

# Episode 248 - Cicero's OTNOTG 23 - Cotta Pushes The "Argument By Design" Against The Epicurean View That All - Including Gods - Is Natural

Post by "Cassius" of September 28, 2024 at 3:27 PM

Welcome to Episode 248 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

XXXIV. ... 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.

XXXV. To return to the subject I was upon. What can be more childish than to assert that there are no such creatures as are generated in the Red Sea or in India? The most curious inquirer cannot arrive at the knowledge of all those creatures which inhabit the earth, sea, fens, and rivers; and shall we deny the existence of them because we never saw them? That similitude which you are so very fond of is nothing to the purpose. Is not a dog like a wolf? And, as Ennius says,

The monkey, filthiest beast, how like to man!

Yet they differ in nature. No beast has more sagacity than an elephant; yet where can you find any of a larger size? I am speaking here of beasts. But among men, do we not see a disparity of manners in persons very much alike, and a similitude of manners in persons unlike? If this sort of argument were once to prevail, Velleius, observe what it would lead to. You have laid it down as certain that reason cannot possibly reside in any but the human form. Another may affirm that it can exist in none but a terrestrial being; in none but a being that is born, that grows up, and receives instruction, and that consists of a soul, and an infirm and perishable body; in short, in none but a mortal man. But if you decline those opinions, why should a single form disturb you? You perceive that man is possessed of reason and understanding, with all the infirmities which I have mentioned interwoven with his being; abstracted from which, you nevertheless know God, you say, if the lineaments do but remain. This is not talking considerately, but at a venture; for surely you did not think what an encumbrance anything superfluous or useless is, not only in a man, but a tree. How troublesome it is to have a finger too much! And why so? Because neither use nor ornament requires more than five; but your Deity has not only a finger more than he wants, but a head, a neck, shoulders, sides, a paunch, back, hams, hands, feet, thighs, and legs. Are these parts necessary to immortality? Are they conducive to the existence of the Deity? Is the face itself of use? One would rather say so of the brain, the heart, the lights, and the liver; for these are the seats of life. The features of the face contribute nothing to the preservation of it.

XXXVI. You censured those who, beholding those excellent and stupendous works, the world, and its respective parts—the heaven, the earth, the seas—and the splendor with which they are adorned; who, contemplating the sun, moon, and stars; and who, observing the maturity and changes of the seasons, and vicissitudes of times, inferred from thence that there must be some excellent and eminent essence that originally made, and still moves, directs, and governs them. Suppose they should mistake in their conjecture, yet I see what they aim at. But what is that great and noble work which appears to you to be the effect of a divine mind, and from which you conclude that there are Gods? “I have,” say you, “a certain information of a Deity imprinted in my mind.” Of a bearded Jupiter, I suppose, and a helmeted Minerva.

But do you really imagine them to be such? How much better are the notions of the ignorant vulgar, who not only believe the Deities have members like ours, but that they make use of them; and therefore they assign them a bow and arrows, a spear, a shield, a trident, and lightning; and though they do not behold the actions of the Gods, yet they cannot entertain a thought of a Deity doing nothing. The Egyptians (so much ridiculed) held no beasts to be sacred, except on account of some advantage which they had received from them. The ibis, a very large bird, with strong legs and a horny long beak, destroys a great number of serpents. These birds keep Egypt from pestilential diseases by killing and devouring the flying serpents brought from the deserts of Lybia by the south-west wind, which prevents the mischief that may attend their biting while alive, or any infection when dead. I could speak of the advantage of the ichneumon, the crocodile, and the cat; but I am unwilling to be tedious; yet I will conclude with observing that the barbarians paid divine honors to beasts because of the benefits they received from them; whereas your Gods not only confer no benefit, but are idle, and do no single act of any description whatever.

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## Post by “Joshua” of September 29, 2024 at 11:09 AM

### Quote

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Cotta's description of the folkloric Wadjet, or flying desert serpent, comes from the *Histories* of Herodotus, where in Book II around section 75 the historian writes:

## Quote

75. There is a region moreover in Arabia, situated nearly over against the city of Buto, to which place I came to inquire about the winged serpents: and when I came thither I saw bones of serpents and spines in quantity so great that it is impossible to make report of the number, and there were heaps of spines, some heaps large and others less large and others smaller still than these, and these heaps were many in number. This region in which the spines are scattered upon the ground is of the nature of an entrance from a narrow mountain pass to a great plain, which plain adjoins the plain of Egypt; and the story goes that at the beginning of spring winged serpents from Arabia fly towards Egypt, and the birds called ibises meet them at the entrance to this country and do not suffer the serpents to go by but kill them. On account of this deed it is (say the Arabians) that the ibis has come to be greatly honoured by the Egyptians, and the Egyptians also agree that it is for this reason that they honour these birds.

76. The outward form of the ibis is this:—it is a deep black all over, and has legs like those of a crane and a very curved beak, and in size it is about equal to a rail: this is the appearance of the black kind which fight with the serpents, but of those which most crowd round men's feet (for there are two several kinds of ibises) the head is bare and also the whole of the throat, and it is white in feathering except the head and neck and the extremities of the wings and the rump (in all these parts of which I have spoken it is a deep black), while in legs and in the form of the head it resembles the other. As for the serpent its form is like that of the watersnake; and it has wings not feathered but most nearly resembling the wings of the bat. Let so much suffice as has been said now concerning sacred animals.

[This](#) site has a good write-up on the problem.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2024 at 4:09 PM

Lucretius Today Episode 248 is now available: "Cotta Pushes The 'Argument By Design' Against The Epicurean View That All - Including Gods - Is Natural."

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62200691>