

Episode 247 - Cicero's OTNOTG 22 - Cotta Continues To Attack The Epicurean View That Gods Are Natural Living Beings

Post by “Cassius” of September 19, 2024 at 3:07 PM

Welcome to Episode 247 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, continues to insist that gods are supernatural and not at all similar to humans. We will, in turn, respond to Cotta's particular and general arguments.

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

XXXII. ...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.

XXXIII. You have enumerated with so ready a memory, and so copiously, the opinions of philosophers, from Thales the Milesian, concerning the nature of the Gods, that I am surprised to see so much learning in a Roman. But do you think they were all madmen who thought that a Deity could by some possibility exist without hands and feet? Does not even this consideration have weight with you when you consider what is the use and advantage of limbs in men, and lead you to admit that the Gods have no need of them? What necessity can there be of feet, without walking; or of hands, if there is nothing to be grasped? The same may be asked of the other parts of the body, in which nothing is vain, nothing useless, nothing superfluous; therefore we may infer that no art can imitate the skill of nature. Shall the Deity, then, have a tongue, and not speak—teeth, palate, and jaws, though he will have no use for them? Shall the members which nature has given to the body for the sake of generation be useless to the Deity? Nor would the internal parts be less superfluous than the external. What comeliness is there in the heart, the lungs, the liver, and the rest of them, abstracted from their use? I mention these because you place them in the Deity on account of the beauty of the human form.

Depending on these dreams, not only Epicurus, Metrodorus, and Hermachus declaimed against Pythagoras, Plato, and Empedocles, but that little harlot Leontium presumed to write against Theophrastus: indeed, she had a neat Attic style; but yet, to think of her arguing against Theophrastus! So much did the garden of Epicurus abound with these liberties, and, indeed, you are always complaining against them. Zeno wrangled. Why need I mention Albutius? Nothing could be more elegant or humane than Phædrus; yet a sharp expression would disgust the old man. Epicurus treated Aristotle with great contumely. He foully slandered Phædo, the disciple of Socrates. He pelted Timocrates, the brother of his companion Metrodorus, with whole volumes, because he disagreed with him in some trifling point of philosophy. He was ungrateful even to Democritus, whose follower he was; and his master Nausiphanes, from whom he learned nothing, had no better treatment from him.

XXXIV. Zeno gave abusive language not only to those who were then living, as Apollodorus, Syllus, and the rest, but he called Socrates, who was the father of philosophy, the Attic buffoon, using the Latin word Scurra. He never called Chrysippus by any name but Chesippus. And you yourself a little before, when you were numbering up a senate, as we may call them, of philosophers, scrupled not to say that the most eminent men talked like foolish, visionary dotards. Certainly, therefore, if they have all erred in regard to the nature of the Gods, it is to be feared there are no such beings. What you deliver on that head are all whimsical notions, and not worthy the consideration even of old women. For you do not seem to be in the least aware what a task you draw on yourselves, if you should prevail on us to grant that the same form is common to Gods and men. The Deity would then require the same trouble in dressing, and the same care of the body, that mankind does. He must walk, run, lie down, lean, sit, hold, speak, and discourse. You need not be told the consequence of making the Gods male and female.

Therefore I cannot sufficiently wonder how this chief of yours came to entertain these strange opinions. But you constantly insist on the certainty of this tenet, that the Deity is both happy and immortal. Supposing he is so, would his happiness be less perfect if he had not two feet? Or cannot that blessedness or beatitude—call it which you will (they are both harsh terms, but we must mollify them by use)—can it not, I say, exist in that sun, or in this world, or in some eternal mind that has not human shape or limbs? All you say against it is, that you never saw any happiness in the sun or the world. What, then? Did you ever see any world but this? No, you will say. Why, therefore, do you presume to assert that there are not only six hundred thousand worlds, but that they are innumerable? Reason tells you so. Will not reason tell you likewise that as, in our inquiries into the most excellent nature, we find none but the divine nature can be happy and eternal, so the same divine nature surpasses us in excellence of mind; and as in mind, so in body? Why, therefore, as we are inferior in all other respects, should we be equal in form? For human virtue approaches nearer to the divinity than human form.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62147894>

Post by “Cassius” of September 22, 2024 at 8:46 AM

Notes for the section to be discussed in this episode:

Section XXXII

1. Cotta accuses Velleius' argument of being based on logic - a technique that the Epicureans allegedly oppose - rather than on the senses.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4052-episode-247-cicero-s-otnotg-22-cotta-continues-to-attack-the-epicurean-view-that/>

2. Cotta agrees with Velleius that the gods are happy, that without virtue no one can be happy, and that virtue requires reason. Cotta disagrees with Velleius, however, that the gods are of human form, and he alleges that this is a leap which is not justified.
3. Cotta asserts that Velleius says that the gods are of human form, when he could just as easily have said that men are of godlike form. This is petty wordplay, because when two things are similar to each other, it makes no difference which order you state the things that are similar to each other.
4. Note that Cotta asserts that the gods always existed, which is required if they are immortal, and therefore existed first before men. It is not clear that this is Velleius' position, especially when you ask about "particular gods" rather than gods as a class, or human beings as a class. If "human beings" is a term that applies only to people of Earth, then yes that class had a beginning after the earth was formed, but that does not mean that there are not other human-like beings in the rest of the universe, or that the class of human-like beings has not always existed, just like the class of the gods.
 1. *[Letter to Herodotus 73] - "And in addition to what we have already said we must believe that worlds, and indeed every limited compound body which continuously exhibits a similar appearance to the things we see, were created from the infinite, and that all such things, greater and less alike, were separated off from individual agglomerations of matter; and that all are again dissolved, some more quickly, some more slowly, some suffering from one set of causes, others from another. [74] And further we must believe that these worlds were neither created all of necessity with one configuration nor yet with every kind of shape. Furthermore, we must believe that in all worlds there are living creatures and plants and other things we see in this world; for indeed no one could prove that in a world of one kind there might or might not have been included the kinds of seeds from which living things and plants and all the rest of the things we see are composed, and that in a world of another kind they could not have been."*
 2. *[Lucretius 2:1048] [1048] *First of all, we find that in every direction everywhere, and on either side, above and below, through all the universe, there is no limit, as I have shown, and indeed the truth cries out for itself and the nature of the deep shines clear. Now in no way must we think it likely, since towards every side is infinite empty space, and seeds in unnumbered numbers in the deep universe fly about in many ways driven on in everlasting motion, that this one world and sky was brought to birth, but that beyond it all those bodies of matter do naught; above all, since this world was so made by nature, as the seeds of things themselves of their own accord, jostling from time to time, were driven together in many ways, rashly, idly, and in vain, and at last those united, which, suddenly cast together, might become ever and anon the beginnings of great things, of earth and sea and sky, and the race of living things. Wherefore, again and again, you must needs confess that there are here and there other gatherings of matter, such as is this, which the ether holds in its greedy grip. [1067] Moreover, when there is much*

matter ready to hand, when space is there, and no thing, no cause delays, things must, we may be sure, be carried on and completed. As it is, if there is so great a store of seeds as the whole life of living things could not number, and if the same force and nature abides which could throw together the seeds of things, each into their place in like manner as they are thrown together here, it must needs be that you confess that there are other worlds in other regions, and diverse races of men and tribes of wild beasts. [1077] This there is too that in the universe there is nothing single, nothing born unique and growing unique and alone, but it is always of some tribe, and there are many things in the same race. First of all turn your mind to living creatures; you will find that in this wise is begotten the race of wild beasts that haunts the mountains, in this wise the stock of men, in this wise again the dumb herds of scaly fishes, and all the bodies of flying fowls. Wherefore you must confess in the same way that sky and earth and sun, moon, sea, and all else that exists, are not unique, but rather of number numberless; inasmuch as the deep-fixed boundary-stone of life awaits these as surely, and they are just as much of a body that has birth, as every race which is here on earth, abounding in things after its kind.

5. Cotta asks how this extraordinary good fortune (of the existence of men and gods) came about, because you Epicureans deny that reason had anything to do with the formation of things. What was this extraordinary fortune? Are we to suppose the divine seed fell from heaven upon earth? Cotta says that Velleius does not assert this (though Cotta would welcome it) - Cotta asserts that Velleius alleges that this happened "by chance." Surely you can't be serious! Cotta says in effect: "I wish it were as easy to show what is true as it is to show that what you say is false!"

Section XXXIII

1. Cotta says that Velleius' history of philosophers regarding the nature of the gods is so good that he is surprised to see so much learning in a Roman. (Sort of weird statement - isn't Cotta Roman too?)
2. Cotta asks Velleius if he thinks those philosophers who held that gods can exist without human attributes (hand and feet) were madmen? Don't you understand that the gods have no need of hands and feet like humans do? (Cotta is alleging that gods are supernatural and don't need such things.)
3. Cotta says: "The same may be asked of the other parts of the body, in which nothing is vain, nothing useless, nothing superfluous; therefore we may infer, that no art can imitate the skill of nature." What does "No art may imitate the skill of nature" mean? Rackham translates "so that no art can imitate the cunning of nature's handiwork."
4. Cotta says he mentions tongues and teeth and jaws and heart, lung, liver, and says "I mention these because you place them in the Deity on account of the beauty of the

human form." -- This is also petty - Velleius made no such specific assertions - only that the gods had some kind of bodies similar in appearance to humans -- not that the gods bodies contained the same exact characteristics as humans.

5. Cotta characterizes Epicurean reasoning as dreams, and calls Leontium a harlot who presumed to write against Theophrastus. The Garden of Epicurus *abounded* with these criticisms of the other philosophers. Cotta then gives a list of other philosophers Epicurus attacks, which would seem to imply confirmation of what Diogenes Laertius has to say about Epicurus calling the other philosophers names.

Post by “Cassius” of September 28, 2024 at 9:42 AM

Production of this episode has been slowed down considerably by the impact of Hurricane Helene, but I hope to have it completed and posted by the end of today today.

Post by “Don” of September 28, 2024 at 9:54 AM

How are you doing? Are you directly impacted by the path?

Anyone else want to check in?

Post by “Cassius” of September 28, 2024 at 12:09 PM

I would expect any of our readers in GA or NC or DC or the Florida panhandle might be without power - at least that's our situation! But we have battery power and podcast editing continues. Gotta keep the responses to Cotta coming!

Post by “Don” of September 28, 2024 at 1:02 PM

You are DEDICATED, [Cassius](#) !! Editing on battery power!

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4052-episode-247-cicero-s-otnotg-22-cotta-continues-to-attack-the-epicurean-view-that/>

Post by “Cassius” of September 28, 2024 at 3:13 PM

Lucretius Today Episode 247 is now available: "Cotta Continues To Insist The Gods Are Supernatural And Not At All Similar To Humans."

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62147894>

Post by “Pacatus” of September 28, 2024 at 5:17 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would expect any of our readers in GA or NC or DC or the Florida panhandle might be without power - at least that's our situation!

Here's hoping all remain well.

Post by “Don” of September 29, 2024 at 4:38 PM

****Excellent**** episode, gentlemen!!

I found the last segment talking about the need for gods' bodies to experience pleasure especially insightful. I don't know whether I've ever heard it read that before.

Thanks for the shout-out. We'll get that episode scheduled. I continue to hold an idealist position (not strongly, but that's the way I lean), but I'll look forward to exploring the topic.

Post by “Cassius” of September 29, 2024 at 4:50 PM

Thanks Don. Joshua's insight there at the end was worth the entire episode, and we tried to follow up on it in our recording this morning.

There's a lot more going on here beneath the surface beyond just "what gods would look like."

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