

Episode 249 - Cicero's OTNOTG 24 - Are The Epicurean Gods Totally Inactive, And Are We To Emulate Them Through Laziness?

Post by “Joshua” of October 6, 2024 at 11:55 AM

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Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve*; Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*

The third post from [this](#) thread contains the full passage.

Velleius on the labors of the gods

Quote

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.

§ 1.52 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. [Here](#)

Ennius, *Iphigenia*; and Lucretius' response

Quote from Ennius

He who does not know how to use leisure
has more of work than when there is work in work.
For to whom a task has been set, he does the work,
desires it, and delights his own mind and intellect:
in leisure, a mind does not know what it wants.
The same is true (of us); we are neither at home nor in the battlefield;
we go here and there, and wherever there is a movement, we are there too.
The mind wanders unsure, except in that life is lived.

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Quote from Lucretius

If men, in that same way as on the mind
They feel the load that wearies with its weight,
Could also know the causes whence it comes,
And why so great the heap of ill on heart,
O not in this sort would they live their life,
As now so much we see them, knowing not
What 'tis they want, and seeking ever and ever
A change of place, as if to drop the burden.
The man who sickens of his home goes out,
Forth from his splendid halls, and straight- returns,
Feeling i'faith no better off abroad.
He races, driving his Gallic ponies along,
Down to his villa, madly,- as in haste
To hurry help to a house afire.- At once
He yawns, as soon as foot has touched the threshold,
Or drowsily goes off in sleep and seeks
Forgetfulness, or maybe bustles about
And makes for town again. In such a way
Each human flees himself- a self in sooth,
As happens, he by no means can escape;
And willy-nilly he cleaves to it and loathes,
Sick, sick, and guessing not the cause of ail.
Yet should he see but that, O chiefly then,
Leaving all else, he'd study to divine
The nature of things, since here is in debate
Eternal time and not the single hour,
Mortal's estate in whatsoever remains

After great death.

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Lucretius on Empedocles; "*A great man, greatly fallen*"

Quote from Lucretius, Book I

As first Empedocles of [Acragas](#),
Whom that three-cornered isle of all the lands
Bore on her coasts, around which flows and flows
In mighty bend and bay the Ionic seas,
Splashing the brine from off their gray-green waves.
Here, billowing onward through the narrow straits,
Swift ocean cuts her boundaries from the shores
Of the Italic mainland. Here the waste
Charybdis; and here [Aetna](#) rumbles threats
To gather anew such furies of its flames
As with its force anew to vomit fires,
Belched from its throat, and skyward bear anew
Its lightnings' flash. And though for much she seem
The mighty and the wondrous isle to men,
Most rich in all good things, and fortified
With generous strength of heroes, she hath ne'er
Possessed within her aught of more renown,
Nor aught more holy, wonderful, and dear
Than this true man. Nay, ever so far and pure
The lofty music of his breast divine
Lifts up its voice and tells of glories found,
That scarce he seems of human stock create.
Yet he and those forementioned (known to be
So far beneath him, less than he in all),
Though, as discoverers of much goodly truth,
They gave, as 'twere from out of the heart's own shrine,
Responses holier and soundlier based
Than ever the Pythia pronounced for men
From out the tripod and the Delphian laurel,
Have still in matter of first-elements
Made ruin of themselves, and, great men, great
indeed and heavy there for them the fall:
First, because, banishing the void from things,

They yet assign them motion, and allow
Things soft and loosely textured to exist,
As air, dew, fire, earth, animals, and grains,
Without admixture of void amid their frame.
Next, because, thinking there can be no end
In cutting bodies down to less and less
Nor pause established to their breaking up,
They hold there is no minimum in things;
Albeit we see the boundary point of aught
Is that which to our senses seems its least,
Whereby thou mayst conjecture, that, because
The things thou canst not mark have boundary points,
They surely have their minimums. Then, too,
Since these philosophers ascribe to things
Soft primal germs, which we behold to be
Of birth and body mortal, thus, throughout,
The sum of things must be returned to naught,
And, born from naught, abundance thrive anew-
Thou seest how far each doctrine stands from truth.
And, next, these bodies are among themselves
In many ways poisons and foes to each,
Wherefore their congress will destroy them quite
Or drive asunder as we see in storms
Rains, winds, and lightnings all asunder fly.

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David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*

[Amazon](#)

An excerpt of the first ten pages from chapter one is available in PDF form from Cambridge University Press; [link to PDF](#).

Norman Wentworth DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*

Quote

At the outset it must be observed and kept diligently in mind that nowhere in his extant writings does Epicurus call the gods immortal. This might be thought an accident of the tradition were it not for the fact that other considerations rule out this possibility. If Lucretius does call them immortal repeatedly, this may be set down as an indication that he never really

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mastered the Epicurean lore of the gods and did not live to make an intensive study of it in preparation for writing about it.

The reasoning behind this doctrine of incorruptibility is readily discerned. From the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void it follows that the bodies of the gods must be corporeal. Gods are zoa, "animate beings." They are thus units in the ascending order of Nature, as is man. Being in this order and corporeal, they cannot be deathless. If deathlessness were inherent in their nature, they would be in another class by themselves. Since they do belong in the same class as man, it is a logical necessity to think of their incorruptibility as by some means preserved. Since in the cosmos of Epicurus, unlike that of Plato, this incorruptibility lacked a superior being to guarantee its

continuance, the sole possibility was that the gods preserved it for themselves by their own vigilance. Thus it must be discerned that just as the happiness of man is self-achieved, so the happiness of the gods is self-preserved.