. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 12

There is no way to dispel the fear about matters of supreme importance, for someone who does not know what the nature of the universe is but retains some of the fears based on mythology. Hence without natural philosophy there is no way of securing the purity of our pleasures. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 13

There is no benefit in creating security with respect to men while retaining worries about things up above, things beneath the earth, and generally things in the infinite. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Vatican Saying 29

I would rather speak with the frankness of a natural philosopher, and reveal the things which are expedient to all mankind, even if no one is going to understand me, than assent to the received opinions and reap the adulation lavishly bestowed by the multitude. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Vatican Saying 45

Natural philosophy does not make people boastful and loud-mouthed, nor flaunters of culture, the thing so hotly competed for among the multitude, but modest and self-sufficient, and proud at their own goods, not at those of their circumstances. (L&S-THP)

Lucretius 1.62-79

(1) When human life lay foul to see and groveling upon the ground, crushed by the weight of Religion, who displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, (2) a man of Greece dared first to raise his mortal eyes against her, first to make a stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar, but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul to long to be the first to burst through the close-set bolts of nature's gates. (3) Therefore his vigorous mind won through, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless universe; (4) whence returning victorious he reports to us what can arise, what cannot, and by what principle each thing has its powers limited and its deep-set boundary stone. (5) Therefore Religion is now in turn cast down and trampled underfoot, while we by the victory are exalted high as heaven. (L&S-THP)

Riley - The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates

Two accounts of anti-Socratic literature appear in our ancient sources: (1) The original accusation of Alcibiades and the public feeling which led to the accusation. The basis of this charge seems to be that Socrates, antidemocratic himself, was responsible for the education and thus the actions of Cleon and Alcibiades. Polybius (the Socratic) composed a *Historia Socratica* in the late 180s which concentrated on this political charge. Such charges of a defence against them appear only in fourth-century literature, e.g., Xenophon's *Apology* and *Memorabilia*, Plato's *Apology*, or in such address as Libanius' *Speech of Socrates* from the fourth century A.D. Charges of antidemocratic behavior had become irrelevant after the time of the great democracy. (2) The biographical tradition beginning with Aristophanes' *Clouds of Socrates*. "Teaching with hatred and malice," he vilified or ignored a mass of delightful information (Socrates was extremely hated but did no harm because he confined himself to married women and prostitutes 39, 54a and b); he was quick to anger (4, 96), and so on. This tradition seems to have had in common with the original accusations against Socrates in 200, but rather than a reference to the widespread polemic between philosophical schools in addition to charges of taxation, personal enmity, insult, and a delight in such stories on the part of Aristophanes himself. (3) The polemic of the Epigrams, in which I wish to concentrate. The Epigrams are often said to be characterized by *stusmata* and *metemata*, abusive and defamatory language, as Pausanias puts it (10a, page 128b).¹² The evidence for this abusive language is, in fact, less, the

¹² That of the satirists in *Strabo* 10a, 11.3. For a general discussion of the