

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 1, 2024 at 1:04 PM

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>

Post by "Cassius" of August 5, 2024 at 7:48 AM

This episode is devoted largely to refuting a specific allegation made by Cotta which misrepresents Velleius' and Epicurus' position:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3984-episode-240-cicero-s-otnotg-15-the-false-allegation-that-general-assent-was-the/>

Quote from Cotta addressing Velleius

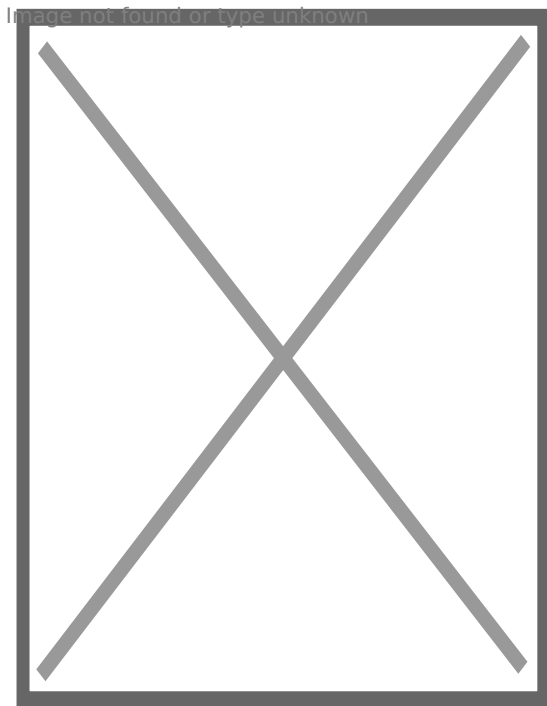
You have said that the general assent of men of all nations and all degrees is an argument strong enough to induce us to acknowledge the being of the Gods

During the episode, I made a passing allusion to Cotta's argument being essentially that Epicurus had adopted a "fifty million frenchmen can't be wrong" attitude.

This needs to be firmly rejected. Epicurus did not and would endorse, given that Epicurus was well known for setting himself apart from the crowd and pointing out that the crowd is frequently wrong.

Some may not be aware of my "Fifty million Frenchmen" reference, and in fact I am not sure I was aware of the Cole Porter song myself, but here is the source of the allusion:

<https://youtu.be/u-IP0DE2kTI>



[Fifty Million Frenchmen - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

Post by "Cassius" of August 6, 2024 at 5:43 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3984-episode-240-cicero-s-otnotg-15-the-false-allegation-that-general-assent-was-the/>

This episode will be released today. In the meantime I wanted to memorialize an observation Joshua made last night to this effect:

That there is a parallel between Epicurus' statement in the letter to Menoeceus as to the nature of gods, and the statement by Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends as to the nature of the highest good.

Joshua can do a better job than I of stating his point, but the way I remember it is that as to gods in the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus points out that the idea of gods is etched on the minds of all men, but that the particular assertions about the gods that men make are untrustworthy and often wrong.

Quote

The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life. First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many.

In regard to the highest good, Torquatus points out that there is a common conception of the highest good on which all philosophers agree (that the highest good is the thing all actions aim at, but which is not itself aimed at anything else) and yet the specific observations men make against the highest good (that the highest good is virtue or piety) is untrustworthy and often wrong.

Quote

[29] IX. 'First, then,' said he, 'I shall plead my case on the lines laid down by the founder of our school himself: I shall define the essence and features of the problem before us, not because I imagine you to be unacquainted with them, but with a view to the methodical progress of my speech. The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

In both cases, Epicurus is not using the conclusions of other men as the direct basis for his conclusion, he is observing that there is a common root perspective in the minds of men, but what men think about that common root perspective is in many/most cases totally wrong, and must be correcting by going back to observations from the canonical faculties.

Linking these two passages together leads to some interesting possibilities which I'll defer making in this post and see if Joshua gets a chance to elaborate his observation further himself.

All this came up in relation to the main point of this Lucretius Today episode, which is that it is ridiculous to assert that Epicurus based his ideas of gods, or of philosophy, by observing the conclusions of other men - the "general consent of mankind" / "Fifty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong" argument.

Post by “Cassius” of August 6, 2024 at 5:56 AM

For reference and comparison, here is the Stoic professor Greg Sadler's presentation of how Epicurus argues that [gods exist due to the "common consent of mankind"](#)

Post by “Cassius” of August 6, 2024 at 8:19 AM

Episode 240 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we address Cotta's false argument that Epicurus rested his contention that gods exist based on "the general assent of mankind."

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

Post by “Don” of August 6, 2024 at 9:28 PM

For what it's worth, here is a relevant section from my Menoikeus commentary and translation:

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον "a god (is a) ζῶον. But what is a ζῶον?

ζῶον (zōon) is where English zoology comes from.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3984-episode-240-cicero-s-otnotg-15-the-false-allegation-that-general-assent-was-the/>

LSJ gives two primary definitions:

- living being, animal
- in art, figure, image, not necessarily of animals (or a *sign* of the Zodiac)

So, unfortunately, at this point in the Letter we can't necessarily resolve the question of what the nature of the gods (or of a god) is according to Epicurus. Some scholars think Epicurus believed the gods were material beings ("living being, animal") somehow living between the various world-systems (cosmos) in the universe. Some think Epicurus believed the gods were mental representations or personifications of the concepts ("figure, image, sign") of blessedness.

...

θεοὶ εἰσιν. "Gods exist." "There are gods."

The implications of those two words have had entire essays written about them. We looked at this a little in 123b with ζῶον. But Epicurus is not equivocating here: **Gods exist.** What he *means* by this we simply have to discover from his extant works and fragments. Again, if we take Sedley's position, each person has their own personal concept of a god. Many people, many individual gods. Those gods exist.

123f. ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ γνῶσις.

- Here's our δέ "on the other hand."
- ἐναργῆς [δέ] ἐστὶν αὐτῶν ἡ γνῶσις

"And the knowledge (ἡ γνῶσις (gnōsis)) of them (θεοί "gods", note the plural here) is ἐναργῆς." But what does ἐναργῆς mean?

LSJ provides two primary definitions:

- visible, palpable, in bodily shape, properly of gods appearing in their own forms (in Homer); so of a dream or vision; ex., ἐναργῆς ταῦρος "in visible form a bull, a very bull"
- manifest to the mind's eye, distinct

Epicurus can't mean the first meaning since he's adamant that the gods don't interact with humans. But the second definition coincides with his contention (and the idea of the prolepsis of the gods) that the gods are apprehended by the mind only. In first Principal Doctrine's scholia (i.e., a note added to the text by a later author), we read τοὺς θεοὺς λόγῳ θεωρητοῦς "the gods are conceived of through contemplation by reasoning." We don't - can't! - see the [Epicurean gods](#) with our physical eyes as Homer describes seeing the Olympian gods "in visible form." Homer's gods were ἐναργῆς in one sense of the word; Epicurus's in the other sense. The truth of the gods' existence in Epicurus's philosophy takes place entirely in our minds by reasoning through their existence by means of contemplation. But through that contemplation,

Epicurus asserts that their existence is *εναργής* "clearly discernible to us / manifest to us in our minds."

This emphasis on contemplation is interesting in light of the characteristic of the Epicurean sage in Diogenes Laertius Book X.30: μάλλον τε εὐφρανθήσεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις. I continue to maintain that "in contemplation" is the best translation of ἐν ταῖς θεωρίαις for this characteristic of the sage: "The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation, speculation, and theorizing." Many translators see this as referring to state festivals and spectacles. I've explored the use of the word elsewhere in Diogenes Laertius' work as well as in Aristotle online. <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...tion?authuser=0> If the gods are "manifest" in contemplation, this seems consistent with that characteristic of an Epicurean sage.

Unfortunately, this does nothing to resolve our problem with puzzling out *how* a god is a ζῶον. Are they physically-existent material beings? Are they existing only as mental perceptions manifest merely to the mind's eye? The ambiguous nature of *εναργής* doesn't necessarily help us fully. It does, however, set up some of Epicurus's clever wordplay contrasting his view with Homer's.

Post by “Joshua” of August 6, 2024 at 10:38 PM

I'd like to develop a thesis that I'm working toward, and that I briefly mentioned on Sunday because it only then occurred to me;

[Quote from Letter To Menoecus, Yonge Translation](#)

First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, thou shalt not affirm of him aught that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness, but shalt believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious.

It's always struck me as odd that Epicurus' first use of *god* (θεὸν) is singular, and in subsequent usage he employs the plural. Some of the translators (as Yonge here) actually translate this as *God*, giving entirely the wrong impression.

I was struck by the similarity between this passage in Epicurus, and the opening words of Torquatus in *De Finibus*;

Quote from Cicero, On Ends, Reid Translation

The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

Notice that Torquatus in this passage is not saying that pleasure is the good because that is the "opinion of all philosophers"; Torquatus is relying on the "opinion of all philosophers" in order to establish a barebones definition of *the good* as such. What makes something the good? Something is the good because we test all things by it, but the good itself by nothing.

In the *Letter to Menoecus* Epicurus seems to be doing the same thing. Before we can even discuss the gods, we need a working definition of what a god really is. Notice how this interpretation of the passage perfectly explains the use of the singular.

Person A: I have three pet marmots at home that I need to go take care of, but after that I'm good for whatever.

Person B: ...What the hell is a marmot?

No one would ever follow up the initial statement with the question, "what are three marmots?" When we ask for a definition, we ask in the singular. When Epicurus speaks on the gods, he first offers a definition, and his definition is also in the singular. And like Torquatus, who relies on the opinion of all philosophers when defining the good, Epicurus invokes the common opinion of mankind when defining a god.

He does *not* use the common opinion of mankind to *justify his own belief that the gods exist*. He thinks the gods exist because of images that impinge, because of prolepsis, because of the principle of isonomia, and perhaps other considerations as well. But he thinks that the gods are blessed and incorruptible because this is the definition of a god; if a god is neither blessed nor incorruptible, it isn't a god.

I have very little facility with the Greek, but I've never seen this interpretation set forth and I find that it solves two thorny problems at one go.

Post by "Don" of August 6, 2024 at 11:03 PM

[Joshua](#) : I'm definitely intrigued by the direction you're going. Sedley makes distinctions between singular and plural, but I don't believe in the way you're proposing. I do think some translators gloss over the singular/plural in those sections. I'd be curious to dig into the Greek in those and quantify singulars and plurals.

Thanks for a thought-provoking proposal!