

# Episode 239 - Cicero's OTNOTG 14 - The Dishonesty Of Academic Skepticism vs. Epicurus' Commitment To Truth

Post by "Cassius" of July 25, 2024 at 1:11 PM

Welcome to Episode 239 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 we have a thread to discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.**

Today we are continuing to review Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," which began with the Epicurean spokesman Velleius defending the Epicurean point of view. This week will continue into Section 21 as Cotta, the Academic Skeptic, responds to Velleius, and we - in turn - will respond to Cotta in particular and the Skeptical argument in general.

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 eventually be put together here](#).

## Today's Text

XXI. Cotta, with his usual courtesy, then began. Velleius, says he, were it not for something which you have advanced, I should have remained silent; for I have often observed, as I did just now upon hearing you, that I cannot so easily conceive why a proposition is true as why it is false. Should you ask me what I take the nature of the Gods to be, I should perhaps make no

answer. But if you should ask whether I think it to be of that nature which you have described, I should answer that I was as far as possible from agreeing with you. However, before I enter on the subject of your discourse and what you have advanced upon it, I will give you my opinion of yourself. Your intimate friend, L. Crassus, has been often heard by me to say that you were beyond all question superior to all our learned Romans; and that few Epicureans in Greece were to be compared to you. But as I knew what a wonderful esteem he had for you, I imagined that might make him the more lavish in commendation of you. Now, however, though I do not choose to praise any one when present, yet I must confess that I think you have delivered your thoughts clearly on an obscure and very intricate subject; that you are not only copious in your sentiments, but more elegant in your language than your sect generally are.

When I was at Athens, I went often to hear Zeno, by the advice of Philo, who used to call him the chief of the Epicureans; partly, probably, in order to judge more easily how completely those principles could be refuted after I had heard them stated by the most learned of the Epicureans. And, indeed, he did not speak in any ordinary manner; but, like you, with clearness, gravity, and elegance; yet what frequently gave me great uneasiness when I heard him, as it did while I attended to you, was to see so excellent a genius falling into such frivolous (excuse my freedom), not to say foolish, doctrines.

However, I shall not at present offer anything better; for, as I said before, we can in most subjects, especially in physics, sooner discover what is not true than what is.

XXII. If you should ask me what God is, or what his character and nature are, I should follow the example of Simonides, who, when Hiero the tyrant proposed the same question to him, desired a day to consider of it. When he required his answer the next day, Simonides begged two days more; and as he kept constantly desiring double the number which he had required before instead of giving his answer, Hiero, with surprise, asked him his meaning in doing so: "Because," says he, "the longer I meditate on it, the more obscure it appears to me." Simonides, who was not only a delightful poet, but reputed a wise and learned man in other branches of knowledge, found, I suppose, so many acute and refined arguments occurring to him, that he was doubtful which was the truest, and therefore despaired of discovering any truth.

But does your Epicurus (for I had rather contend with him than with you) say anything that is worthy the name of philosophy, or even of common-sense?

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60851858>

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**Post by "Cassius" of July 28, 2024 at 7:19 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3980-episode-239-cicero-s-otnotg-14-the-dishonesty-of-academic-skepticism-vs-epicurus/>

Early in this episode (recorded this morning, to be released later this week) Joshua leads off with an excellent quote from Thomas Jefferson expressing Jefferson's disdain for Skepticism. The quote comes in an 1820 letter Jefferson wrote to John Adams, one of a series of documents relevant to Epicurus collected [here](#).

The complete letter can be found [here](#), and the selection Joshua emphasized is below:

#### Quote

let me turn to [your puzzling letter of May 12](#). on matter, spirit, motion E<sup>t</sup>c. it's croud of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, & laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again, and again: and to give rest to my mind, I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, '[I feel: therefore I exist](#).' I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them matter. I feel them changing place. this gives me motion. where there is an absence of matter, I call it void, or nothing, or immaterial space. on the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.

...

#### Quote

Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind. a single sense may indeed be sometimes decieved, but rarely: and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. they evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams & phantasms. I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence. I am sure that I really know many, many, things, and none more surely than that I love you with all my heart, and pray for the continuance of your life until you shall be tired of it yourself.

Those are certainly two excellent quotes directly on point to this and many episodes of the podcast to come, because we are dealing with the objections to the Epicurean position made by Cotta, who is himself an Academic Skeptic. I also recommend reading [the full letter](#), because sandwiched between the two sections Joshua quoted is more excellent analysis that is useful to fully understand the self-refuting nature of the radical skeptic position.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 29, 2024 at 4:38 PM**

Episode 239 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we address the dishonesty of Academic Skepticism as opposed to Epicurus' commitment to knowing and teaching the truth about things that matter in life!

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/60851858>

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### **Post by “Joshua” of July 29, 2024 at 11:10 PM**

#### Quote

You should pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body.  
Ask for a stout heart that has no fear of death,  
and deems length of days the least of Nature's gifts  
that can endure any kind of toil,  
that knows neither wrath nor desire and thinks  
the woes and hard labors of Hercules better than  
the loves and banquets and downy cushions of Sardanapalus.  
What I commend to you, you can give to yourself;  
For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.

#### Display More

Listening to the episode now, I think I was perhaps a little uncharitable to Juvenal here. While the emphasis on virtue as the "only road" to peace does strike the wrong note for me (even considering what Epicurus said about living wisely, honorably, and justly), Juvenal is clear in the second to last line that one doesn't need a gift from the gods to secure these things. The mention of Hercules does read to me as a nod to Stoicism, but even Lucretius uses Hercules as a metaphor in praising Epicurus for his philosophical labor.

Mea culpa!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 30, 2024 at 8:09 AM**

I tend to think your take in the episode is correct, as I see the overall tone of that quote as decidedly slanted toward Stoicism. But I don't have a mental fix on Juvenal at all at this point, so I will try to look further into him in the future.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3980-episode-239-cicero-s-otnotg-14-the-dishonesty-of-academic-skepticism-vs-epicurus/>

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 30, 2024 at 9:56 AM

A glance at Wikipedia doesn't help much to get a fix on Juvenal, but I do have a couple of additional thoughts. We spent most of our time in this episode criticizing Academic Skepticism and its self-contradictions and lack of position-taking, and some of that applies to that excerpt. It's probably helpful exercise to be able to take any passage and be able to pull it apart and ask Epicurean questions about it to see if it's really helpful or not.

Just what is Juvenal advocating, when his words can be interpreted acceptably by Stoic or Epicurean? Would a Christian or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist have any objection to this wording? If *\*everyone\** finds it acceptable despite their dramatically different worldviews, that strikes me as a major red flag.

As to the first two lines, a healthy body isn't so hard to quantify, but what exactly is a healthy mind? Isn't that the ultimate question? And why not be afraid of death? For the Epicurean reason that there is no existence after death, or for an anti-Epicurean reason that a god is going to reward you in an afterlife?

After the first two lines, each of the following lines seems to me to have a decided unEpicurean slant:

and deems length of days the least of Nature's gifts  
that can endure any kind of toil,  
that knows neither wrath nor desire and thinks  
the woes and hard labors of Hercules better than  
the loves and banquets and downy cushions of Sardanapalus.  
What I commend to you, you can give to yourself;  
For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.

1. Time ("*length of days*") is the *\*least\** of Nature's gifts? Doesn't that reduce to not needing life at all, and doesn't Epicurus specifically condemn the view that it would be better never to have been born, and doesn't Epicurus say that life is desirable?
2. *Enduring any kind of toil*? Doesn't it make a lot of difference *\*why\** you are toiling?
3. *Knows neither wrath nor desire*? Aren't there times to be angry, as Philodemus preserves for us, and don't we find life to be desirable, as Epicurus says to Menoecus?
4. *Woes and hard labors of Hercules*? Doesn't Lucretius directly minimize Hercules as a symbol by pointing out that his labors were largely unnecessary? I don't get the impression that the Epicureans would have considered Hercules to be a negative figure in all cases, but when Hercules is set up as a paradigm of choosing virtue, not as a means to pleasure, but as an end in itself, then that crosses a line to the clearly negative.

5. Criticisms of the "*loves and banquets and cushions*" of *Sardanapalus* makes sense in Epicurean terms, *if* the reader understands *Sadanapalus* as in fact not being successful in living a happy life (in which case it would be consistent with [PD10](#)), but Wikipedia says: "The name *Sardanapalus* is probably a corruption of [Ashurbanipal](#) (*Aššur-bāni-apli* > *Sardan-ápalos*), an Assyrian emperor, but *Sardanapalus* as described by Diodorus bears little relationship with what is known of that king, who in fact was a militarily powerful, highly efficient and scholarly ruler, presiding over the largest empire the world had yet seen. ... There is no evidence from Mesopotamia that either *Ashurbanipal* or *Shamash-shum-ukin* led hedonistic lifestyles, were homosexual or transvestites. Both appear to have been strong, disciplined, serious and ambitious rulers, and *Ashurbanipal* was known to be a literate and scholarly king with an interest in [mathematics](#), [astronomy](#), [astrology](#), [history](#), [zoology](#) and [botany](#).<sup>[6]</sup>" The way the line is written, *Juvenal* takes the story as a caricature that makes it sound like he is condemning *all* luxury *all* the time, which is not what *Epicurus* says to *Menoceus*.
6. "*What I commend to you, you can give to yourself*" can certainly be read acceptably, but more than anything else it has a Stoic "mind over matter" ring to it, as if you are *oblivious to outside circumstances*, which Epicureans (who cry out when under torture) are *not*.
7. "*For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.*" And of course the road set out by *Epicurus* is to "pleasure," and not to "peace," even if the road can be considered to be one of virtue, per [PD05](#). Everything about the tone of this excerpt implies that "virtue" is being stated in the Stoic sense, not the Epicurean sense.

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### Post by "Joshua" of July 30, 2024 at 10:06 AM

Yeah, I still prefer the Epistle of Horace to *Juvenal* here. I mentioned after the recording that my interest in Roman history pretty much flatlines after the assassination of Julius Caesar, so we are dealing with a sweeping period of ignorance on my part.

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### Post by "Cassius" of July 30, 2024 at 1:04 PM

Mine flat lines too but my recent reading into *Seneca* has motivated me a little more than in the past. Now it seems likely to be that the Epicureans didn't disappear overnight - which never made sense - and that if we start to look back into the history we will see things that we did not see before.

Exposing Seneca's hypocrisy will go a long way toward purging Modern interpretations of Epicurus of Seneca's Stoicism, and I bet if we look closer we will see details in the history of next several hundred years that make a lot more sense if we look for clues in people who -like Julius Caesar himself probably - were holding Epicurean ideas without being called by that name.

Given how active Cassius Longinus and other Epicureans were in 50BC, and lacking any reason why they should be suppressed until the Christian total takeover, there must have continued to be prominent Epicureans for centuries.