

Episode 230 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 05 - Velleius Attacks Misplaced Ideas of Divinity

Post by "Cassius" of May 23, 2024 at 2:31 PM

Welcome to Episode 230 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.

For our new listeners, let me remind you of several ground rules for both our podcast and our forum.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it.

Second: We won't be talking about modern political issues in this podcast. How you apply Epicurus in your own life is of course entirely up to you. We call this approach "Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean." Epicurean philosophy is a philosophy of its own, it's not the same as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, Libertarianism or Marxism - it is unique and must be understood on its own, not in terms of any conventional modern morality.

Third: One of the most important things to keep in mind is that the Epicureans often used words very differently than we do today. To the Epicureans, Gods were not omnipotent or omniscient, so Epicurean references to "Gods" do not mean at all the same thing as in major religions today. In the Epicurean theory of knowledge, [all sensations are true](#), but that does not mean all opinions are true, but that the raw data reported by the senses is reported without the injection of opinion, as the opinion-making process takes place in the mind, where it is subject to mistakes, rather than in the senses. In Epicurean ethics, "Pleasure" refers not ONLY to sensory stimulation, but also to every experience of life which is not felt to be painful. The classical texts show that Epicurus was not focused on luxury, like some people say, but neither did he teach minimalism, as other people say. Epicurus taught that all experiences of life fall under one of two feelings - pleasure and pain - and those feelings -- and not gods, idealism, or virtue - are the guides that Nature gave us by which to live. More than anything else, Epicurus taught that the universe is not supernatural in any way, and that means there's no life after death, and any happiness we'll ever have comes in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Today we are continuing to review the Epicurean sections of Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," as presented by the Epicurean spokesman Velleius, beginning at the end of Section 10.

For the main text we are using primarily the [Yonge translation, available here](#). The text which we include in these posts is the Yonge version, the full version of which is here at Epicureanfriends. 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 be maintained here](#).

Today's Text

XI. Anaxagoras, who received his learning from Anaximenes, was the first who affirmed the system and disposition of all things to be contrived and perfected by the power and reason of an infinite mind; in which infinity he did not perceive that there could be no conjunction of sense and motion, nor any sense in the least degree, where nature herself could feel no impulse. If he would have this mind to be a sort of animal, then there must be some more internal principle from whence that animal should receive its appellation. But what can be more internal than the mind? Let it, therefore, be clothed with an external body. But this is not agreeable to his doctrine; but we are utterly unable to conceive how a pure simple mind can exist without any substance annexed to it.

Alcmæon of Crotona, in attributing a divinity to the sun, the moon, and the rest of the stars, and also to the mind, did not perceive that he was ascribing immortality to mortal beings.

Pythagoras, who supposed the Deity to be one soul, mixing with and pervading all nature, from which our souls are taken, did not consider that the Deity himself must, in consequence of this doctrine, be maimed and torn with the rending every human soul from it; nor that, when the human mind is afflicted (as is the case in many instances), that part of the Deity must likewise be afflicted, which cannot be. If the human mind were a Deity, how could it be ignorant of any thing? Besides, how could that Deity, if it is nothing but soul, be mixed with, or infused into, the world?

Then Xenophanes, who said that everything in the world which had any existence, with the addition of intellect, was God, is as liable to exception as the rest, especially in relation to the

infinity of it, in which there can be nothing sentient, nothing composite.

Parmenides formed a conceit to himself of something circular like a crown. (He names it Stephane.) It is an orb of constant light and heat around the heavens; this he calls God; in which there is no room to imagine any divine form or sense. And he uttered many other absurdities on the same subject; for he ascribed a divinity to war, to discord, to lust, and other passions of the same kind, which are destroyed by disease, or sleep, or oblivion, or age. The same honor he gives to the stars; but I shall forbear making any objections to his system here, having already done it in another place.

XII. Empedocles, who erred in many things, is most grossly mistaken in his notion of the Gods. He lays down four natures as divine, from which he thinks that all things were made. Yet it is evident that they have a beginning, that they decay, and that they are void of all sense.

Protagoras did not seem to have any idea of the real nature of the Gods; for he acknowledged that he was altogether ignorant whether there are or are not any, or what they are.

What shall I say of Democritus, who classes our images of objects, and their orbs, in the number of the Gods; as he does that principle through which those images appear and have their influence? He deifies likewise our knowledge and understanding. Is he not involved in a very great error? And because nothing continues always in the same state, he denies that anything is everlasting, does he not thereby entirely destroy the Deity, and make it impossible to form any opinion of him?

Diogenes of Apollonia looks upon the air to be a Deity. But what sense can the air have? or what divine form can be attributed to it?

It would be tedious to show the uncertainty of Plato's opinion; for, in his *Timæus*, he denies the propriety of asserting that there is one great father or creator of the world; and, in his book of *Laws*, he thinks we ought not to make too strict an inquiry into the nature of the Deity. And as for his statement when he asserts that God is a being without any body—what the Greeks call *ἄσώματος*—it is certainly quite unintelligible how that theory can possibly be true; for such a God must then necessarily be destitute of sense, prudence, and pleasure; all which things are comprehended in our notion of the Gods. He likewise asserts in his *Timæus*, and in his *Laws*, that the world, the heavens, the stars, the mind, and those Gods which are delivered down to us from our ancestors, constitute the Deity. These opinions, taken separately, are apparently false; and, together, are directly inconsistent with each other.

Xenophon has committed almost the same mistakes, but in fewer words. In those sayings which he has related of Socrates, he introduces him disputing the lawfulness of inquiring into the form of the Deity, and makes him assert the sun and the mind to be Deities: he represents him likewise as affirming the being of one God only, and at another time of many; which are errors of almost the same kind which I before took notice of in Plato.

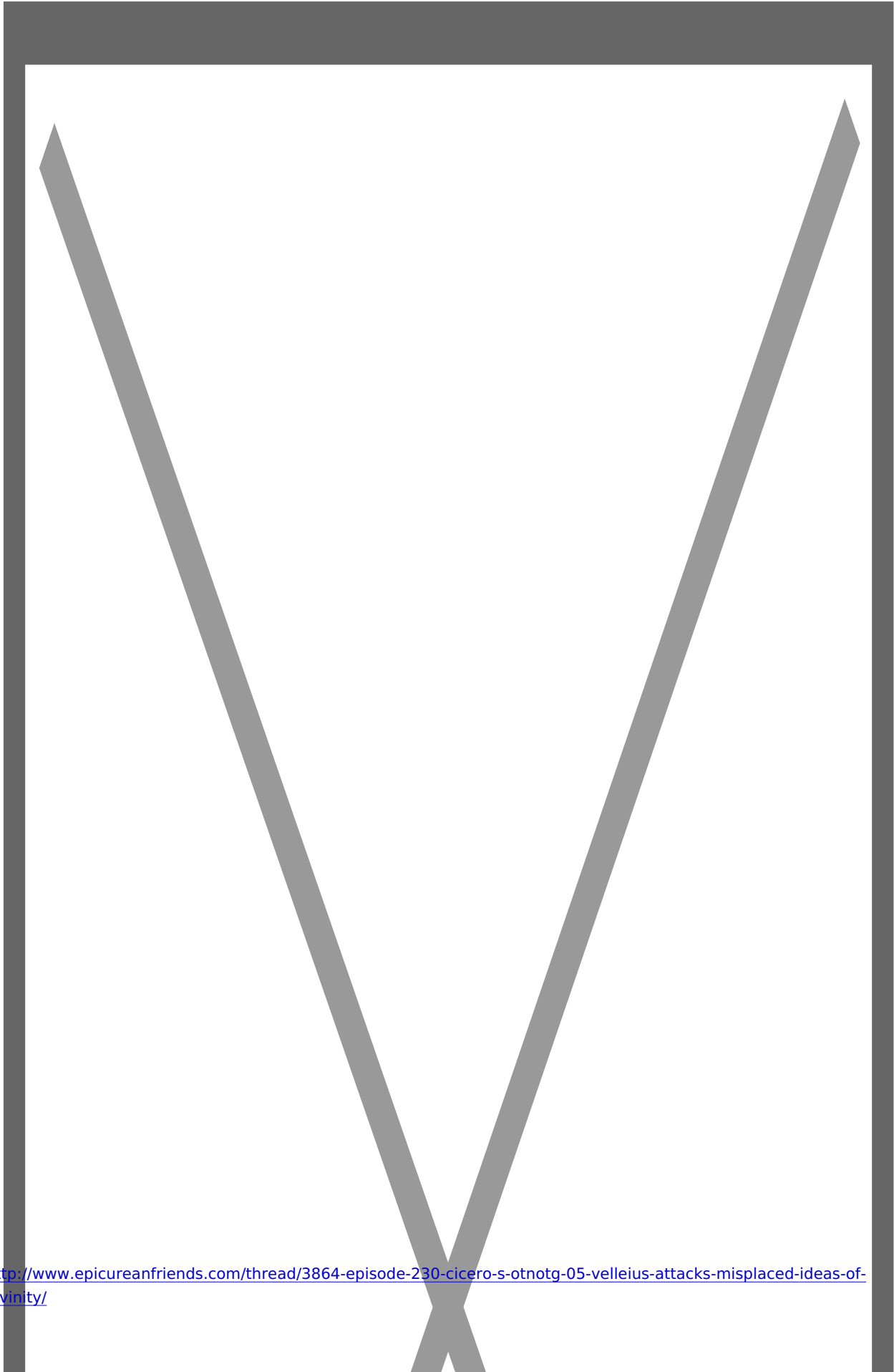
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Post by “Cassius” of May 25, 2024 at 6:06 PM

In regard to the comment that has been referenced recently that Voltaire is recorded to have praised "On The Nature of the Gods" very highly, I've found this on wikipedia:

This work, alongside [De Officiis](#) and [De Divinatione](#), was highly influential on the [philosophes](#) of the 18th century. [David Hume](#) was familiar with the work and used it to style his own [Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion](#).^[17] [Voltaire](#) described *De Natura Deorum* and the [Tusculan Disputations](#) as "the two most beautiful books ever produced by the wisdom of humanity".^[18]

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<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3864-episode-230-cicero-s-otnotg-05-velleius-attacks-misplaced-ideas-of-divinity/>

The footnote for that is:

'Les deux plus beaux ouvrages qu'ait jamais écrits la sagesse qui n'est qu'humaine' [Voltaire, "Cicéron", *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764); *Œuvres complètes* (Garnier) 18:181]

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2024 at 11:53 AM

In this episode one criticism made by Velleius is I think particularly interesting (and difficult), in that involves infinity, which is one of the subjects to which Epicurus said to pay special attention. Here is the quote, from Book One section XI, this translation by Rackham:

Quote from Velleius in On The Nature of The Gods XI

Next, Xenophanes endowed the universe with mind, and held that, as being infinite, it was god. His view of mind is as open to objection as that of the rest ; but on the subject of infinity he incurs still severer criticism, for the infinite can have no sensation and no contact with anything outside.

My interpretation of this, as stated in the podcast (if it survives editing) is that Epicurus would say that "infinity" is a concept that itself "can have no sensation and no contact with anything outside [itself?]. I suggested that there might be a parallel here in the argument made by Socrates/Plato that the greatest good cannot be pleasure because pleasure can be made better (by adding more) and thus something that can be made better is itself not perfect or complete. Analogously, is there an argument that a divinity cannot be infinite because that means the divinity is not complete (or "perfect" in the sense of completed)?

That's just my first thought, but I wanted to add this to the thread because it seems that Velleius (and therefore probably Epicurus) took the position that a divinity cannot be infinite "for the infinite can have no sensation....."

Thoughts?

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2024 at 3:04 PM

Addendum: I should note in addition to criticizing Xenophanes on this "infinity can have no sensation" argument that Velleius had raised essentially the same point shortly before, in the same section, against Anaxagoras:

Quote

XI. Anaxagoras, who received his learning from Anaximenes, was the first who affirmed the system and disposition of all things to be contrived and perfected by the power and reason of an infinite mind; in which infinity he did not perceive that there could be no conjunction of sense and motion, nor any sense in the least degree, where nature herself could feel no impulse. If he would have this mind to be a sort of animal, then there must be some more internal principle from whence that animal should receive its appellation. But what can be more internal than the mind? Let it, therefore, be clothed with an external body. But this is not agreeable to his doctrine; but we are utterly unable to conceive how a pure simple mind can exist without any substance annexed to it.

So this argument appears to be something that the Epicureans considered very significant, and presents an issue that we need to understand about the issue of infinity.

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2024 at 3:58 PM

Here's my take:

An infinite being would have nothing outside of itself *to* sense! If there's only one infinite being, by definition there would be nothing exterior to itself with which to interact with it. Same with motion. If there was only one infinite being encompassing everything, there would be no void into which it could move.

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2024 at 4:08 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

If there's only one infinite being, by definition there would be nothing exterior to itself with which to interact with it

I agree that sounds reasonable. Does that leave the question of whether it could be aware of itself? Does it leave additional questions anyone can think of about why an infinite being could not be aware of itself. Does "infinity" contradict the idea of being "a being"?

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2024 at 4:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

If there's only one infinite being, by definition there would be nothing exterior to itself with which to interact with it

I agree that sounds reasonable. Does that leave the question of whether it could be aware of itself? Does it leave additional questions anyone can think of about why an infinite being could not be aware of itself. Does "infinity" contradict the idea of being "a being"?

I don't think we can be aware of ourselves *without* something external to us. There has to be a me and a you, this and that, for there to be awareness. You might counter with dreams or being in a coma. I think the only way awareness is possible in those circumstances is precisely because we've experienced ourselves in relation to an external world previously. We have never ever had the experience of being a completely autonomous being and never can have that experience.*

*PS: Some might bring up sensory deprivation tanks. But people in those experience weird sensations and mental images because they're coming into the tank with those external experiences. Even cut off from sensory stimulation (while still alive!), our minds use prior experience to hallucinate or imagine or visualize.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 26, 2024 at 5:01 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't think we can be aware of ourselves without something external to us

Further, we have no non-relative "view from nowhere" (a so-called "god's eye view") from which to be aware of anything. This is ultimately what is behind the existentialist dictum "existence precedes essence" -- i.e., we can not even consider how things "really (essentially) are" except from some relative perspective(s). I am thinking here of the existentialist perspectivism of Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset (but Nietzsche was also on to it).

Post by "Godfrey" of May 26, 2024 at 5:22 PM

Random thoughts:

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't think we can be aware of ourselves without something external to us.

We do have interoception, an awareness of our internal sensations. But of course there's always something external to us. And we can't exist without something external to us (food, water, air).

Someone, somewhere (who I believe was worth quoting) said that awareness is awareness of something, not a state of being aware.

Post by "Don" of May 26, 2024 at 6:51 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

We do have interoception, an awareness of our internal sensations.

Agreed. Good point. Even there, there still has to be a sensation of *something*.

I should say I didn't want to go down the rabbit hole of some sensor apart from the sensation. The sensation of the stimuli is sensation. No Cartesian duality or anything.

Post by “Bryan” of May 26, 2024 at 7:14 PM

And obviously, when Velleius says *"in which infinity he did not perceive that there could be no conjunction of sense and motion, nor any sense in the least degree, where nature herself could feel no impulse. "*

Part of what he has in mind is that the gods have a human shape (a shape we know that can have reason), and the gods are not formless, or spherical or infinitely large (shapes that do not have reason) *"but we are utterly unable to conceive how a pure simple mind can exist without any substance annexed to it."*

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2024 at 9:49 AM

Also as a reminder as we proceed with this episode, around the 30 minute mark Joshua mentions a disciple of Pythagorus who asserted that the number 10 was of special significance to the geometric forms. During the podcast we weren't able to recall this person's name but if we come across it we can add it into thjs episode's notes.

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2024 at 10:10 AM

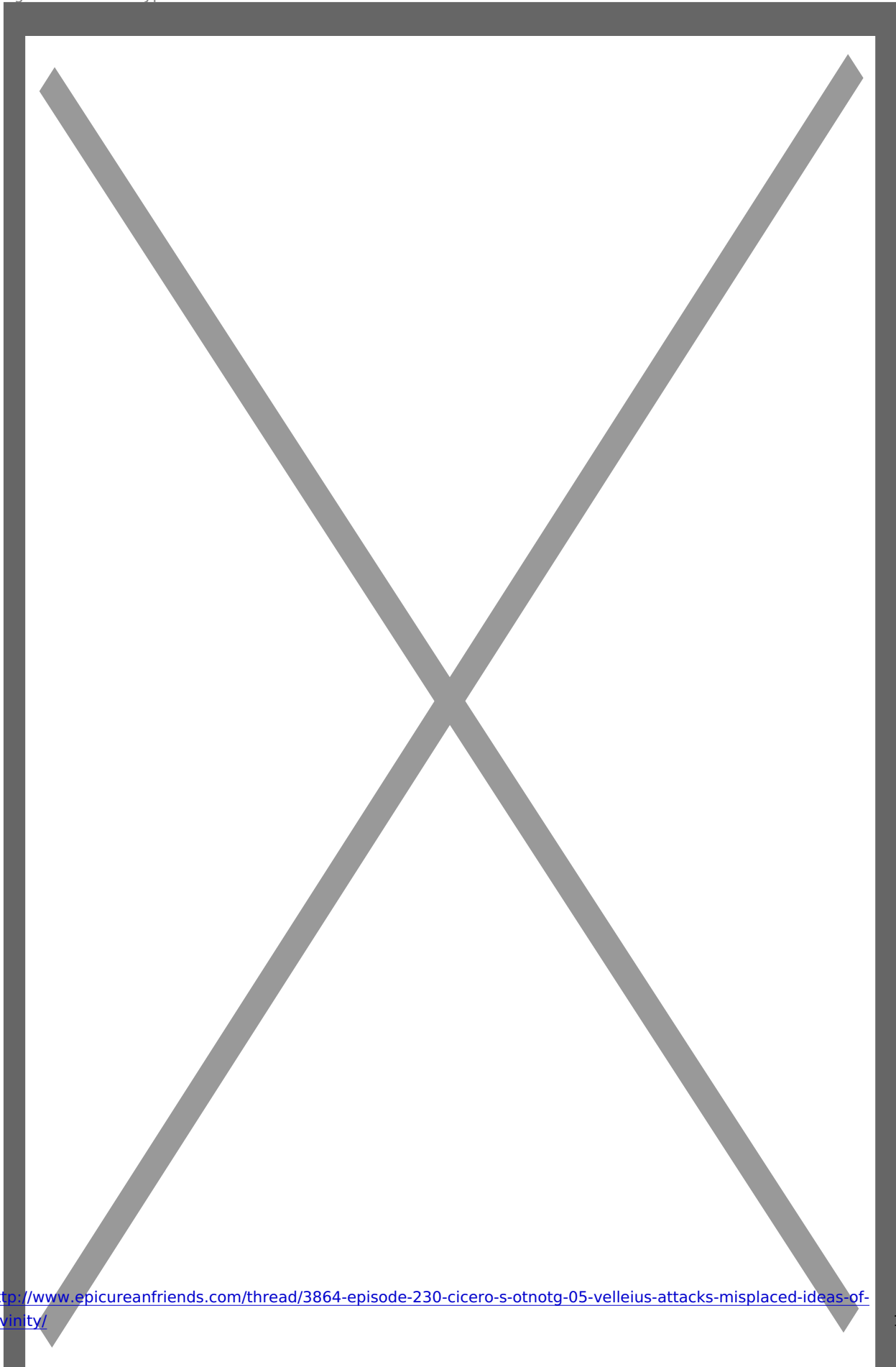
[Quote from Cassius](#)

a disciple of Pythagorus who asserted that the number 10 was of special significance to the geometric forms.

Decimus 😁 Sorry, bad joke.

I was under the impression that it comes directly from Pythagoras himself:

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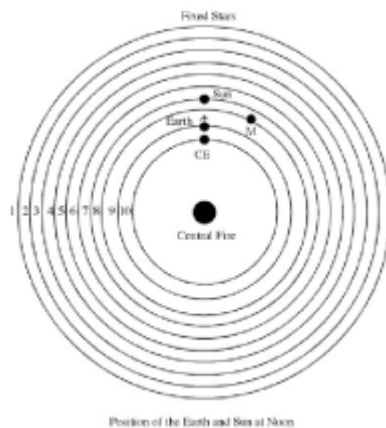
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Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2024 at 10:16 AM

[Joshua](#) does what Don posted joggle your memory?

Post by “Joshua” of May 27, 2024 at 12:18 PM

Quote



The world view of Philolaus . In the world view of Philolaus, the center is occupied by the Central Fire, Anticthon (Counter-Earth, CE), The Earth, the Moon (M), the Sun, and beyond those lie the spheres of the five planets and that of the fixed stars. The crystalline spheres around the Central Fire are 10 (= 1+2+3+4), equal to the sum of the first four numbers.

-The Heliocentric System from the Orphic Hymns and the Pythagoreans to the Emperor Julian [link](#)

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2024 at 2:56 PM

Episode 230 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available, with Velleius attacking misplaced ideas of divinity expressed by other philosophers.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60190696>

Post by “Joshua” of May 27, 2024 at 10:46 PM

I have to apologize for my seasonal allergies in this episode, my voice was clearly strained!

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2024 at 11:03 PM

No apologies necessary: congratulations for showing up!

Post by “Bryan” of May 28, 2024 at 6:34 PM

The word "heresy" originating from ἄρσις -- Epicurus' main word for "choice," is indeed poignant.

I agree it is good that our school has no tradition of calling for violence on those who disagree with us. The frequent calls for open and underhanded violence to people who disagree with you in religious texts should be shameful -- but is unfortunately common, for example, in the Mishneh Torah.

As we know, the advice for our school is:

Rotzeah uShmirat Nefesh 4.10: "The [following are considered] Epicureans (מִסְרוּקִיפָאָה, Ha'Epikorsim): those who worship idols or commit transgressions in order to provoke anger. Even if one eats non-kosher meat or wears garments of mixed fabric to provoke anger, he is considered an Epicurean (סְרוּקִיפָאָה, Epikoros). This includes those who deny the Torah and the Prophets. It is a commandment (מִצְוָה, mitzvah) to kill them. If one has the power to kill them with a sword in public, he should do so. If not, he should employ tricks until he causes their death. How? If one of them falls into a well (בְּעֵר, be'er) and a ladder (סֻלָּם, sulam) is inside, he

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should remove it and say, 'I must go and bring my son down from the roof; I will return the ladder to you,' and he should act similarly in such opportunities."