

Episode 226 - Cicero's On The Nature of The Gods - Epicurean Section 01 - Introduction

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Welcome to Episode 226 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 you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Now that we have finished the Epicurean sections of "On Ends," we will now move to the Epicurean sections of Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods."

This week's episode will serve as a bridge between our discussion of "On Ends" and this new examination of Cicero, as we focus on what Cicero says about the contemporary state of views about the nature of the gods, and how Cicero came to prepare the current text.

Today we will go quickly through the first seven sections of Book 1, and then we will turn next week to Velleius' elaboration of the Epicurean view.

On the Nature of the Gods Book Ons

I. There are many things in philosophy, my dear Brutus, which are not as yet fully explained to us, and particularly (as you very well know) that most obscure and difficult question concerning the Nature of the Gods, so extremely necessary both towards a knowledge of the human mind and the practice of true religion: concerning which the opinions of men are so various, and so different from each other, as to lead strongly to the inference that ignorance is the cause, or origin, of philosophy, and that the Academic philosophers have been prudent in refusing their assent to things uncertain: for what is more unbecoming to a wise man than to judge rashly? or what rashness is so unworthy of the gravity and stability of a philosopher as either to maintain false opinions, or, without the least hesitation, to support and defend what he has not thoroughly examined and does not clearly comprehend?

In the question now before us, the greater part of mankind have united to acknowledge that which is most probable, and which we are all by nature led to suppose, namely, that there are Gods. Protagoras doubted whether there were any. Diagoras the Melian and Theodorus of Cyrene entirely believed there were no such beings. But they who have affirmed that there are Gods, have expressed such a variety of sentiments on the subject, and the disagreement between them is so great, that it would be tiresome to enumerate their opinions; for they give

us many statements respecting the forms of the Gods, and their places of abode, and the employment of their lives. And these are matters on which the philosophers differ with the most exceeding earnestness. But the most considerable part of the dispute is, whether they are wholly inactive, totally unemployed, and free from all care and administration of affairs; or, on the contrary, whether all things were made and constituted by them from the beginning; and whether they will continue to be actuated and governed by them to eternity. This is one of the greatest points in debate; and unless this is decided, mankind must necessarily remain in the greatest of errors, and ignorant of what is most important to be known.

II. For there are some philosophers, both ancient and modern, who have conceived that the Gods take not the least cognizance of human affairs. But if their doctrine be true, of what avail is piety, sanctity, or religion? for these are feelings and marks of devotion which are offered to the Gods by men with uprightness and holiness, on the ground that men are the objects of the attention of the Gods, and that many benefits are conferred by the immortal Gods on the human race. But if the Gods have neither the power nor the inclination to help us; if they take no care of us, and pay no regard to our actions; and if there is no single advantage which can possibly accrue to the life of man; then what reason can we have to pay any adoration, or any honors, or to prefer any prayers to them? Piety, like the other virtues, cannot have any connection with vain show or dissimulation; and without piety, neither sanctity nor religion can be supported; the total subversion of which must be attended with great confusion and disturbance in life.

I do not even know, if we cast off piety towards the Gods, but that faith, and all the associations of human life, and that most excellent of all virtues, justice, may perish with it.

There are other philosophers, and those, too, very great and illustrious men, who conceive the whole world to be directed and governed by the will and wisdom of the Gods; nor do they stop here, but conceive likewise that the Deities consult and provide for the preservation of mankind. For they think that the fruits, and the produce of the earth, and the seasons, and the variety of weather, and the change of climates, by which all the productions of the earth are brought to maturity, are designed by the immortal Gods for the use of man. They instance many other things, which shall be related in these books; and which would almost induce us to believe that the immortal Gods had made them all expressly and solely for the benefit and advantage of men. Against these opinions Carneades has advanced so much that what he has said should excite a desire in men who are not naturally slothful to search after truth; for there is no subject on which the learned as well as the unlearned differ so strenuously as in this; and since their opinions are so various, and so repugnant one to another, it is possible that none of them may be, and absolutely impossible that more than one should be, right.

III. Now, in a cause like this, I may be able to pacify well-meaning opposers, and to confute invidious censurers, so as to induce the latter to repent of their unreasonable contradiction, and the former to be glad to learn; for they who admonish one in a friendly spirit should be instructed, they who attack one like enemies should be repelled. But I observe that the several books which I have lately published have occasioned much noise and various discourse about

them; some people wondering what the reason has been why I have applied myself so suddenly to the study of philosophy, and others desirous of knowing what my opinion is on such subjects. I likewise perceive that many people wonder at my following that philosophy chiefly which seems to take away the light, and to bury and envelop things in a kind of artificial night, and that I should so unexpectedly have taken up the defense of a school that has been long neglected and forsaken. But it is a mistake to suppose that this application to philosophical studies has been sudden on my part. I have applied myself to them from my youth, at no small expense of time and trouble; and I have been in the habit of philosophizing a great deal when I least seemed to think about it; for the truth of which I appeal to my orations, which are filled with quotations from philosophers, and to my intimacy with those very learned men who frequented my house and conversed daily with me, particularly Diodorus, Philo, Antiochus, and Posidonius, under whom I was bred; and if all the precepts of philosophy are to have reference to the conduct of life, I am inclined to think that I have advanced, both in public and private affairs, only such principles as may be supported by reason and authority.

IV. But if any one should ask what has induced me, in the decline of life, to write on these subjects, nothing is more easily answered; for when I found myself entirely disengaged from business, and the commonwealth reduced to the necessity of being governed by the direction and care of one man,⁷⁷ I thought it becoming, for the sake of the public, to instruct my countrymen in philosophy, and that it would be of importance, and much to the honor and commendation of our city, to have such great and excellent subjects introduced in the Latin tongue. I the less repent of my undertaking, since I plainly see that I have excited in many a desire, not only of learning, but of writing; for we have had several Romans well grounded in the learning of the Greeks who were unable to communicate to their countrymen what they had learned, because they looked upon it as impossible to express that in Latin which they had received from the Greeks. In this point I think I have succeeded so well that what I have done is not, even in copiousness of expression, inferior to that language.

Another inducement to it was a melancholy disposition of mind, and the great and heavy oppression of fortune that was upon me; from which, if I could have found any surer remedy, I would not have sought relief in this pursuit. But I could procure ease by no means better than by not only applying myself to books, but by devoting myself to the examination of the whole body of philosophy. And every part and branch of this is readily discovered when every question is propounded in writing; for there is such an admirable continuation and series of things that each seems connected with the other, and all appear linked together and united.

V. Now, those men who desire to know my own private opinion on every particular subject have more curiosity than is necessary. For the force of reason in disputation is to be sought after rather than authority, since the authority of the teacher is often a disadvantage to those who are willing to learn; as they refuse to use their own judgment, and rely implicitly on him whom they make choice of for a preceptor. Nor could I ever approve this custom of the Pythagoreans, who, when they affirmed anything in disputation, and were asked why it was so, used to give this answer: "He himself has said it;" and this "he himself," it seems, was Pythagoras. Such was the force of prejudice and opinion that his authority was to prevail even without argument or

reason.

They who wonder at my being a follower of this sect in particular may find a satisfactory answer in my four books of Academical Questions. But I deny that I have undertaken the protection of what is neglected and forsaken; for the opinions of men do not die with them, though they may perhaps want the author's explanation. This manner of philosophizing, of disputing all things and assuming nothing certainly, was begun by Socrates, revived by Arcesilaus, confirmed by Carneades, and has descended, with all its power, even to the present age; but I am informed that it is now almost exploded even in Greece. However, I do not impute that to any fault in the institution of the Academy, but to the negligence of mankind. If it is difficult to know all the doctrines of any one sect, how much more is it to know those of every sect! which, however, must necessarily be known to those who resolve, for the sake of discovering truth, to dispute for or against all philosophers without partiality.

I do not profess myself to be master of this difficult and noble faculty; but I do assert that I have endeavored to make myself so; and it is impossible that they who choose this manner of philosophizing should not meet at least with something worthy their pursuit. I have spoken more fully on this head in another place. But as some are too slow of apprehension, and some too careless, men stand in perpetual need of caution. For we are not people who believe that there is nothing whatever which is true; but we say that some falsehoods are so blended with all truths, and have so great a resemblance to them, that there is no certain rule for judging of or assenting to propositions; from which this maxim also follows, that many things are probable, which, though they are not evident to the senses, have still so persuasive and beautiful an aspect that a wise man chooses to direct his conduct by them.

VI. Now, to free myself from the reproach of partiality, I propose to lay before you the opinions of various philosophers concerning the nature of the Gods, by which means all men may judge which of them are consistent with truth; and if all agree together, or if any one shall be found to have discovered what may be absolutely called truth, I will then give up the Academy as vain and arrogant. So I may cry out, in the words of Statius, in the Synephebi,

Ye Gods, I call upon, require, pray, beseech, entreat, and implore the attention of my countrymen all, both young and old;

yet not on so trifling an occasion as when the person in the play complains that,

In this city we have discovered a most flagrant iniquity: here is a professed courtesan, who refuses money from her lover;

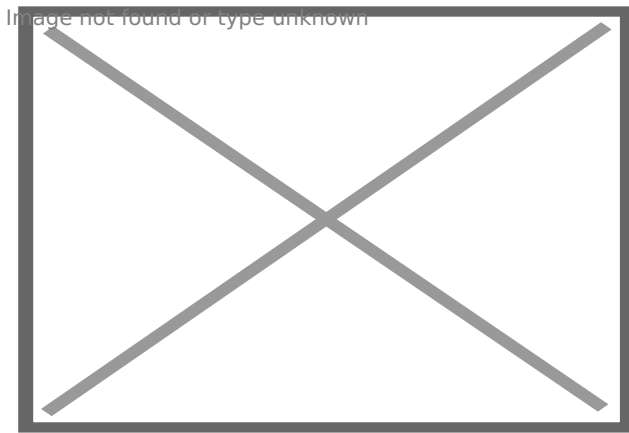
but that they may attend, know, and consider what sentiments they ought to preserve concerning religion, piety, sanctity, ceremonies, faith, oaths, temples, shrines, and solemn sacrifices; what they ought to think of the auspices over which I preside;⁷⁸ for all these have relation to the present question. The manifest disagreement among the most learned on this subject creates doubts in those who imagine they have some certain knowledge of the subject.

Which fact I have often taken notice of elsewhere, and I did so more especially at the discussion that was held at my friend C. Cotta's concerning the immortal Gods, and which was carried on with the greatest care, accuracy, and precision; for coming to him at the time of the Latin holidays,⁷⁹ according to his own invitation and message from him, I found him sitting in his study,⁸⁰ and in a discourse with C. Velleius, the senator, who was then reputed by the Epicureans the ablest of our countrymen. Q. Lucilius Balbus was likewise there, a great proficient in the doctrine of the Stoics, and esteemed equal to the most eminent of the Greeks in that part of knowledge. As soon as Cotta saw me, You are come, says he, very seasonably; for I am having a dispute with Velleius on an important subject, which, considering the nature of your studies, is not improper for you to join in.

VII. Indeed, says I, I think I am come very seasonably, as you say; for here are three chiefs of three principal sects met together. If M. Piso was present, no sect of philosophy that is in any esteem would want an advocate. If Antiochus's book, replies Cotta, which he lately sent to Balbus, says true, you have no occasion to wish for your friend Piso; for Antiochus is of the opinion that the Stoics do not differ from the Peripatetics in fact, though they do in words; and I should be glad to know what you think of that book, Balbus? Says he, I wonder that Antiochus, a man of the clearest apprehension, should not see what a vast difference there is between the Stoics, who distinguish the honest and the profitable, not only in name, but absolutely in kind, and the Peripatetics, who blend the honest with the profitable in such a manner that they differ only in degrees and proportion, and not in kind. This is not a little difference in words, but a great one in things; but of this hereafter. Now, if you think fit, let us return to what we began with.

With all my heart, says Cotta. But that this visitor (looking at me), who is just come in, may not be ignorant of what we are upon, I will inform him that we were discoursing on the nature of the Gods; concerning which, as it is a subject that always appeared very obscure to me, I prevailed on Velleius to give us the sentiments of Epicurus. Therefore, continues he, if it is not troublesome, Velleius, repeat what you have already stated to us. I will, says he, though this new-comer will be no advocate for me, but for you; for you have both, adds he, with a smile, learned from the same Philo to be certain of nothing. What we have learned from him, replied I, Cotta will discover; but I would not have you think I am come as an assistant to him, but as an auditor, with an impartial and unbiased mind, and not bound by any obligation to defend any particular principle, whether I like or dislike it.

For the text as we go forward, we will likely use the last public domain translation in the Loeb series, which contains both Latin and English, as translated by H. Rackham. A copy of that can be found here:



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