

Episode 246 - Cicero's OTNOTG 21 - Examining Epicurean Evidence-Based Reasoning

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2024 at 3:11 PM

Welcome to Episode 246 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

XXXI. In his statement of this sentence, some think that he avoided speaking clearly on purpose, though it was manifestly without design. But they judge ill of a man who had not the least art. It is doubtful whether he means that there is any being happy and immortal, or that if there is any being happy, he must likewise be immortal. They do not consider that he speaks here, indeed, ambiguously; but in many other places both he and Metrodorus explain themselves as clearly as you have done. But he believed there are Gods; nor have I ever seen

any one who was more exceedingly afraid of what he declared ought to be no objects of fear, namely, death and the Gods, with the apprehensions of which the common rank of people are very little affected; but he says that the minds of all mortals are terrified by them. Many thousands of men commit robberies in the face of death; others rifle all the temples they can get into: such as these, no doubt, must be greatly terrified, the one by the fears of death, and the others by the fear of the Gods.

But since you dare not (for I am now addressing my discourse to Epicurus himself) absolutely deny the existence of the Gods, what hinders you from ascribing a divine nature to the sun, the world, or some eternal mind? I never, says he, saw wisdom and a rational soul in any but a human form. What! did you ever observe anything like the sun, the moon, or the five moving planets? The sun, terminating his course in two extreme parts of one circle, finishes his annual revolutions. The moon, receiving her light from the sun, completes the same course in the space of a month. The five planets in the same circle, some nearer, others more remote from the earth, begin the same courses together, and finish them in different spaces of time. Did you ever observe anything like this, Epicurus? So that, according to you, there can be neither sun, moon, nor stars, because nothing can exist but what we have touched or seen. What! have you ever seen the Deity himself? Why else do you believe there is any? If this doctrine prevails, we must reject all that history relates or reason discovers; and the people who inhabit inland countries must not believe there is such a thing as the sea. This is so narrow a way of thinking that if you had been born in Seriphus, and never had been from out of that island, where you had frequently been in the habit of seeing little hares and foxes, you would not, therefore, believe that there are such beasts as lions and panthers; and if any one should describe an elephant to you, you would think that he designed to laugh at you.

XXXII. You indeed, Velleius, have concluded your argument, not after the manner of your own sect, but of the logicians, to which your people are utter strangers. You have taken it for granted that the Gods are happy. I allow it. You say that without virtue no one can be happy. I willingly concur with you in this also. You likewise say that virtue cannot reside where reason is not. That I must necessarily allow. You add, moreover, that reason cannot exist but in a human form. Who, do you think, will admit that? If it were true, what occasion was there to come so gradually to it? And to what purpose? You might have answered it on your own authority. I perceive your gradations from happiness to virtue, and from virtue to reason; but how do you come from reason to human form? There, indeed, you do not descend by degrees, but precipitately.

Nor can I conceive why Epicurus should rather say the Gods are like men than that men are like the Gods. You ask what is the difference; for, say you, if this is like that, that is like this. I grant it; but this I assert, that the Gods could not take their form from men; for the Gods always existed, and never had a beginning, if they are to exist eternally; but men had a beginning: therefore that form, of which the immortal Gods are, must have had existence before mankind; consequently, the Gods should not be said to be of human form, but our form should be called

divine. However, let this be as you will. I now inquire how this extraordinary good fortune came about; for you deny that reason had any share in the formation of things. But still, what was this extraordinary fortune? Whence proceeded that happy concourse of atoms which gave so sudden a rise to men in the form of Gods? Are we to suppose the divine seed fell from heaven upon earth, and that men sprung up in the likeness of their celestial sires? I wish you would assert it; for I should not be unwilling to acknowledge my relation to the Gods. But you say nothing like it; no, our resemblance to the Gods, it seems, was by chance. Must I now seek for arguments to refute this doctrine seriously? I wish I could as easily discover what is true as I can overthrow what is false.

[Transcript](#)

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62001048>

Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2024 at 8:27 PM

It will take a couple of days to get this edition posted, but in the meantime I want to point out that this passage I'm about to quote seems to me to be a great way to introduce the issues that Philodemus addresses in "On Methods of Inference."

If we strip away the context of discussing gods, and focus on the part that begins with "What!" I think we'll see that this is an argument that strikes much more deeply at Epicurean philosophy than do many others. It goes to the whole issue of Epicurean reliance on the senses and their relationship to reason and how we draw conclusions about things that are not directly seeable or touchable by us.

This gives us a list of specific examples of arguments against Epicurus to observe and confront:

1 - You've never seen anything here on earth like the moon, the stars, or the planets, have you? How can an Epicurean form ANY opinions about something that they've never seen before up close? You Epicureans should be denying that the moon and stars and planets exist at all, because you've never seen any such thing up close to which to compare it!

2 - You've never seen a god here on earth either! You Epicureans should be denying that gods exist, because under your philosophy you can validate nothing that cannot be validated by the sense!

3 - If your Epicurean doctrine were to prevail, we'd have to throw out everything that history or reason discovers, because if it hasn't been previously observed by the senses, then you Epicureans reject that it is even possible!

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4043-episode-246-cicero-s-otnotg-21-examining-epicurean-evidence-based-reasoning/>

4 - Yours is such a narrow way of thinking! If you had been born and raised in an inland nation, and neither you nor your friends had ever seen an ocean, you would deny that oceans are possible!

5 - If you had lived in a land which had only rabbits and foxes, you would think that someone who asserted that lions and panthers or elephants exist would be playing you for a fool!

Ok that's this part of Cotta's argument, and it demands a response.

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the Epicureans would not have admitted even a grain of truth in that charge, but in "On the Nature of The Gods" Cicero does not allow Velleius to reply.

Our job is to construct the argument that the ancient Epicureans used against these arguments. Probably Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference / On Signs" is the best place to start, but I bet there are other sources we can pull together as well.

We offer some possible responses in the podcast, but it deserves much longer treatment. Yes it applies to the gods, but it's an argument that applies to atoms and void and much of the rest of Epicurean physics. It's even at the root of the whole question of how we can be confident that the universe operates naturally and isn't the plaything of arbitrary gods.

Quote

But since you dare not (for I am now addressing my discourse to Epicurus himself) absolutely deny the existence of the Gods, what hinders you from ascribing a divine nature to the sun, the world, or some eternal mind?

I never, says he, saw wisdom and a rational soul in any but a human form.

What! Did you ever observe anything like the sun, the moon, or the five moving planets? The sun, terminating his course in two extreme parts of one circle, finishes his annual revolutions. The moon, receiving her light from the sun, completes the same course in the space of a month. The five planets in the same circle, some nearer, others more remote from the earth, begin the same courses together, and finish them in different spaces of time. Did you ever observe anything like this, Epicurus? So that, according to you, there can be neither sun, moon, nor stars, because nothing can exist but what we have touched or seen.

What! have you ever seen the Deity himself? Why else do you believe there is any? If this doctrine prevails, we must reject all that history relates or reason discovers; and the people who inhabit inland countries must not believe there is such a thing as the sea. This is so narrow a way of thinking that if you had been born in Seriphus, and never had been from out of that island, where you had frequently been in the habit of

seeing little hares and foxes, you would not, therefore, believe that there are such beasts as lions and panthers; and if any one should describe an elephant to you, you would think that he designed to laugh at you.

Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2024 at 3:05 AM

Just as a cross-reference, Kalosyni just posted to an article that is relevant to this subject. It discusses Epicurus' reasoning about "the soul," so it is another separate example of what we are discussing here as to proper methods of reasoning about those things that are imperceptible to the senses by starting with points of reference in what is perceptible, rather than allowing "anything that can be constructed by the imagination with self-consistent wording is possible" type speculation.

So the list of "Important examples of Epicurean reasoning" needs to include:

1. Atoms
2. Void
3. Gods
4. The Soul
5. Death

And I am sure there are many many more to add to the list -including the ultimate nature of Epicurus' reasoning about pleasure itself. But should start with the "easy" and more concrete ones such as the list above, and establish the general method first, before we graduate to the more abstract issues.

Here is Kalosyni's link to the article on the soul:

Post

[RE: What is the soul?](#)

I just found this interesting excerpt, on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy website, "Ancient Theories of Soul" - Section on Epicurus:

[...]

Source: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/#5.1>



Kalosyni

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4043-episode-246-cicero-s-otnotg-21-examining-epicurean-evidence-based-reasoning/>

September 15, 2024 at 8:44 PM

Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2024 at 3:14 AM

Also as a side note: I think this is so important that we will eventually want to add another bullet point to the opening list of key takeaways for new readers (the top of the front page).

So it would be good to look for pithy passages from the ancient Epicureans that summarize the point, which is something like:

Reasoning about the nature of the imperceptible must be based on and consistent with the nature of the perceptible.

What we're getting at here is probably the most basic Canonical assertion of Epicurean philosophy.

It is the method for deriving, and being confident of, both the affirmative existence of atoms and void as well as the non-existence of supernatural gods and consciousness after death (immortal souls).

But it must be stated in a way that makes clear why, at the same time, BOTH (1) people who have lived all their lives inland would not declare oceans to be impossible, and also (2) people need not live forever or travel the entire universe before they can affirm that supernatural gods are impossible.

So suggestions for text references which say something like the italicized section above will be appreciated. I expect we have this in Herodotus and Lucretius and probably other places as well.

For example from Herodotus:

Quote

And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.

I can't confirm the Greek, but, for example, it seems important in this passage that the phrasing would be "perceptIBLE" (*able* to be perceived) rather than "that which has *already* been

perceived."

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2024 at 7:04 AM

Herodotus, 10.38 ([Hicks](#))

Next, we must by all means stick to our sensations, that is, simply to the present impressions whether of the mind or of any criterion whatever, and similarly to our actual feelings, in order that we may have the means of determining that which needs confirmation and that which is obscure.

"Ἔτι τε⁴⁴ τὰς αἰσθήσεις δεῖ πάντως τηρεῖν καὶ ἀπλῶς τὰς παρούσας ἐπιβολὰς εἴτε διανοίας εἴθ' ὅτου δήποτε τῶν κριτηρίων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὰ ὑπάρχοντα παθη, ὅπως ἂν καὶ τὸ προσμένον καὶ τὸ ἄδηλον ἔχωμεν οἷς σημειωσόμεθα.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I can't confirm the Greek, but, for example, it seems important in this passage that the phrasing would be "perceptIBLE" (able to be perceived) rather than "that which has already been perceived."

That passage doesn't seem to do what you want. I read it as:

τὰς παρούσας ἐπιβολὰς "the *present* impressions"

[παρούσας](#) is "of things, to be by, i.e. ready or at hand; to be present in or at." These are the impressions of the mind being experienced. So, it seems to me to be neither "perceptIBLE" (able to be perceived)" nor "that which has already been perceived" but what is present at the moment, at least in this particular passage.

τὰ ὑπάρχοντα παθη (ta hyparkhonta pathē) "the actual feelings"

[ὑπάρχοντα](#) is "to be already in existence; to be laid down, to be taken for granted." We need to take our feelings - pathē - of pleasure/pain into account.

This passage says to me we need to use what we have experienced or are experiencing to determine the nature of that which needs additional evidence or that which is unseen or not evident to the senses.

Post by "Cassius" of September 17, 2024 at 5:36 PM

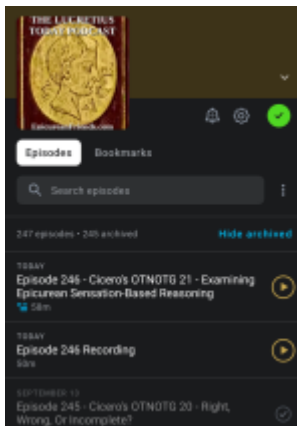
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Lucretius Today Episode 246 is now available: "Examining Epicurean Evidence-Based Reasoning" [Transcript](#)

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62001048>

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2024 at 6:20 PM

Did you mean to upload twice? This is what I'm seeing on my podcast app:



Post by “Joshua” of September 17, 2024 at 6:36 PM

I should correct myself around the 8:20 mark. Correlation is not causation!

Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2024 at 6:39 PM

1. Don - The first upload was deleted. it may show up twice but only the first is usable.
 2. Joshua - Let me check. I don't remember anything egregiously off.
-

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2024 at 6:57 PM

Still one of my favorite memes...

Diogenes

~ **"BEHOLD! A MAN"**

Plato

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2024 at 6:58 AM

I would say that this issue of evidence - based reasoning is what is being referred to very near the beginning of Lucretius' poem, and its position here as one of Epicurus' great accomplishments reflects its importance. Epicurus points to the method for unraveling "*what can be, and what cannot - in what way each thing has its power limited - its deep-set boundary mark*"

[Quote from Lucretius Book One](#)

[62] When the life of man lay foul to see and grovelling upon the earth, crushed by the weight of religion, which showed her face from the realms of heaven, lowering upon mortals with dreadful mien, 'twas a man of Greece who dared first to raise his mortal eyes to meet her, and first to stand forth to meet her: him neither the stories of the gods nor thunderbolts checked, nor the sky with its revengeful roar, but all the more spurred the eager daring of his mind to yearn to be the first to burst through the close-set bolts upon the doors of nature. And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole; whence in victory he brings us tidings what can come to be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deepset boundary-stone. And so religion in revenge is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us to heaven.

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2024 at 7:03 AM

No doubt there are some pithy quotes in "On Signs" that are directly relevant to this discussion.

Here's our discussion of [two articles on knowledge and signs by David Sedley](#)

And [here's a transcript of the text of the DeLacey edition of Philodemus](#).

Post by “Bryan” of September 18, 2024 at 6:55 PM

Great podcast! Yes, Cicero is forgetting that, per Epicurus, a consideration is true -- both "**if it is not contradicted**" by evidence as well as "if it is affirmed." (51c)

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2024 at 7:46 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Yes, Cicero is forgetting that, per Epicurus, a consideration is true -- both "if it is not contradicted " by evidence as well as "if it is affirmed." (51c)

Thanks Bryan. Also: We have [PD24](#) for a similar point:

Quote

[PD24](#). If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations, as well, with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation, and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.

But I'd like to make clear from our existing quotes something to the effect that the opinion, in order to be suggested in the first place, must pass an initial threshold of being based on some kind of existing evidence. In other words it isn't sufficient to say "I can imagine an omnipotent god....."

I'd like to see what we can do to come up with a pithy statement of the ultimate point. Something first has to get the opinion started as reasonable based on existing evidence.

What's the best way to take something like "*Reasoning about the nature of the imperceptible must be based on and consistent with the nature of the perceptible*" and modify it to a form in which you would teach a child?

Post by "Bryan" of September 19, 2024 at 9:59 AM

When thinking about things we can't see or sense, we should base our ideas on what we can see and sense, and make sure they match.

Or maybe:

When we try to understand things we can't see, we should use what we know about things we can see and make sure our ideas fit together.

Post by "Cassius" of September 19, 2024 at 10:30 AM

Yes that is helpful, thank you!

Because it's not limited to "gods" I think it's worth spelling out the reasoning issue. As I see it:

1. Cotta is alleging that Epicurus said that in order to understand something, you have to have seen a prior example and understood the prior example. Implicitly the point is "you have to have examined it here on earth in your own experience and understood it before you can apply the generalization to a new example."
2. Cotta alleges that there is nothing like the sun, moon, or stars here on earth, so Epicurus has had no examples to examine.
3. Cotta alleges that since Epicurus had no examples, and under Epicurus's rules that we require examples on which to reason, we cannot make any reliable statements about the sun moon or stars. But Cotta knows that Epicurus *DOES* claim to know that the sun and stars and planets are not gods.
4. Cotta says this position that the suns and stars and planets are not gods is contradictory. Since Epicurus has had no examples of suns or moons or planet to examine, Epicurus (allegedly under his own rules) should not be making any representations about the sun and stars and planets at all. Cotta thinks he has Epicurus in a trap, so he says "Epicurus if you are willing without evidence reach the conclusion that sun stars and planets are not gods, why don't you go ahead and admit without evidence the sun stars and planets are gods, and that gods can exist in other than human form?"

So I see Cotta as trying to take advantage of the argument that we also see in Lucretius, where Lucretius says "the gods could not have made the universe because they had no pattern to go by." It was apparently understood that the Epicureans argued regularly that you must have a pattern from experience in order to understand something and work with it.

Any skeptic who thinks that Epicureans demand examples before they believe in something will attack any Epicurean position on the sun moon and stars by saying : "Under your own theory of reasoning, you can't say anything at all about something unless you have seen a prior example of it, so you shouldn't be talking at all about the sun moon or stars."

And that sounds like a reasonable argument against someone who is alleging you can only reason based on analogy from sensory experience. But it's not a persuasive argument against Epicurus, because the Epicurus' position is not that you reason based ONLY on past experience, your reason can also be based on reasonable inferences from circumstantial evidence. In that way it is permissible to make conclusions about things you haven't seen, because you can infer new possibilities that you haven't seen based on other examples of what we have seen.

This is how the difference plays out in court:

If a judge in court only allows "direct evidence," then he will allow into evidence a witness who says "I saw Tom Jones strangle Sally Smith in the jail cell."

If a court allows only direct evidence, the judge will EXCLUDE the testimony of a witness who says: "I saw Tom Jones and Sally Smith alone in the jail cell, and then I left, and ten minutes later I came back and Sally Smith was dead with red marks around her neck, and no one had disturbed the lock on the cell."

The latter testimony is not "direct" evidence" but "circumstantial evidence." Circumstantial evidence is controversial and has to be treated carefully. But our legal system has decided that it is reasonable to ally juries to consider circumstantial evidence in court, because sometimes direct evidence is not available but circumstantial evidence is very strong.

The answer to Cotta is that Epicurean philosophy doesn't require direct evidence all the time, such as in the case of the existence of atoms or what happens to self-consciousness after death. Epicurean philosophy allows inference based on circumstantial evidence, and it considers the conclusions of persuasive amounts of circumstantial evidence to be as worthy of reliance, even in life-and-death decisionmaking, as evidence from that which has been observed directly.

Therefore I see it as essential to point out that Cotta's is wrong to allege that Epicurus requires direct evidence to support decisionmaking. After that, we also need to take the next step of discussing the proper use of circumstantial evidence, so we can explain *how* he's misrepresenting Epicurus, because that's not obvious to everyone.

And it's also worth pointing out another inconsistency in Cotta:

Why, Cotta, if you are a skeptic and don't think anything is knowable, do you agree with Velleius that gods are happy, and gods have virtue, and gods use reason? Where do *you* come by *that* knowledge?

In fact we need to ask that question of both Cotta and Epicurus in order to understand the big picture of how their reasoning differs. If we just stop and say "this topic is about gods and I

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don't care about gods" then we will cut ourselves off from major aspects of how Epicurean reasoning works on everything, not just gods.