

Episode 228 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 03 - Velleius Asks "What Woke The Gods To Create The World?"

Post by "Cassius" of May 10, 2024 at 11:59 AM

Welcome

to Episode 228 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.

We are now discussing the Epicurean sections of Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," and this week we continue with the argument of the Epicurean spokesman Velleius, beginning in Section 9.

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](http://EpicureanFriends.com). 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 Velleius' arguments against the existence of supernatural gods will be here.

Today's Text

IX. But I would demand of you both, why these world-builders started up so suddenly, and lay dormant for so many ages? For we are not to conclude that, if there was no world, there were therefore no ages. I do not now speak of such ages as are finished by a certain number of days

and nights in annual courses; for I acknowledge that those could not be without the revolution of the world; but there was a certain eternity from infinite time, not measured by any circumscription of seasons; but how that was in space we cannot understand, because we cannot possibly have even the slightest idea of time before time was. I desire, therefore, to know, Balbus, why this Providence of yours was idle for such an immense space of time? Did she avoid labor? But that could have no effect on the Deity; nor could there be any labor, since all nature, air, fire, earth, and water would obey the divine essence. What was it that incited the Deity to act the part of an ædile, to illuminate and decorate the world? If it was in order that God might be the better accommodated in his habitation, then he must have been dwelling an infinite length of time before in darkness as in a dungeon. But do we imagine that he was afterward delighted with that variety with which we see the heaven and earth adorned? What entertainment could that be to the Deity? If it was any, he would not have been without it so long.

Or were these things made, as you almost assert, by God for the sake of men? Was it for the wise? If so, then this great design was adopted for the sake of a very small number. Or for the sake of fools? First of all, there was no reason why God should consult the advantage of the wicked; and, further, what could be his object in doing so, since all fools are, without doubt, the most miserable of men, chiefly because they are fools? For what can we pronounce more deplorable than folly? Besides, there are many inconveniences in life which the wise can learn to think lightly of by dwelling rather on the advantages which they receive; but which fools are unable to avoid when they are coming, or to bear when they are come.

X. They who affirm the world to be an animated and intelligent being have by no means discovered the nature of the mind, nor are able to conceive in what form that essence can exist; but of that I shall speak more hereafter. At present I must express my surprise at the weakness of those who endeavor to make it out to be not only animated and immortal, but likewise happy, and round, because Plato says that is the most beautiful form; whereas I think a cylinder, a square, a cone, or a pyramid more beautiful. But what life do they attribute to that round Deity? Truly it is a being whirled about with a celerity to which nothing can be even conceived by the imagination as equal; nor can I imagine how a settled mind and happy life can consist in such motion, the least degree of which would be troublesome to us. Why, therefore, should it not be considered troublesome also to the Deity? For the earth itself, as it is part of the world, is part also of the Deity. We see vast tracts of land barren and uninhabitable; some, because they are scorched by the too near approach of the sun; others, because they are bound up with frost and snow, through the great distance which the sun is from them. Therefore, if the world is a Deity, as these are parts of the world, some of the Deity's limbs must be said to be scorched, and some frozen.

These are your doctrines, Lucilius; but what those of others are I will endeavor to ascertain by tracing them back from the earliest of ancient philosophers. Thales the Milesian, who first inquired after such subjects, asserted water to be the origin of things, and that God was that

mind which formed all things from water. If the Gods can exist without corporeal sense, and if there can be a mind without a body, why did he annex a mind to water?

It was Anaximander's opinion that the Gods were born; that after a great length of time they died; and that they are innumerable worlds. But what conception can we possibly have of a Deity who is not eternal?

Anaximenes, after him, taught that the air is God, and that he was generated, and that he is immense, infinite, and always in motion; as if air, which has no form, could possibly be God; for the Deity must necessarily be not only of some form or other, but of the most beautiful form. Besides, is not everything that had a beginning subject to mortality?

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.

Post by “Cassius” of May 10, 2024 at 8:16 PM

I am going to try to keep a running list of Velleius' arguments against the existence of supernatural gods. [The full list will be here.](#) Below are the new ones we will add in Episode 288:

1. What were the world-building gods doing for an eternity of time before they made the universe?
 1. "But I would demand of you both, why these world-builders started up so suddenly, and lay dormant for so many ages? For we are not to conclude that, if there was no world, there were therefore no ages. I do not now speak of such ages as are finished by a certain number of days and nights in annual courses; for I acknowledge that those could not be without the revolution of the world; but there was a certain eternity from infinite time, not measured by any circumscription of seasons; but how that was in space we cannot understand, because we cannot possibly have even the slightest idea of time before time was. I desire, therefore, to know, Balbus, why this Providence of yours was idle for such an immense space of time? Did she avoid labor? But that could have no effect on the Deity; nor could there be any labor, since all nature, air, fire, earth, and water would obey the divine essence. What was it that incited the Deity to act the part of an ædile, to illuminate and decorate the world? If it was in order that God might be the better accommodated in his habitation, then he must have been dwelling an infinite length of time before in darkness as in a dungeon. But do we imagine that he was afterward delighted with that variety with which we see the heaven and earth adorned? What entertainment could that be to the Deity? If it was any, he would not have been without it so long.
2. Who benefited from the creation of the universe? If for the wise, that's a very small number. If for fools, why?
 1. Or were these things made, as you almost assert, by God for the sake of men? Was it for the wise? If so, then this great design was adopted for the sake of a very small number. Or for the sake of fools? First of all, there was no reason why God should consult the advantage of the wicked; and, further, what could be his object in doing so, since all fools are, without doubt, the most miserable of men, chiefly because they are fools? For what can we pronounce more deplorable than folly? Besides, there are many inconveniences in life which the wise can learn to think lightly of by dwelling rather on the advantages which they receive; but which fools are unable to

avoid when they are coming, or to bear when they are come.

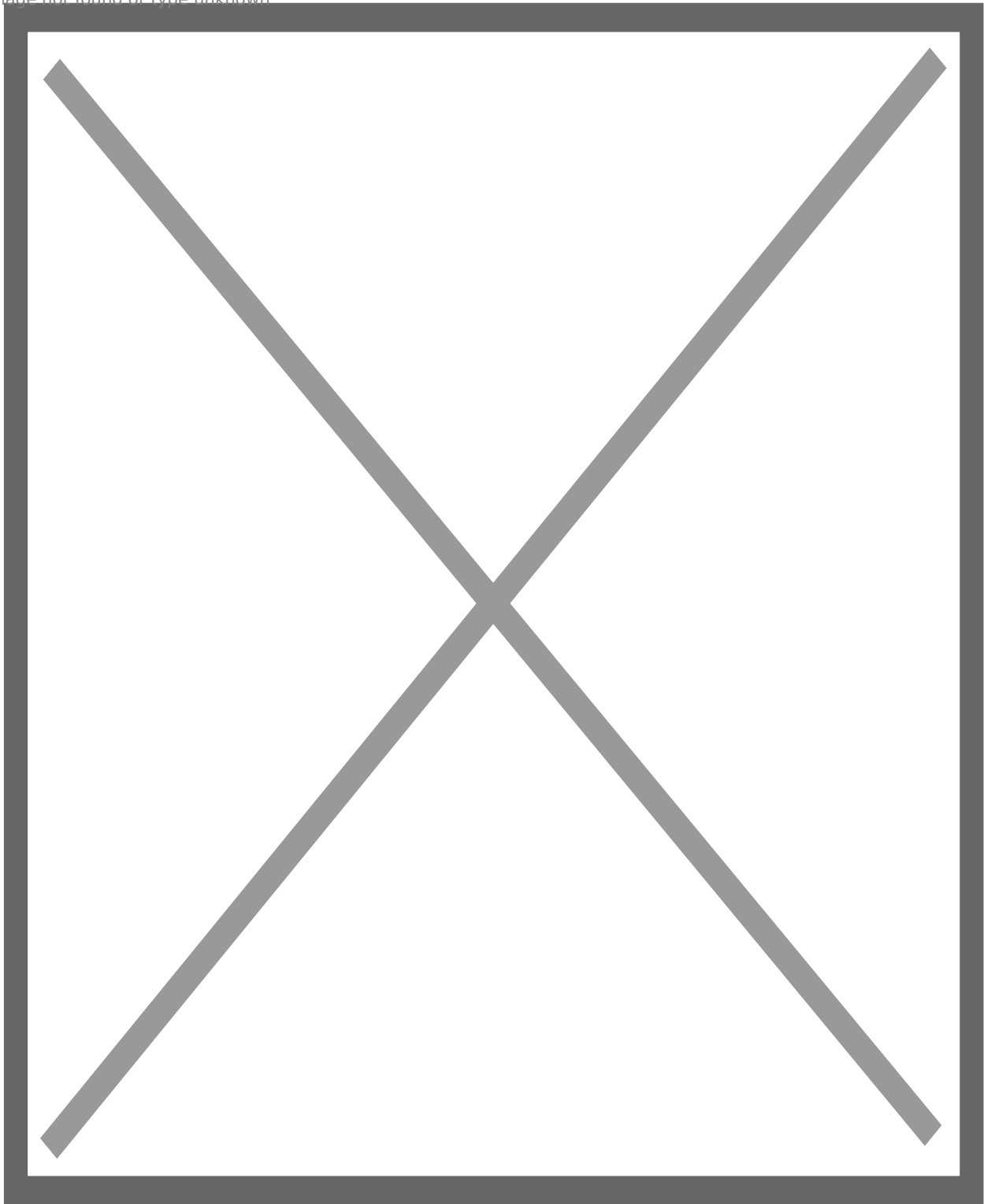
3. Those who assert that the world itself is a god make no sense, because a round world hurtling through space cannot be a god.

1. They who affirm the world to be an animated and intelligent being have by no means discovered the nature of the mind, nor are able to conceive in what form that essence can exist; but of that I shall speak more hereafter. At present I must express my surprise at the weakness of those who endeavor to make it out to be not only animated and immortal, but likewise happy, and round, because Plato says that is the most beautiful form; whereas I think a cylinder, a square, a cone, or a pyramid more beautiful. But what life do they attribute to that round Deity? Truly it is a being whirled about with a celerity to which nothing can be even conceived by the imagination as equal; nor can I imagine how a settled mind and happy life can consist in such motion, the least degree of which would be troublesome to us. Why, therefore, should it not be considered troublesome also to the Deity? For the earth itself, as it is part of the world, is part also of the Deity. We see vast tracts of land barren and uninhabitable; some, because they are scorched by the too near approach of the sun; others, because they are bound up with frost and snow, through the great distance which the sun is from them. Therefore, if the world is a Deity, as these are parts of the world, some of the Deity's limbs must be said to be scorched, and some frozen.

Post by "Cassius" of May 13, 2024 at 5:31 AM

Mentioned by Joshua (quoting Greenblatt) as Lucretian-inspired in this week's episode:

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[Primavera \(Botticelli\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primavera_(Botticelli))
en.wikipedia.org

Post by "Cassius" of May 13, 2024 at 9:06 AM

Episode 228 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available, with Velleius asking: "What Woke The Gods To Create The World?"

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60003095>

Post by "Bryan" of May 17, 2024 at 1:45 PM

Thank you for doing these!

In case this is new to anyone, I wanted to point out that there is a very good recording of this book (<https://www.amazon.com/Audible-Nature-Gods/dp/B0CND98MNG>), which is free if you already have an Audible membership. The performer has an amusing pompous tone and does a good job.

Post by "Bryan" of May 27, 2024 at 1:13 PM

"Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions -- **ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them.**"

This quote has stuck with me. Jefferson sounds very Epicurean here. Thank you, Joshua, for highlighting those quotes -- I will not soon be forgetting the image of the holy men acting like scuttlefish.

Although worlds come and go, there was never a time before there were any worlds. Similarly, the gods have always existed -- but unlike worlds, the gods persevere.

The gods are not inherently deathless, but they are effectively deathless by their process of living. Living beings that are able to preserve themselves in the manner similar to a god -- but struggle or fail to do so -- no longer fit our anticipation of gods (and therefore are not properly considered to be gods).

Post by "Bryan" of May 27, 2024 at 1:23 PM

"A lot of people we talk to tend to be very benevolent and they want to think the best of other people. They want to think that nobody in their right mind is really attempting to be harmful or really is attempting to obccure, or cause confusion -- but that is not the way the world is."
(Cassius Amicus)

Post by "Godfrey" of May 27, 2024 at 6:52 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Living beings that are able to preseve themselves in the manner similar to a god -- but struggle or fail to do so -- no longer fit our anticipation of gods (and therefore are not properly considered to be gods).

I find this statement quite illuminating. We can't exactly preserve ourselves in the manner of gods, but we do have access to remarkable medical advances and a plethora of lifestyle advice (diet, exercise, sleep, stress...) I ofte struggle to maintain a "healthy" lifestyle which perhaps, beyond a certain point, can be counterproductive. Every so often someone dies relatively young, and their friends say "but they were so health conscious!"

So this quote is valuable to think about so that I/we don't lose sight of the proper goal as spelled out by Epicurus. And it's similarly valuable in thinking about our choices and avoidances.

Post by "Bryan" of May 30, 2024 at 10:16 PM

And it is not just the holy men who act like scuttlefish -- the inconsistencies of Plato and the over-complexities of Aristotle can seem intimidating to the reader -- but really these are devices to hide the weaknesses of the authors' argument.

Do you not really understand what Neo-Platonism is? Don't worry, neither did the Neo-Platonists.