

Episode 245 - Cicero's OTNOTG 20 - Right, Wrong, Or Incomplete?

Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2024 at 9:50 PM

Welcome to Episode 245 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 27 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

XXVII. This, I perceive, is what you contend for, that the Gods have a certain figure that has nothing concrete, nothing solid, nothing of express substance, nothing prominent in it; but that it is pure, smooth, and transparent. Let us suppose the same with the Venus of Cos, which is not a body, but the representation of a body; nor is the red, which is drawn there and mixed with the white, real blood, but a certain resemblance of blood; so in Epicurus's Deity there is no real substance, but the resemblance of substance.

Let me take for granted that which is perfectly unintelligible; then tell me what are the lineaments and figures of these sketched-out Deities. Here you have plenty of arguments by which you would show the Gods to be in human form. The first is, that our minds are so anticipated and prepossessed, that whenever we think of a Deity the human shape occurs to us. The next is, that as the divine nature excels all things, so it ought to be of the most beautiful form, and there is no form more beautiful than the human; and the third is, that reason cannot reside in any other shape.

First, let us consider each argument separately. You seem to me to assume a principle, despotically I may say, that has no manner of probability in it. Who was ever so blind, in contemplating these subjects, as not to see that the Gods were represented in human form, either by the particular advice of wise men, who thought by those means the more easily to turn the minds of the ignorant from a depravity of manners to the worship of the Gods; or through superstition, which was the cause of their believing that when they were paying adoration to these images they were approaching the Gods themselves. These conceits were not a little improved by the poets, painters, and artificers; for it would not have been very easy to represent the Gods planning and executing any work in another form, and perhaps this opinion arose from the idea which mankind have of their own beauty. But do not you, who are so great an adept in physics, see what a soothing flatterer, what a sort of procuress, nature is to herself? Do you think there is any creature on the land or in the sea that is not highly delighted with its own form? If it were not so, why would not a bull become enamored of a mare, or a horse of a cow? Do you believe an eagle, a lion, or a dolphin prefers any shape to its own? If nature, therefore, has instructed us in the same manner, that nothing is more beautiful than man, what wonder is it that we, for that reason, should imagine the Gods are of the human form? Do you suppose if beasts were endowed with reason that every one would not give the prize of beauty to his own species?

XXVIII. Yet, by Hercules (I speak as I think)! though I am fond enough of myself, I dare not say that I excel in beauty that bull which carried Europa. For the question here is not concerning our genius and elocution, but our species and figure. If we could make and assume to ourselves any form, would you be unwilling to resemble the sea-triton as he is painted supported swimming on sea-monsters whose bodies are partly human? Here I touch on a difficult point; for so great is the force of nature that there is no man who would not choose to be like a man, nor, indeed, any ant that would not be like an ant. But like what man? For how few can pretend to beauty! When I was at Athens, the whole flock of youths afforded scarcely one. You laugh, I see; but what I tell you is the truth. Nay, to us who, after the examples of ancient philosophers, delight in boys, defects are often pleasing. Alcæus was charmed with a wart on a boy's knuckle; but a wart is a blemish on the body; yet it seemed a beauty to him. Q. Catulus, my friend and colleague's father, was enamored with your fellow-citizen Roscius, on whom he wrote these verses:

As once I stood to hail the rising day,

Roscius appearing on the left I spied:

Forgive me, Gods, if I presume to say

The mortal's beauty with th' immortal vied.

Roscius more beautiful than a God! yet he was then, as he now is, squint-eyed. But what signifies that, if his defects were beauties to Catulus?

XXIX. I return to the Gods. Can we suppose any of them to be squint-eyed, or even to have a cast in the eye? Have they any warts? Are any of them hook-nosed, flap-eared, beetle-browed, or jolt-headed, as some of us are? Or are they free from imperfections? Let us grant you that. Are they all alike in the face? For if they are many, then one must necessarily be more beautiful than another, and then there must be some Deity not absolutely most beautiful. Or if their faces are all alike, there would be an Academy in heaven; for if one God does not differ from another, there is no possibility of knowing or distinguishing them.

What if your assertion, Velleius, proves absolutely false, that no form occurs to us, in our contemplations on the Deity, but the human? Will you, notwithstanding that, persist in the defence of such an absurdity? Supposing that form occurs to us, as you say it does, and we know Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Neptune, Vulcan, Apollo, and the other Deities, by the countenance which painters and statuaries have given them, and not only by their countenances, but by their decorations, their age, and attire; yet the Egyptians, the Syrians, and almost all barbarous nations, are without such distinctions. You may see a greater regard paid by them to certain beasts than by us to the most sacred temples and images of the Gods; for many shrines have been rifled, and images of the Deities have been carried from their most sacred places by us; but we never heard that an Egyptian offered any violence to a crocodile, an ibis, or a cat. What do you think, then? Do not the Egyptians esteem their sacred bull, their Apis, as a Deity? Yes, by Hercules! as certainly as you do our protectress Juno, whom you never behold, even in your dreams, without a goat-skin, a spear, a shield, and broad sandals. But the Grecian Juno of Argos and the Roman Juno are not represented in this manner; so that the Grecians, the Lanuvinians, and we, ascribe different forms to Juno; and our Capitoline Jupiter is not the same with the Jupiter Ammon of the Africans.

XXX. Therefore, ought not a natural philosopher—that is, an inquirer into the secrets of nature—to be ashamed of seeking a testimony to truth from minds prepossessed by custom? According to the rule you have laid down, it may be said that Jupiter is always bearded, Apollo always beardless; that Minerva has gray and Neptune azure eyes; and, indeed, we must then honor that Vulcan at Athens, made by Alcamenes, whose lameness through his thin robes appears to be no deformity. Shall we, therefore, receive a lame Deity because we have such an account of him?

Consider, likewise, that the Gods go by what names we give them. Now, in the first place, they have as many names as men have languages; for Vulcan is not called Vulcan in Italy, Africa, or

Spain, as you are called Velleius in all countries. Besides, the Gods are innumerable, though the list of their names is of no great length even in the records of our priests. Have they no names? You must necessarily confess, indeed, they have none; for what occasion is there for different names if their persons are alike?

How much more laudable would it be, Velleius, to acknowledge that you do not know what you do not know than to follow a man whom you must despise! Do you think the Deity is like either me or you? You do not really think he is like either of us. What is to be done, then? Shall I call the sun, the moon, or the sky a Deity? If so, they are consequently happy. But what pleasures can they enjoy? And they are wise too. But how can wisdom reside in such shapes? These are your own principles. Therefore, if they are not of human form, as I have proved, and if you cannot persuade yourself that they are of any other, why are you cautious of denying absolutely the being of any Gods? You dare not deny it—which is very prudent in you, though here you are not afraid of the people, but of the Gods themselves. I have known Epicureans who reverence even the least images of the Gods, though I perceive it to be the opinion of some that Epicurus, through fear of offending against the Athenian laws, has allowed a Deity in words and destroyed him in fact; so in those his select and short sentences, which are called by you κυρία δόξα, this, I think, is the first: “That being which is happy and immortal is not burdened with any labor, and does not impose any on any one else.”

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/61484470>

Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2024 at 11:33 AM

This Pompeian artwork was mentioned in our episode today in regard to Venus of Cos

[Apelles' Venus Anaduomene - Culture](#)

Ἀφροδίτη Ἀναδυομένη



Wallpainting in Pompeii ('House of Venus'), supposedly based on Apelles.

Post by “Joshua” of September 8, 2024 at 11:50 AM

Lucian's [A True Story](#)

Lucian's [Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#);

Quote

In this connexion, Alexander once made himself supremely ridiculous. Coming across Epicurus's *Accepted Maxims*, the most admirable of his books, as you know, with its terse presentment of his wise conclusions, he brought it into the middle of the market-place, there burned it on a fig-wood fire for the sins of its author, and cast its ashes into the sea. He issued an oracle on the occasion:

The dotard's maxims to the flames be given.

The fellow had no conception of the blessings conferred by that book upon its readers, of the peace, tranquillity, and independence of mind it produces, of the protection it gives against terrors, phantoms, and marvels, vain hopes and inordinate desires, of the

judgement and candour that it fosters, or of its true purging of the spirit, not with torches and squills and such rubbish, but with right reason, truth, and frankness.

Discovery Institute, [Is Richard Dawkins a Raelian?](#)

[Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed](#)

Montesquieu; ["If the triangles were to make a god they would give him three sides"](#)

Post by “Cassius” of September 12, 2024 at 8:00 PM

It's been a busy week for me and editing has gone more slowly than in recent weeks, but I expect to have this episode up no later than Saturday morning. In the meantime, I am coming across several additional items that we need to cite in this thread, especially since they appear late in the episode, where we do by far our best analysis of this week's material.

The first of the references we need to link is the Isaac Asimov article we discussed recently. I highly recommend this entire article as extremely helpful in adjusting our attitudes toward how to appreciate the Epicurean view of the universe in light of the criticism that it gets from some quarters that parts of its physics are outdated. Here's the link to the [Isaac Asimov article "The Relativity of Wrong"](#) discussion.

Also, as we were giving closing comments Joshua came up with another reference which was very helpful on much the same point. As I recall it stems from a movie and an article in "National Review" magazine and an exchange between Ben Stein and Richard Dawkins.

Joshua if you could link to that material I would appreciate it, because these points are critical to understanding of the Epicurean method of reasoning both on the gods specifically but on the rest of the universe as well, and these two articles explain a lot.

Much of the criticism Cicero embedded in Cotta's criticisms of Epicurus boil down to the argument that "because you can't explain the specifics of the gods' blood, and the gods' bodies, and many of the other suggestions you make about gods, NOTHING you say is credible, and we should throw out ALL your suggestions, including that gods live blessed lives and don't cause trouble for (or give rewards to) humans. Cotta's argument is rooted in skepticism, but has a superficial attractiveness to it, because the Epicurean attitude is generally disposed against useless speculation where evidence is minimal. We can agree or disagree with the ancient Epicureans on the view that the nature of gods is a subject that deserves serious discussion, but for those who are interested in it we can trace the outlines of where Epicurus was going, and the Asimov and Dawkins discussions can help us see that regardless of the

incompleteness of their knowledge, the Epicureans were surely a lot closer to being "right" about the nature of gods than their mainstream opponents.

I see no reason why people of good will toward Epicurus can't debate among themselves whether it is useful to discuss "quasi-blood" and "quasi bodies," and I am personally very convinced that it is superior to debate the unobservable based on analogies to our own experiences rather than to supernatural explanations. But what's not debatable is that the Epicureans were surely right that whatever gods may exist, those gods don't spend their time plotting eternal damnation for humans. And the importance of that conclusion stands head and shoulders above any uncertainties about the details.

Post by “Joshua” of September 12, 2024 at 9:58 PM

I linked to it above

Post by “Cassius” of September 12, 2024 at 10:18 PM

Thanks Joshua! I saw the Lucian cite but did not see the one's afterwards.

Post by “Cassius” of September 13, 2024 at 3:06 PM

Lucretius Today Episode 245 is now available: "Right, Wrong, Or Incomplete?" This week we continue to play Epicurean views of the gods in the context of their place in the overall framework of Epicurean reasoning.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/61484470>

[TRANSCRIPT](#) of this week's episode.

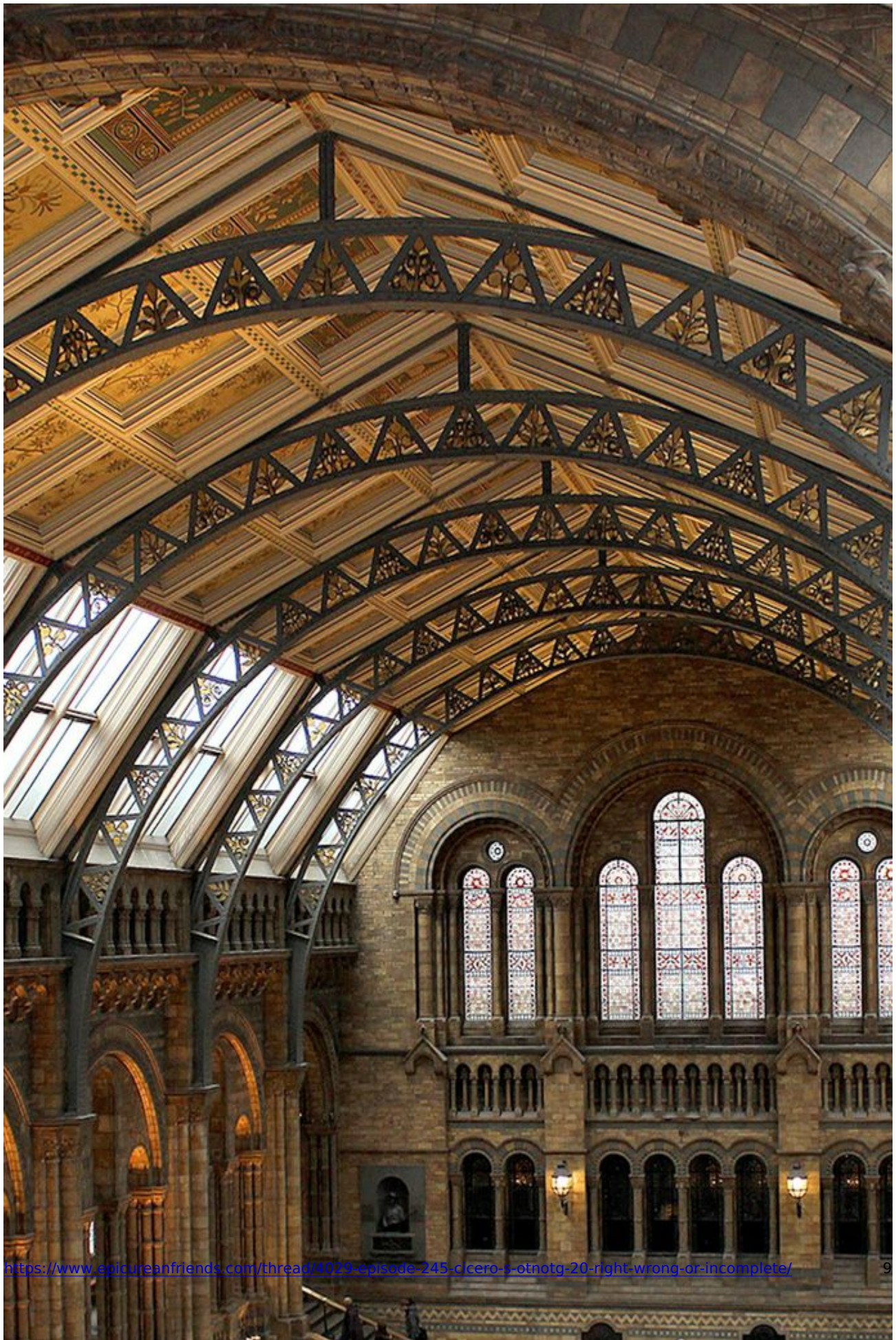
Post by “Cassius” of September 13, 2024 at 9:56 PM

Also, thank you Joshua for the link to the info on the Expelled movie. I see that it can be viewed online [here](#) so I will try to take a look at it before our next recording. It certainly doesn't look like a movie I would recommend to our group here but it might provide some ideas for the podcast - I'll let you know if it does.

Post by “Joshua” of September 13, 2024 at 11:35 PM

I actually never watched the movie, so...good luck! Religulous came out around the same time, I found that one really entertaining!

Post by “Joshua” of September 15, 2024 at 2:55 PM



Interior of the [Natural History Museum](#) in London.

This is in reference to a conversation with [Cassius](#) about the Richard Dawkins interview in the movie linked to above.

There may still be a photograph of me next to that statue of Darwin, but if so I can give no account of what has become of it.

Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2024 at 3:59 PM

1. I hope you find it!

2. Yes I may have more to say about that Ben Stein movie which you first mentioned. The main Richard Dawkins section (a short dialogue with Stein, which occurs after Stein visits that location pictured) is worth watching for the way it crystallizes some of the issues we are currently discussing. No doubt Stein edited it in a way slanted against Dawkins, but I think Dawkins would have been better advised to at least mention the possibility that Epicurus' externality argument is by no means out of the running as a response to Stein's "so give me the details of what happened first?" approach.

I will find a way to pull that out at some point so we can discuss it further.