

# Episode 252 - Why Reverence The Epicurean Gods?

Post by "Cassius" of October 26, 2024 at 11:09 AM

Welcome to Episode 252 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 41 as Cotta, the Academic Skeptic, continues to attack the Epicurean view of the nature of divinity.

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

XLI. But they are free from pain. Is that sufficient for beings who are supposed to enjoy all good things and the most supreme felicity? The Deity, they say, is constantly meditating on his own happiness, for he has no other idea which can possibly occupy his mind. Consider a little; reflect what a figure the Deity would make if he were to be idly thinking of nothing through all eternity but "It is very well with me, and I am happy;" nor do I see why this happy Deity should not fear being destroyed, since, without any intermission, he is driven and agitated by an everlasting incursion of atoms, and since images are constantly floating off from him. Your Deity, therefore,

is neither happy nor eternal.

Epicurus, it seems, has written books concerning sanctity and piety towards the Gods. But how does he speak on these subjects? You would say that you were listening to Coruncanius or Scævola, the high-priests, and not to a man who tore up all religion by the roots, and who overthrew the temples and altars of the immortal Gods; not, indeed, with hands, like Xerxes, but with arguments; for what reason is there for your saying that men ought to worship the Gods, when the Gods not only do not regard men, but are entirely careless of everything, and absolutely do nothing at all?

But they are, you say, of so glorious and excellent a nature that a wise man is induced by their excellence to adore them. Can there be any glory or excellence in that nature which only contemplates its own happiness, and neither will do, nor does, nor ever did anything? Besides, what piety is due to a being from whom you receive nothing? Or how can you, or any one else, be indebted to him who bestows no benefits? For piety is only justice towards the Gods; but what right have they to it, when there is no communication whatever between the Gods and men? And sanctity is the knowledge of how we ought to worship them; but I do not understand why they are to be worshipped, if we are neither to receive nor expect any good from them.

XLII. And why should we worship them from an admiration only of that nature in which we can behold nothing excellent? and as for that freedom from superstition, which you are in the habit of boasting of so much, it is easy to be free from that feeling when you have renounced all belief in the power of the Gods; unless, indeed, you imagine that Diagoras or Theodorus, who absolutely denied the being of the Gods, could possibly be superstitious. I do not suppose that even Protagoras could, who doubted whether there were Gods or not. The opinions of these philosophers are not only destructive of superstition, which arises from a vain fear of the Gods, but of religion also, which consists in a pious adoration of them.

What think you of those who have asserted that the whole doctrine concerning the immortal Gods was the invention of politicians, whose view was to govern that part of the community by religion which reason could not influence? Are not their opinions subversive of all religion? Or what religion did Prodicus the Chian leave to men, who held that everything beneficial to human life should be numbered among the Gods? Were not they likewise void of religion who taught that the Deities, at present the object of our prayers and adoration, were valiant, illustrious, and mighty men who arose to divinity after death? Euhemerus, whom our Ennius translated, and followed more than other authors, has particularly advanced this doctrine, and treated of the deaths and burials of the Gods; can he, then, be said to have confirmed religion, or, rather, to have totally subverted it? I shall say nothing of that sacred and august Eleusina, into whose mysteries the most distant nations were initiated, nor of the solemnities in Samothrace, or in Lemnos, secretly resorted to by night, and surrounded by thick and shady groves; which, if they were properly explained, and reduced to reasonable principles, would rather explain the nature of things than discover the knowledge of the Gods.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62543175>

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2024 at 11:22 AM

Citations relevant to this episode:

Vatican Saying 32: The veneration of the wise man is a great blessing to those who venerate him.

Velleius Previously In On The Nature of The Gods:

XVII ... We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that "that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak." If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshiping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

XX ... Well then, in this immensity of length and breadth and height there flits an infinite quantity of atoms innumerable, which though separated by void yet cohere together, and taking hold each of another form unions wherefrom are created those shapes and forms of things which you think cannot be created without the aid of bellows and anvils, and so have saddled us with an eternal master, whom day and night we are to fear. For who would not fear a prying busybody of a god, who foresees and thinks of and notices all things, and deems that everything is his concern? An outcome of this theology was first of all your doctrine of Necessity or Fate, *heimarmene*, as you termed it, the theory that every event is the result of an eternal truth and an unbroken sequence of causation. But what value can be assigned to a philosophy which thinks that everything happens by fate? It is a belief for old women, and ignorant old women at that. And next follows your doctrine of *mantike*, or Divination, which would so steep us in superstition, if we consented to listen to you, that we should be the devotees of soothsayers, augurs, oracle-mongers, seers and interpreters of dreams. But Epicurus has set us free from superstitious terrors and delivered us out of captivity, so that we have no fear of beings who, we know, create no trouble for themselves and seek to cause none to others, while we worship with pious reverence the transcendent majesty of nature.

## Post by “Joshua” of October 26, 2024 at 6:56 PM

### Quote

What are those good things? Sensual pleasures, no doubt; for you know no delight of the mind but what arises from the body, and returns to it.

We should spend some more time on this from last week. Cicero loves to exploit Epicurus' position on the physicality of the soul in such a way as to muddle the distinction between mental and bodily pleasure.

Yes, Epicurus held that the soul is made of matter. Yes, the soul is rooted in the body and cannot survive without it. But to imply, therefore, that the distinction between mind and body is without meaning is to commit a serious injustice to the ancient Epicureans; mental pleasures and pains are quite different to bodily pleasures and pains, and Cicero is helping no one when he ignores those differences--unless it be that Cicero helps himself, and others who think like him, to view Epicurus as something less than human.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2024 at 8:47 PM

Along the same lines of deprecating the senses, Joshua, this quote from Cicero's [ON DIVINATION](#):

### Quote

"Moreover, divination finds another and a positive support in nature, which teaches us how great is the power of the soul when it is divorced from the bodily senses, as it is especially in sleep, and in times of frenzy or inspiration. For, as the souls of the gods, without the intervention of eyes or ears or tongue, understand each other and what each one thinks (hence men, even when they offer silent prayers and vows, have no doubt that the gods understand them), so the souls of men, when released by sleep from bodily chains, or when stirred by inspiration and delivered up to their own impulses, see things that they cannot see when they are mingled with the body. And while it is difficult, perhaps, to apply this principle of nature to explain that kind of divination which we call artificial, yet Posidonius, who digs into the question as deep as one can, thinks that nature gives certain signs of future events. Thus Heraclides of Pontus records that it is the custom of the people of Ceos, once each year, to make a

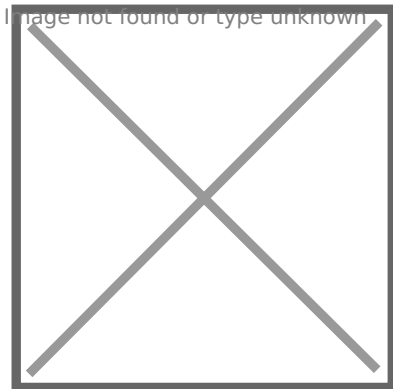
careful observation of the rising of the Dog-star and from such observation to conjecture whether the ensuing year will be healthy or pestilential. For if the star rises dim and, as it were enveloped in a fog, this indicates a thick and heavy atmosphere, which will give off very unwholesome vapours; but if the star appears clear and brilliant, this is a sign that the atmosphere is light and pure and, as a consequence, will be conducive to good health.

"Again, Democritus expresses the opinion that the ancients acted wisely in providing for the inspection of the entrails of sacrifices; because, as he thinks, the colour and general condition of the entrails are prophetic sometimes of health and sometimes of sickness and sometimes also of whether the fields will be barren or productive. Now, if it is known by observation and experience that these means of divination have their source in nature, it must be that the observations made and records kept for a long period of time have added much to our knowledge of this subject. Hence, that natural philosopher introduced by Pacuvius into his play of Chryses, seems to show very scanty apprehension of the laws of nature when he speaks as follows:

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 28, 2024 at 10:37 AM

Mentioned in this episode:



[Epicurus' refutation of determinism](#)

Epicurus' refutation of determinism

[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2024 at 7:14 AM

Side note during editing: The topic that is referenced in the current title of the episode (Why reverence the [Epicurean gods?](#)) doesn't really kick in until about the 30 minute mark, but at that point we begin to bring up an analogy that I think is useful:

One way of looking at the opening hymn to Venus, and Her role in bringing peace / pleasure to Mars at the beginning of the poem, is that Lucretius is laying the ground work to shift the paradigm from the familiar (Venus as the goddess leading the way to the best life) to the new paradigm. in which the real "god" to whom we owe respect and appreciation for leading us in the best life is [Epicurus](#), who in god-like / savior-like / father-like way does the same thing, but with true philosophy, rather than by means of the supernatural.

Viewed in this way, when Lucretius says "Call upon Neptune/Ceres if you like...," just so long as you don't let your mind get fouled with superstition, he's saying that the real "god" to call on is [Epicurus](#), who -- once we allow him to show us the true nature of the universe -- takes on the role of Venus in leading us properly in the pursuit of a pleasurable life.

And in the same way, piety / reverence toward the gods in Epicurean philosophy takes on a very similar positive flavor to piety / reverence toward Epicurus himself in Epicurean philosophy. That seems to me to be the best way of interpreting Epicurean participation in "religious ceremonies, in that that participation would be very analogous to participation in the Twentieth or other memorialization of the Epicurean founders and public festivals with friends.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2024 at 11:02 AM

Lucretius Today Episode 252 is now available: "Why Reverence the [Epicurean Gods](#)"

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