

# Episode 233 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 08 - An Epicurean Attack On The False God Of Stoicism

Post by "Cassius" of June 14, 2024 at 8:35 PM

Welcome to Episode 233 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 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 be maintained here](#).

## **Today's Text**

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? 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. 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. 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.

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.

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?

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.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2024 at 8:37 PM**

This coming Sunday we will be addressing what is probably for us today the most important of the erroneous positions about the gods - those held by the Stoics. We will be in section 14 of Book One, so if anyone has any time to suggest resources we should review before this episode, or has comments or suggestions, please let us know.

## Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2024 at 8:45 PM

Here is an outline of the arguments we will cover:

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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.
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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.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2024 at 8:09 AM**

I am still in the early editing phase of this episode but I now realize that early on, Joshua and I discussed including references to Marcus Aurelius within the discussion of the Stoic viewpoint on the gods. For obvious reasons Velleius doesn't include reference to anything Aurelius said, but I think it would be helpful to listeners who are familiar with Stoicism if we include a couple of references to Aurelius on gods, since Aurelius is probably the Stoic with whom they are most familiar.

We can add in reference to that in our next episode if we come up with something particularly interesting, so if anyone knows of interesting statements by Aurelius on the gods, please let us know. The context of this will become more clear too when we release this Episode 233, hopefully in the next several days,

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 18, 2024 at 3:33 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3905-episode-233-cicero-s-otnotg-08-an-epicurean-attack-on-the-false-god-of-stoicism/>

Episode 233 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week Velleius Attacks The False God Of Stoicism.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60427400>

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 19, 2024 at 1:49 PM

More reference background:

[Cleanthes' "Hymn To Zeus" - Wikiquote](#)

But we seem to discover in Cleanthes, when we read his hymn<sup>[6]</sup> (was it written in early, middle, or later life?), a genuinely religious man, “bent on giving a theological interpretation of the world, and breathing a pious submission to the world-order which it is refreshing to feel and come in contact with” (Davidson, *The Stoic Creed*, p. 27). Notwithstanding the materialism apparent in his physical speculations, “he can yet infuse into his submission to the cosmic order such an amount of willing acquiescence as to give the impression of the deepest religious feeling” (*ib.*, p. 229).<sup>[7]</sup> Lightfoot was justified in calling his hymn the noblest expression of heathen devotion which Greek literature has preserved to us. Nothing quite so impressive, of its kind, was ever again to appear in pagan history till, nearly half a millennium later, **Stoicism was destined to produce its final and exquisite fruit in the Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.**

Most glorious of Immortals, mighty God,  
Invoked by many a name, O sovran King  
Of universal Nature, piloting  
This world in harmony with Law,—all hail!  
Thee it is meet that mortals should invoke,  
For we Thine offspring are, and sole of all  
Created things that live and move on earth  
Receive from Thee the image of the One.  
Therefore I praise Thee, and shall hymn Thy power  
Unceasingly. Thee the wide world obeys,  
As onward ever in its course it rolls  
Where'er Thou guidest, and rejoices still  
Beneath Thy sway so strong a minister  
Is held by Thine unconquerable hands,—  
10  
That two-edged thunderbolt of living fire

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3905-episode-233-cicero-s-otnotg-08-an-epicurean-attack-on-the-false-god-of-stoicism/>

That never fails. Under its dreadful blow  
All Nature reels; therewith Thou dost direct  
The Universal Reason which, commixt  
With all the greater and the lesser lights,  
Moves thro' the Universe. How great Thou art,  
The Lord supreme for ever and for aye!

15

No work is wrought apart from Thee, O God,  
Or in the world, or in the heaven above,  
Or on the deep, save only what is done  
By sinners in their folly. Nay, Thou canst  
Make the rough smooth, bring wondrous order forth  
From chaos; in Thy sight unloveliness  
Seems beautiful; for so Thou hast fitted things  
20 Together, good and evil, that there reigns  
One everlasting Reason in them all.

The wicked heed not this, but suffer it  
To slip, to their undoing; these are they  
Who, yearning ever to secure the good,  
Mark not nor hear the law of God, by wise

25

Obedience unto which they might attain  
A nobler life, with Reason harmonized.  
But now, unbid, they pass on divers paths  
Each his own way, yet knowing not the truth,—  
Some in unlovely striving for renown,  
Some bent on lawless gains, on pleasure some,

30

Working their own undoings self-deceived.  
O Thou most bounteous God that sittest throned  
In clouds, the Lord of lightning, save mankind  
From grievous ignorance! Oh, scatter it  
Far from their souls, and grant them to achieve  
True knowledge, on whose might Thou dost rely  
To govern all the world in righteousness;

35

That so, being honoured, we may Thee requite  
With honour, chanting without pause Thy deeds,  
As all men should: since greater guerdon ne'er  
Befalls or man or god than evermore  
Duly to praise the Universal Law.

## Post by “Remus” of June 21, 2024 at 1:05 PM

"Stoicism is self tyranny" is my takeaway quote for this episode.

I have a question arising from this episode:

What are the implications for the modern day concept of Natural Rights and universal human rights (which is supposed to be based on Nature) if there are no moral lessons to be learned from Nature other than the pleasure/pain motivation? What does Epicurus say?

Wikipedia:

According to the theory of law called [jurnaturalism](#), all people have inherent rights, conferred not by act of legislation but by "[God](#), [nature](#), or [reason](#)." Natural law theory can also refer to "theories of [ethics](#), [theories of politics](#), theories of [civil law](#), and theories of [religious morality](#)."

- Natural rights are those that are not dependent on the laws or customs of any particular culture or government, and so are *universal*, *fundamental* and *inalienable* (they cannot be repealed by human laws, though one can forfeit their enjoyment through one's actions, such as by violating someone else's rights). [Natural law](#) is the law of natural rights.

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 21, 2024 at 1:33 PM

I think Epicurus blows to pieces any concept of "universal" rights that is alleged to be based on or protected by a god of Nature in a Stoic kind of way

But replacing it is the acknowledgement that humans by nature experience pleasure and pain as motivations, and where pain is inflicted one can expect pushback. Sometimes we will choose pain and deal with the pushback, but Epicurus leads to acknowledgment that the results are up to us. If we want certain rights (and we do) then it is up to us to act to obtain and keep them.

That's a much more realistic way of looking at things, and since it is more consistent with reality it's very arguably more effective.

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## Post by “Don” of June 21, 2024 at 1:38 PM

When the topic of rights comes up, I turn to George Carlin and his "rights vs privileges"

For those who haven't heard it (language warning!):

<https://youtu.be/3gkjWxCl6zE?feature=shared>

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 21, 2024 at 1:49 PM**

As another relevant analogy, we see Torquatus in On Ends arguing that Epicurus establishes the foundations of friendship, and implicitly justice, far more soundly by basing it on pleasure than do those who invoke fictional views of justice as established by gods or "Natural Law." Diogenes of Oinoanda makes much the same argument.

Torquatus:

[70] Men are found to say that there is a certain treaty of alliance which binds wise men not to esteem their friends less than they do themselves. Such alliance we not only understand to be possible, but often see it realized, and it is plain that nothing can be found more conducive to pleasantness of life than union of this kind. From all these different views we may conclude that not only are the principles of friendship left unconstrained, if the supreme good be made to reside in pleasure, but that without this view it is entirely impossible to discover a basis for friendship.