

Episode 232 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 07 - Velleius Attacks The Platonist And Aristotelian Views Of Gods

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2024 at 12:40 PM

Welcome to Episode 232 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](https://www.epicureanfriends.com).

For our new listeners, let me remind you of several ground rules for both our podcast and our forum.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it.

Second: We won't be talking about modern political issues in this podcast. How you apply Epicurus in your own life is of course entirely up to you. We call this approach "Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean." Epicurean philosophy is a philosophy of its own, it's not the same as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, Libertarianism or Marxism - it is unique and must be understood on its own, not in terms of any conventional modern morality.

Third: One of the most important things to keep in mind is that the Epicureans often used words very differently than we do today. To the Epicureans, Gods were not omnipotent or omniscient, so Epicurean references to "Gods" do not mean at all the same thing as in major religions today. In the Epicurean theory of knowledge, [all sensations are true](#), but that does not mean all opinions are true, but that the raw data reported by the senses is reported without the injection of opinion, as the opinion-making process takes place in the mind, where it is subject to mistakes, rather than in the senses. In Epicurean ethics, "Pleasure" refers not ONLY to sensory stimulation, but also to every experience of life which is not felt to be painful. The classical texts show that Epicurus was not focused on luxury, like some people say, but neither did he teach minimalism, as other people say. Epicurus taught that all experiences of life fall under one of two feelings - pleasure and pain - and those feelings -- and not gods, idealism, or virtue - are the guides that Nature gave us by which to live. More than anything else, Epicurus taught that the universe is not supernatural in any way, and that means there's no life after death, and any happiness we'll ever have comes in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Today we are continuing to review the Epicurean sections of Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," as presented by the Epicurean spokesman Velleius, beginning at the end of Section 10.

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. 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 be maintained here](#).

Today's Text

XII.

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What shall I say of Democritus, who classes our images of objects, and their orbs, in the number of the Gods; as he does that principle through which those images appear and have their influence? He deifies likewise our knowledge and understanding. Is he not involved in a very great error? And because nothing continues always in the same state, he denies that anything is everlasting, does he not thereby entirely destroy the Deity, and make it impossible to form any opinion of him?

Diogenes of Apollonia looks upon the air to be a Deity. But what sense can the air have? or what divine form can be attributed to it?

It would be tedious to show the uncertainty of Plato's opinion; for, in his *Timæus*, he denies the propriety of asserting that there is one great father or creator of the world; and, in his book of *Laws*, he thinks we ought not to make too strict an inquiry into the nature of the Deity. And as for his statement when he asserts that God is a being without any body—what the Greeks call ἀσώματος—it is certainly quite unintelligible how that theory can possibly be true; for such a God must then necessarily be destitute of sense, prudence, and pleasure; all which things are comprehended in our notion of the Gods. He likewise asserts in his *Timæus*, and in his *Laws*, that the world, the heavens, the stars, the mind, and those Gods which are delivered down to us from our ancestors, constitute the Deity. These opinions, taken separately, are apparently false; and, together, are directly inconsistent with each other.

Xenophon has committed almost the same mistakes, but in fewer words. In those sayings which he has related of Socrates, he introduces him disputing the lawfulness of inquiring into the form of the Deity, and makes him assert the sun and the mind to be Deities: he represents him likewise as affirming the being of one God only, and at another time of many; which are errors of almost the same kind which I before took notice of in Plato.

XIII. Antisthenes, in his book called the Natural Philosopher, says that there are many national and one natural Deity; but by this saying he destroys the power and nature of the Gods. Speusippus is not much less in the wrong; who, following his uncle Plato, says that a certain incorporeal power governs everything; by which he endeavors to root out of our minds the knowledge of the Gods.

Aristotle, in his third book of Philosophy, confounds many things together, as the rest have done; but he does not differ from his master Plato. At one time he attributes all divinity to the mind, at another he asserts that the world is God. Soon afterward he makes some other essence preside over the world, and gives it those faculties by which, with certain revolutions, he may govern and preserve the motion of it. Then he asserts the heat of the firmament to be God; not perceiving the firmament to be part of the world, which in another place he had described as God. How can that divine sense of the firmament be preserved in so rapid a motion? And where do the multitude of Gods dwell, if heaven itself is a Deity? But when this philosopher says that God is without a body, he makes him an irrational and insensible being. Besides, how can the world move itself, if it wants a body? Or how, if it is in perpetual self-motion, can it be easy and happy?

Xenocrates, his fellow-pupil, does not appear much wiser on this head, for in his books concerning the nature of the Gods no divine form is described; but he says the number of them is eight. Five are moving planets; the sixth is contained in all the fixed stars; which, dispersed, are so many several members, but, considered together, are one single Deity; the seventh is the sun; and the eighth the moon. But in what sense they can possibly be happy is not easy to be understood.

From the same school of Plato, Heraclides of Pontus stuffed his books with puerile tales. Sometimes he thinks the world a Deity, at other times the mind. He attributes divinity likewise to the wandering stars. He deprives the Deity of sense, and makes his form mutable; and, in the same book again, he makes earth and heaven Deities.

The unsteadiness of Theophrastus is equally intolerable. At one time he attributes a divine prerogative to the mind; at another, to the firmament; at another, to the stars and celestial constellations.

Nor is his disciple Strato, who is called the naturalist, any more worthy to be regarded; for he thinks that the divine power is diffused through nature, which is the cause of birth, increase, and diminution, but that it has no sense nor form.

Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2024 at 12:43 PM

We did not get very far in the text last week, but in this episode we'll turn to what Velleius has to say about Democritus and then about the Academy and the Peripatetics before getting to the Stoics:

- **Those who say that gods are not everlasting destroy the true concept of divinity.**

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- **Those who attribute sense to formlessness are also wrong.**

1. Diogenes of Apollonia looks upon the air to be a Deity. But what sense can the air have? or what divine form can be attributed to it?

- **The Academy, including Plato and Xenophon and Antisthenes held ideas of the gods that were inconsistent and unintelligible.**

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the mind to be Deities: he represents him likewise as affirming the being of one God only, and at another time of many; which are errors of almost the same kind which I before took notice of in Plato.

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4. From the same school of Plato, Heraclides of Pontus stuffed his books with puerile tales. Sometimes he thinks the world a Deity, at other times the mind. He attributes divinity likewise to the wandering stars. He deprives the Deity of sense, and makes his form mutable; and, in the same book again, he makes earth and heaven Deities.

• **Aristotle and the Peripatetics, like Plato, were self-contradictory, and wrong in holding that a god has no body.**

1. Aristotle, in his third book of Philosophy, confounds many things together, as the rest have done; but he does not differ from his master Plato. At one time he attributes all divinity to the mind, at another he asserts that the world is God. Soon afterward he makes some other essence preside over the world, and gives it those faculties by which, with certain revolutions, he may govern and preserve the motion of it. Then he asserts the heat of the firmament to be God; not perceiving the firmament to be part of the world, which in another place he had described as God. How can that divine sense of the firmament be preserved in so rapid a motion? And where do the multitude of Gods dwell, if heaven itself is a Deity? But when this philosopher says that God is without a body, he makes him an irrational and insensible being. Besides, how can the world move itself, if it wants a body? Or how, if it is in perpetual self-motion, can it be easy and happy?
2. Xenocrates, his fellow-pupil, does not appear much wiser on this head, for in his books concerning the nature of the Gods no divine form is described; but he says the number of them is eight. Five are moving planets; the sixth is contained in all the fixed stars; which, dispersed, are so many several members, but, considered together, are one single Deity; the seventh is the sun; and the eighth the moon. But in what sense they can possibly be happy is not easy to be understood.
3. The unsteadiness of Theophrastus is equally intolerable. At one time he attributes a divine prerogative to the mind; at another, to the firmament; at another, to the stars and celestial constellations. Nor is his disciple Strato, who is called the naturalist, any more worthy to be regarded; for he thinks that the divine power is diffused through nature, which is the cause of birth, increase, and diminution, but that it has no sense nor form.

• **The Stoics were wrong in holding that “the law of nature” is a divinity, and they are otherwise wrong in thinking that the sky is a god, or that rationality is a god, and in defending the ancient myths as allegories, and in holding that the form of a god is inconceivable, and other ways too.**

1. [XIV] Zeno (to come to your sect, Balbus) thinks the law of nature to be the divinity, and that it has the power to force us to what is right, and to restrain us from what is wrong. How this law can be an animated being I cannot conceive; but that God is so we would certainly maintain. The same person says, in another place, that the sky is God; but can we possibly conceive that God is a being insensible, deaf to our prayers, our wishes, and our vows, and wholly unconnected with us?
2. In other books he thinks there is a certain rational essence pervading all nature, indued with divine efficacy. He attributes the same power to the stars, to the years, to the months, and to the seasons.
3. In his interpretation of Hesiod's Theogony, he entirely destroys the established notions of the Gods; for he excludes Jupiter, Juno, and Vesta, and those esteemed divine, from the number of them; but his doctrine is that these are names which by some kind of allusion are given to mute and inanimate beings.
4. The sentiments of his disciple Aristo are not less erroneous. He thought it impossible to conceive the form of the Deity, and asserts that the Gods are destitute of sense; and he is entirely dubious whether the Deity is an animated being or not.
5. Cleanthes, who next comes under my notice, a disciple of Zeno at the same time with Aristo, in one place says that the world is God; in another, he attributes divinity to the mind and spirit of universal nature; then he asserts that the most remote, the highest, the all-surrounding, the all-enclosing and embracing heat, which is called the sky, is most certainly the Deity. In the books he wrote against pleasure, in which he seems to be raving, he imagines the Gods to have a certain form and shape; then he ascribes all divinity to the stars; and, lastly, he thinks nothing more divine than reason. So that this God, whom we know mentally and in the speculations of our minds, from which traces we receive our impression, has at last actually no visible form at all.
6. [XV] Persæus, another disciple of Zeno, says that they who have made discoveries advantageous to the life of man should be esteemed as Gods; and the very things, he says, which are healthful and beneficial have derived their names from those of the Gods; so that he thinks it not sufficient to call them the discoveries of Gods, but he urges that they themselves should be deemed divine. What can be more absurd than to ascribe divine honors to sordid and deformed things; or to place among the Gods men who are dead and mixed with the dust, to whose memory all the respect that could be paid would be but mourning for their loss?
7. Chrysippus, who is looked upon as the most subtle interpreter of the dreams of the Stoics, has mustered up a numerous band of unknown Gods; and so unknown that we are not able to form any idea about them, though our mind seems capable of framing any image to itself in its thoughts. For he says that the divine power is placed in reason, and in the spirit and mind of universal nature; that the world, with a universal effusion of its spirit, is God; that the superior part of that spirit, which is the mind and reason, is the great principle of nature, containing and preserving the

chain of all things; that the divinity is the power of fate, and the necessity of future events. He deifies fire also, and what I before called the ethereal spirit, and those elements which naturally proceed from it—water, earth, and air. He attributes divinity to the sun, moon, stars, and universal space, the grand container of all things, and to those men likewise who have obtained immortality. He maintains the sky to be what men call Jupiter; the air, which pervades the sea, to be Neptune; and the earth, Ceres. In like manner he goes through the names of the other Deities. He says that Jupiter is that immutable and eternal law which guides and directs us in our manners; and this he calls fatal necessity, the everlasting verity of future events. But none of these are of such a nature as to seem to carry any indication of divine virtue in them. These are the doctrines contained in his first book of the Nature of the Gods. In the second, he endeavors to accommodate the fables of Orpheus, Musæus, Hesiod, and Homer to what he has advanced in the first, in order that the most ancient poets, who never dreamed of these things, may seem to have been Stoics. Diogenes the Babylonian was a follower of the doctrine of Chrysippus; and in that book which he wrote, entitled “A Treatise concerning Minerva,” he separates the account of Jupiter’s bringing-forth, and the birth of that virgin, from the fabulous, and reduces it to a natural construction.

8.

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2024 at 8:23 PM

Episode 232 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week Velleius attacks the Platonic and Aristotelian views of the gods.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60390998>

Post by “Remus” of June 16, 2024 at 1:40 PM

I listened to the podcast and was struck once again by the idea that If the gods have no bodies then they have no sensation and cannot relate to us or interact with us. (Fanciful science fiction plot lines featuring godlike "creatures of pure energy" not withstanding.)