

Episode 238 - Cicero's OTNOTG 13 - Velleius Erupts Against Stoic Fate and Supernatural God-Making

Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2024 at 1:29 PM

Welcome to Episode 238 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," where the Epicurean spokesman Velleius defends the Epicurean point of view. Last week we left off right at the very end of section 19, and we will pick up there and continue into section 20.

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

XIX. Surely the mighty power of the Infinite Being is most worthy our great and earnest contemplation; the nature of which we must necessarily understand to be such that everything in it is made to correspond completely to some other answering part. This is called by Epicurus $\text{\iota}\text{\sigma}\text{\nu}\text{\omicron}\text{\nu}\text{\mu}\text{\acute{\alpha}}$; that is to say, an equal distribution or even disposition of things. From hence he draws this inference, that, as there is such a vast multitude of mortals, there cannot be a less number of immortals; and if those which perish are innumerable, those which are preserved ought also to be countless. Your sect, Balbus, frequently ask us how the Gods live, and how

they pass their time? Their life is the most happy, and the most abounding with all kinds of blessings, which can be conceived. They do nothing. They are embarrassed with no business; nor do they perform any work. They rejoice in the possession of their own wisdom and virtue. They are satisfied that they shall ever enjoy the fulness of eternal pleasures.

XX. Such a Deity may properly be called happy; but yours is a most laborious God. For let us suppose the world a Deity—what can be a more uneasy state than, without the least cessation, to be whirled about the axle-tree of heaven with a surprising celerity? But nothing can be happy that is not at ease. Or let us suppose a Deity residing in the world, who directs and governs it, who preserves the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons, and the vicissitudes and orders of things, surveying the earth and the sea, and accommodating them to the advantage and necessities of man. Truly this Deity is embarrassed with a very troublesome and laborious office. We make a happy life to consist in a tranquillity of mind, a perfect freedom from care, and an exemption from all employment.

The philosopher from whom we received all our knowledge has taught us that the world was made by nature; that there was no occasion for a workhouse to frame it in; and that, though you deny the possibility of such a work without divine skill, it is so easy to her, that she has made, does make, and will make innumerable worlds. But, because you do not conceive that nature is able to produce such effects without some rational aid, you are forced, like the tragic poets, when you cannot wind up your argument in any other way, to have recourse to a Deity, whose assistance you would not seek, if you could view that vast and unbounded magnitude of regions in all parts; where the mind, extending and spreading itself, travels so far and wide that it can find no end, no extremity to stop at. In this immensity of breadth, length, and height, a most boundless company of innumerable atoms are fluttering about, which, notwithstanding the interposition of a void space, meet and cohere, and continue clinging to one another; and by this union these modifications and forms of things arise, which, in your opinions, could not possibly be made without the help of bellows and anvils. Thus you have imposed on us an eternal master, whom we must dread day and night. For who can be free from fear of a Deity who foresees, regards, and takes notice of everything; one who thinks all things his own; a curious, ever-busy God?

Hence first arose your Εἰμαρμένη, as you call it, your fatal necessity; so that, whatever happens, you affirm that it flows from an eternal chain and continuance of causes. Of what value is this philosophy, which, like old women and illiterate men, attributes everything to fate? Then follows your μαντική, in Latin called divinatio, divination; which, if we would listen to you, would plunge us into such superstition that we should fall down and worship your inspectors into sacrifices, your augurs, your soothsayers, your prophets, and your fortune-tellers.

Epicurus having freed us from these terrors and restored us to liberty, we have no dread of those beings whom we have reason to think entirely free from all trouble themselves, and who do not impose any on others. We pay our adoration, indeed, with piety and reverence to that essence which is above all excellence and perfection. But I fear my zeal for this doctrine has

made me too prolix. However, I could not easily leave so eminent and important a subject unfinished, though I must confess I should rather endeavor to hear than speak so long.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60782906>

Post by “Joshua” of July 21, 2024 at 3:45 PM

Lucretius offers a glimpse of the life of the gods in this passage in Book I;

The gods dwell far removed in profound peace, free from pain and fear, and neither placated by offerings nor moved to anger	talibus	in rebus communi desse	saluti.	omnis enim per se
	such important in affairs common	to neglect welfare all	for through themselves	
	divom natura necesses	45	immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur	
	of the gods the nature are by necessity	deathless	of age entirely with peace enjoying	
	semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe;	nam privata dolore omni,		
	removed from our affairs and separated afar	for freed from pain all		
	privata periculis, ipsa suis pollens opibus,	nil indiga nostri, nec		
	freed from danger they by their own made mighty resources	not needing us neither		
	bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira			
	good offerings receiving nor touched by anger			
	επ			

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2024 at 11:53 AM

This episode (which should be released later today or tomorrow, contains a very memorable passage which is worth noting as being among the most powerful as any of the existing Epicurean texts. In the episode, I noted that it has a parallel in Lucretius, especially as to the part about how those who resort to supernatural gods to explain nature end up harnessing us to oppressive gods.

Here's the statement by Velleius which is so strong, and I will look for parallels in Lucretius because I think the similarity of argument is well worth noticing:

Quote

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3968-episode-238-cicero-s-otnotg-13-velleius-erupts-against-stoic-fate-and-supernatur/>

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To me, this argument is as well stated as several of Torquatus' summations in On Ends, and it's so well stated that (as I said in the podcast) I don't think Cicero would have come up with this phrasing himself. It seems clear to me that powerful and eloquent passages like attacking standard religious and moral views this must have been lifted almost verbatim directly from authentic Epicurean texts.

And I contrast that specifically with much of the moralizing material from Seneca, who seems to rewrite the thrust of Epicurus' argument to suit Seneca's own Stoic viewpoint. There's no way in my mind that a Stoic or Academic Skeptic like Cicero would have created such compelling and

strong Epicurean anti-religious argument on his own, and Cicero makes no effort to reconcile this wording with Stoicism or Skepticism.

Now I'll look for one or more parallel passages in Lucretius.

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2024 at 11:57 AM

Here is at least one parallel passage, Lucretius Book 5, around 55:

Quote

[55] In his footsteps I tread, and while I follow his reasonings and set out in my discourse, by what law all things are created, and how they must needs abide by it, nor can they break through the firm ordinances of their being, even as first of all the nature of the mind has been found to be formed and created above other things with a body that has birth, and to be unable to endure unharmed through the long ages, but it is images that are wont in sleep to deceive the mind, when we seem to behold one whom life has left;

for what remains, the train of my reasoning has now brought me to this point, that I must give account how the world is made of mortal body and also came to birth; and in what ways that gathering of matter established earth, sky, sea, stars, sun, and the ball of the moon; then what living creatures sprang from the earth, and which have never been born at any time; and in what manner the race of men began to use ever-varying speech one to another by naming things; and in what ways that fear of the gods found its way into their breasts, which throughout the circle of the world keeps revered shrines, lakes, groves, altars, and images of the gods.

Moreover, I will unfold by what power nature, the helmsman, steers the courses of the sun and the wanderings of the moon; lest by chance we should think that they of their own will 'twixt earth and sky fulfil their courses from year to year, with kindly favour to the increase of earth's fruits and living creatures, or should suppose that they roll on by any forethought of the gods.

For those who have learnt aright that the gods lead a life free from care, yet if from time to time they wonder by what means all things can be carried on, above all among those things which are descried above our heads in the coasts of heaven, are borne back again into the old beliefs of religion, and adopt stern overlords, whom in their misery they believe have all power, knowing not what can be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deep-set boundary-stone.

Post by “Bryan” of July 23, 2024 at 4:05 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"she has made, does make, and will make innumerable worlds."

"has made, does make, and will make" is probably too formulaic to be evidence either way, but we have:

[PD16](#), "Chance falls upon the wise man briefly: for Reasoning has managed the greatest and most critical things - and for the whole time of life manages and will manage." or

SV10 "Remember that you are of mortal nature and have a limited time to live and have devoted yourself to discussions on nature for all time and eternity, and have seen “things that are now and are to come and have been."

This last line there is a quote from Hesiod's Theogony line 38. εἰρεῦσαι τὰ τ' ἔόντα τὰ τ' ἔσσόμενα πρό τ' ἔόντα ""declaring the things that exist, the things that will exist, and the things existing before"

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2024 at 9:36 PM

Episode 238 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we close Velleius' presentation with one of the most rousing Epicurean selections ever written, as Velleius erupts against Stoic Fate and Supernatural God-Making!

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60782906>

Post by “Bryan” of July 23, 2024 at 10:29 PM

I fully agree with your point, Joshua, about pi. However, I am also thinking that the idea that pi goes on indefinitely seems to come close to infinite divisibility. It seems, from a physicalist perspective, pi does not show anything infinite, but could be viewed as another example of how math/geometry fails to adequately correspond to reality.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3968-episode-238-cicero-s-otnotg-13-velleius-erupts-against-stoic-fate-and-supernatur/>

Post by “Joshua” of July 24, 2024 at 12:28 AM

Yeah, Cicero makes that case in book one of *On Ends* when he says that Epicurus would have known that atoms had to be divisible if only he had 'learned geometry from Polyaeus, instead of making him unlearn everything he knew'.

A comparison can be made with fractals; while, mathematically, images produced from fractal sets contain infinite detail in a finite space, Epicurus would say that nature itself has a lower limit in the atom.

Post by “Bryan” of July 27, 2024 at 9:20 AM

Well done, guys! I agree, it is by looking for gods that are more than physical living mammals in outer space that people come to atheism (and rightly so, for what they are looking for, a non-physical being that can create physical matter, cannot exist).

Joshua, you mentioned that many scientifically-minded people accept that aliens must exist; it is statistically guaranteed. This line of thinking is, of course, even more proof of gods—as gods are (by one way of speaking) a class of aliens.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 27, 2024 at 2:38 PM

Coincidentally I've begun reading *The Longevity Diet* by Valter Longo from the USC Longevity Center. Although I'm not sure what to make of the diet, the first two chapters struck me as interesting when considering the [Epicurean gods](#) and theories as to how they might maintain their incorruptibility.

Unfortunately I'm not able to provide a more detailed analysis at this time, but it's worth a look in this regard.

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 27, 2024 at 4:43 PM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3968-episode-238-cicero-s-otnotg-13-velleius-erupts-against-stoic-fate-and-supernatur/>

I found this:

Quote

Ask pretty much anyone if they want to live a longer life, and the answer is probably a resounding yes. But how exactly does one go about living longer? [Valter Longo, PhD](#), a professor of gerontology and biological sciences at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the director of the USC Longevity Institute, and the author of [*The Longevity Diet: Discover the New Science Behind Stem Cell Activation and Regeneration to Slow Aging, Fight Disease, and Optimize Weight*](#), combed through the [research](#) on how diet can influence lifespan in order to develop the longevity diet.

[Source](#)

And then there is also this, which emphasizes exercise:

<https://foreverfitscience.com/exercise-scienc...0of%20longevity>.