

Episode 253 - How The "Riddle Of Epicurus" Fits Into the Epicurean View of The Gods - Cicero's OTNOTG 28

Post by "Cassius" of October 27, 2024 at 11:13 AM

Welcome to Episode 253 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 will take a brief detour from Cicero's "On the Nature of The Gods," to take a look at what is known today as "The Riddle of Epicurus."

David Hume attributes this argument to Epicurus: "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Dialogues concerning Natural Religion 1779).

Lactantius, On the Anger of God, states: "You see, therefore, that we have greater need of wisdom on account of evils; and unless these things had been proposed to us, we should not be a rational animal. But if this account is true, which the Stoics were in no manner able to see, that argument also of Epicurus is done away. God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them? I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at; but having examined the matter, we easily do away with this formidable argument. For God is able to do whatever He wishes, and there is no weakness or envy in God. He is able, therefore, to take away evils; but He does not wish to do so, and yet He is not on that account envious. For on this account He does not take them away, because He at the same time gives wisdom, as I have shown; and

there is more of goodness and pleasure in wisdom than of annoyance in evils. For wisdom causes us even to know God, and by that knowledge to attain to immortality, which is the chief good. Therefore, unless we first know evil, we shall be unable to know good. But Epicurus did not see this, nor did any other, that if evils are taken away, wisdom is in like manner taken away; and that no traces of virtue remain in man, the nature of which consists in enduring and overcoming the bitterness of evils. And thus, for the sake of a slight gain in the taking away of evils, we should be deprived of a good, which is very great, and true, and peculiar to us. It is plain, therefore, that all things are proposed for the sake of man, as well evils as also goods" (Chapter 13, translated by William Fletcher 1886).

Next week we will return to our normal sequence, and get back to 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 42 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

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.

XLIII. Even that great man Democritus, from whose fountains Epicurus watered his little garden, seems to me to be very inferior to his usual acuteness when speaking about the nature of the Gods. For at one time he thinks that there are images endowed with divinity, inherent in the universality of things; at another, that the principles and minds contained in the universe are Gods; then he attributes divinity to animated images, employing themselves in doing us good or harm; and, lastly, he speaks of certain images of such vast extent that they encompass the whole outside of the universe; all which opinions are more worthy of the country of Democritus than of Democritus himself; for who can frame in his mind any ideas of such images? who can admire them? who can think they merit a religious adoration?

But Epicurus, when he divests the Gods of the power of doing good, extirpates all religion from the minds of men; for though he says the divine nature is the best and the most excellent of all natures, he will not allow it to be susceptible of any benevolence, by which he destroys the chief and peculiar attribute of the most perfect being. For what is better and more excellent than goodness and beneficence? To refuse your Gods that quality is to say that no man is any object of their favor, and no Gods either; that they neither love nor esteem any one; in short, that they not only give themselves no trouble about us, but even look on each other with the greatest indifference.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62630139>

Post by “Joshua” of October 27, 2024 at 11:22 AM

The Riddle of Epicurus

We'll go over this during our Nov. 3rd recording, so here are a few links;

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4112-episode-253-how-the-riddle-of-epicurus-fits-into-the-epicurean-view-of-the-gods/>

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

[The Project Gutenberg E-text of Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, by David Hume](#)

(control+F search 'epicur' to locate the passage)

And the New Epicurean article on the history of the dilemma;

[Derivation of the “Riddle of Epicurus” - NewEpicurean](#)

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 30, 2024 at 1:25 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The Riddle of Epicurus

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David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm>

(control+F search 'epicur' to locate the passage)

And the New Epicurean article on the history of the dilemma;

<https://newepicurean.com/derivation-of-...le-of-epicurus/>

Display More

I wanted to mention that I've recently com across a few scholars who suggested that this trilemma *actually* comes from a [Skeptic](#) (perhaps [Carneades](#) the [Academic](#)), and **not** Epicurus ([Larrimore, Mark Joseph. *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Blackwell, 2001](#)). Based on *De Ira Dei* [David Hume](#) attributes this argument to Epicurus: **“Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”** ([Dialogues concerning Natural Religion](#) 1779). While it comports with Epicurean theology, it does not correspond with any extant writings of Epicurus nor another Epicurean. I also note that Lactantius documented this material approximately 600 years after Epicurus was

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4112-episode-253-how-the-riddle-of-epicurus-fits-into-the-epicurean-view-of-the-gods/>

teaching in Athens. <<https://twentiers.com/anger-of-god>>

From Lactantius, On the Anger of God "You see, therefore, that we have greater need of wisdom on account of evils; and unless these things had been proposed to us, we should not be a rational animal. But if this account is true, which the Stoics were in no manner able to see, that argument also of Epicurus is done away. **God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?**" I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at; but having examined the matter, we easily do away with this formidable argument. For God is able to do whatever He wishes, and there is no weakness or envy in God. He is able, therefore, to take away evils; but He does not wish to do so, and yet He is not on that account envious. For on this account He does not take them away, because He at the same time gives wisdom, as I have shown; and there is more of goodness and pleasure in wisdom than of annoyance in evils. For wisdom causes us even to know God, and by that knowledge to attain to immortality, which is the chief good. Therefore, unless we first know evil, we shall be unable to know good. But Epicurus did not see this, nor did any other, that if evils are taken away, wisdom is in like manner taken away; and that no traces of virtue remain in man, the nature of which consists in enduring and overcoming the bitterness of evils. And thus, for the sake of a slight gain in the taking away of evils, we should be deprived of a good, which is very great, and true, and peculiar to us. It is plain, therefore, that all things are proposed for the sake of man, as well evils as also goods" (Chapter 13, translated by William Fletcher 1886).

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 1:58 PM

I made a long set of notes on my reading of Humes "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" and they are now here:

Thread

[David Hume and his "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion"](#)

Not sure yet how to approach the Hume material from Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, or how much time we will have for it in the podcast beyond the Riddle, but I may collect a few notable quotations as I go through it. It's notable that none of the major players are advocating an Epicurean position:

- *Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up: We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and*

...



Cassius

October 30, 2024 at 7:54 AM

Post by “Cassius” of October 30, 2024 at 2:05 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I wanted to mention that I've recently com across a few scholars who suggested that this trilemma actually comes from a Skeptic (perhaps Carneades the Academic), and not Epicurus (Larrimore, Mark Joseph. The Problem of Evil: A Reader. Blackwell, 2001). Based on De Ira Dei David Hume attributes this argument to Epicurus: “Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (Dialogues concerning Natural Religion 1779). While it comports with Epicurean theology, it does not correspond with any extant writings of Epicurus nor another Epicurean. I also note that Lactantius documented this material approximately 600 years after Epicurus was teaching in Athens. <
<https://twentiers.com/anger-of-god>>

Excellent post Nate. Now that I am fresh from reading Hume's Dialogue in which it appears, I tend to agree that it was a skeptic who framed the argument this way. As presented, it is focused on "the problem of evil" and tightly interwoven with the position that it is illogical to take the Stoic position that "god" is benevolent. The real root of it seems to be as part of the larger argument that there is so much pain and suffering in the world that a "good" god is impossible. While that argument helps against "design," and definitely has aspects that rings of the Epicurean argument that the world has so many defects that it can't have been designed by

a benevolent god, it rings to me of having a much more "skeptical" flavor than Epicurus would have used.

As we know Epicurus focuses on stating the positive things that we *should* believe about gods - that they are living beings blessed and imperishable. While the two perspectives can be made to fit together, to me the Hume/Lanctatius version rings with a real emphasis on suffering that does not strike me as the way Epicurus would have presented anything.

When Epicurus presents suffering it's usually (always?) in the context of how suffering can be avoided. After all pain is generally manageable if long and short if intense. Seems to me Epicurus' focuses on the remedy to pain and suffering and it would be uncharacteristic of him to use an argument that takes as its premise an emphatic endorsement that suffering inevitably dominates the human condition.

Post by "Joshua" of October 30, 2024 at 2:15 PM

Thank you [Eikadistes](#)! The confusion that surrounds it is one of the main reasons I think we need to at least address it, but I have no firm conclusions myself.

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 2:24 PM

Another comment after reading Hume's Dialogue: Truer words were never spoken than this passage from DeWitt's Book, under the section "**True Opinions: False Opinions**" - "In the succession of philosophers the place of Epicurus is immediately after Plato and Pyrrho the skeptic. Platonism and skepticism were among his chief abominations."

Hume seems to see the same thing, and he structures his entire Dialogue as a debate between skepticism and dogmatism. He let's "mysticism" have a voice initially, but then has the advocate of mysticism walk out before the end as if no reasonable person, whether dogmatist or skeptic, will accept the mystic's arbitrariness.

Epicurus' whole argument about the gods - and everything else for that matter - is framed in terms of how you refute the claims of skepticism that nothing is knowable. Epicurus' conclusions about happiness, pleasure, death, life - the whole ball of wax - are framed in terms of "how" we are confident that his conclusions are true. And the "how" derives from taking the position that we test "truth" according to what we get from the canonical faculties. The feelings

of pleasure and pain are as "true" to us as the data we gather from the five senses, and the rest of the picture is that the data from images/prolepsis must be viewed that way as well.

Truth isn't measured by X number of scientists or philosophers or priests telling us that it is so, and we don't wait for "gods" to tell us what is true either. Seems to me that the best way to look at it is that Epicurus held opinion about anything to be "true" if that opinion is consistently confirmed, and without contradiction, by the data from the three canonical sources.

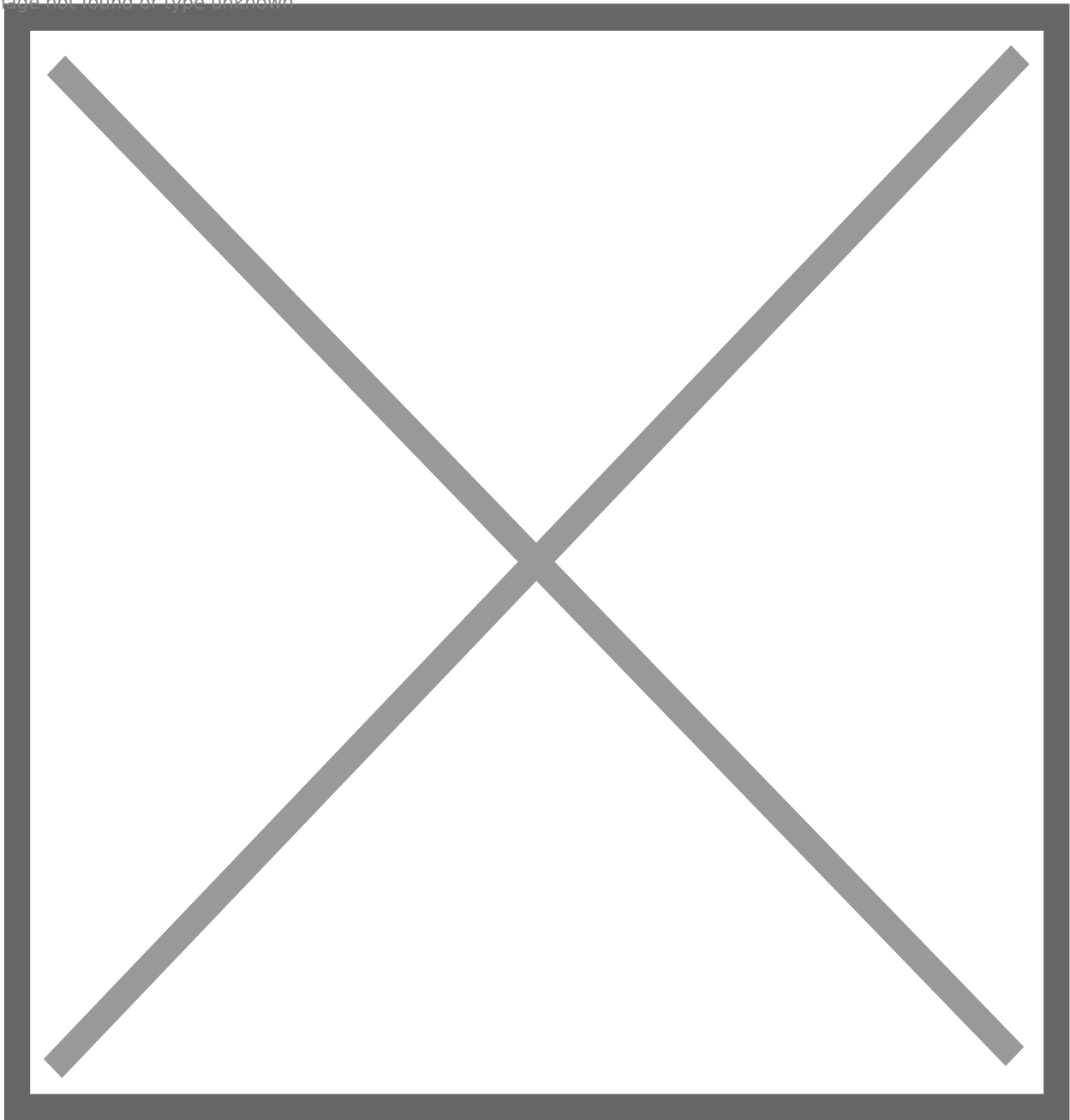
Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2024 at 9:00 PM

We'll be recording our podcast in which the Riddle will appear tomorrow morning. If anyone has any last minute thoughts on any aspect of the Riddle, please let us know and we will incorporate into the episode.

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2024 at 9:07 PM

Good article with background cites:

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[‘Then why call him God?’— Epicurus never said what everyone thinks he did](#)

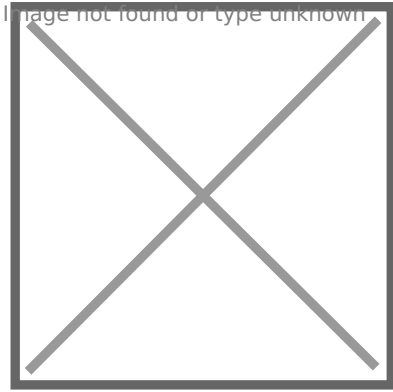
Why everyone is wrong about Epicurus

sylvesterreport.medium.com

Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2024 at 9:10 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4112-episode-253-how-the-riddle-of-epicurus-fits-into-the-epicurean-view-of-the-gods/>

Related article by David Sedley cited in the Medium article posted above:



[The atheist underground](#)

The atheist underground

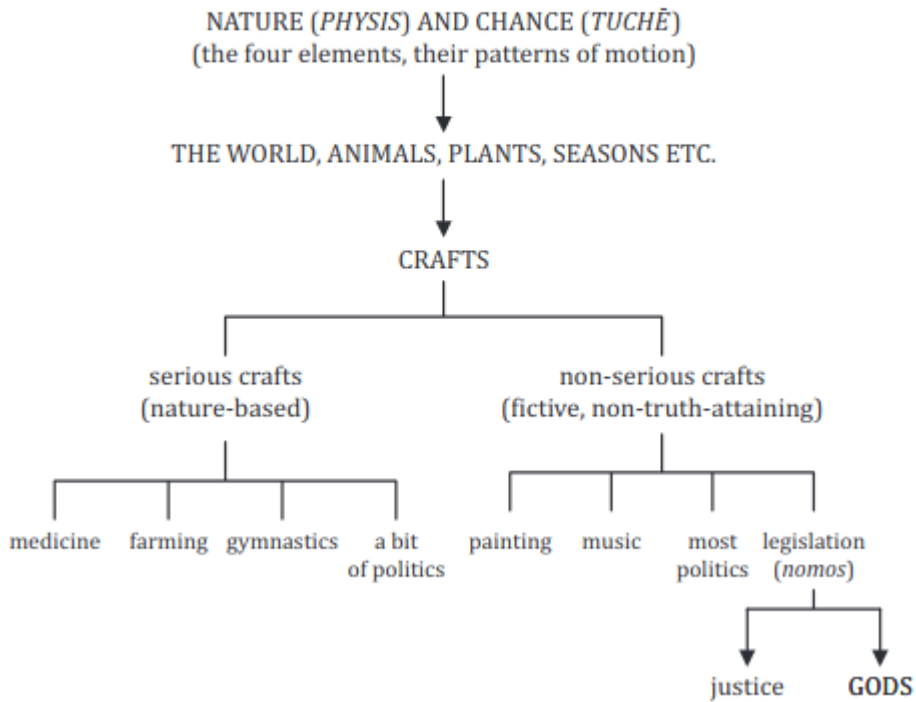
www.academia.edu

and a little David Sedley humor:

Third in the catalogue was Critias. Epicurus' is the earliest evidence for attributing to Critias, rather than to Euripides, what has come to be known as the Sisyphus fragment, in which the speaker explains the origin of religion as a political device, the gods having been invented to convince would-be miscreants that they are under 24-hour satellite surveillance.

and from the article an interesting chart, based on Plato's reference to atheist views:

(descending arrows = causation
descending lines = species)



To be clear this is based on Plato and not Epicurus, and as such David Sedley doesn't present it as consistent with Epicurus.

Post by “Joshua” of November 3, 2024 at 1:06 AM

This seems to be the relevant passage from [Lactantius](#):

Quote

You see, therefore, that we have greater need of wisdom on account of evils; and unless these things had been proposed to us, we should not be a rational animal. But if this account is true, which the Stoics were in no manner able to see, that argument also of Epicurus is done away. God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance

with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them? I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at; but having examined the matter, we easily do away with this formidable argument. For God is able to do whatever He wishes, and there is no weakness or envy in God. He is able, therefore, to take away evils; but He does not wish to do so, and yet He is not on that account envious. For on this account He does not take them away, because He at the same time gives wisdom, as I have shown; and there is more of goodness and pleasure in wisdom than of annoyance in evils. For wisdom causes us even to know God, and by that knowledge to attain to immortality, which is the chief good. Therefore, unless we first know evil, we shall be unable to know good. But Epicurus did not see this, nor did any other, that if evils are taken away, wisdom is in like manner taken away; and that no traces of virtue remain in man, the nature of which consists in enduring and overcoming the bitterness of evils. And thus, for the sake of a slight gain in the taking away of evils, we should be deprived of a good, which is very great, and true, and peculiar to us. It is plain, therefore, that all things are proposed for the sake of man, as well evils as also goods.

There are a number of quotations in Lactantius that are consistent with the surviving works of Epicurus and Lucretius;

Quote

Finally, **Lucretius**, as though forgetful of atoms, which he was maintaining, in order that he might refute those who say that all things are produced from nothing, employed these arguments, which might have weighed against himself. For he thus spoke:—

"If things came from nothing, any kind might be born of anything; nothing would require seed."

Likewise afterwards:—

"We must admit, therefore, that nothing can come from nothing, since things require seed before they can severally be born, and be brought out into the buxom fields of air."

That which follows is concerning the school of **Epicurus**; that as there is no anger in God, so indeed there is no kindness. For when Epicurus thought that it was inconsistent with God to injure and to inflict harm, which for the most part arises from the affection of anger, he took away from Him beneficence also, since he saw that it followed that if God has anger, He must also have kindness. Therefore, lest he should concede to Him a vice, he deprived Him also of virtue. From this, he says, He is happy and uncorrupted, because He cares about nothing, and neither takes trouble Himself nor occasions it to another.

- This is a very loose paraphrase of the first Principal Doctrine; 1. *"A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness."*
 - Note: It may be disputed whether PD1 actually suggests that the gods are without kindness. A general sense of goodwill might not be inconsistent with the nature of the gods, but granting favors or answering prayers would certainly be inconsistent with Epicurus' idea of a god.

But religion is overthrown if we believe **Epicurus** speaking thus:—

"For the nature of gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality together with supreme repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since, exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting anything of us, it is neither gained by favours nor moved by anger."

- We know this quote not from Epicurus but from **Lucretius**, I.44-49 and II.646-651

Afterwards **Epicurus** said that there was indeed a God, because it was necessary that there should be in the world some being of surpassing excellence, distinction, and blessedness; yet that there was no providence, and thus that the world itself was ordered by no plan, nor art, nor workmanship, but that the universe was made up of certain minute and indivisible seeds.

- High level summary citing isonomia and atomism. This passage in Lucretius comes close to covering all the main points;

*Nothing from nothing ever yet was born.
Fear holds dominion over mortality
Only because, seeing in land and sky*

*So much the cause whereof no wise they know,
Men think Divinities are working there.
Meantime, when once we know from nothing still
Nothing can be create, we shall divine
More clearly what we seek: those elements
From which alone all things created are,
And how accomplished by no tool of Gods.*

But **Epicurus** opposes us, and says: "If there is in God the affection of joy leading Him to favour, and of hatred influencing Him to anger, He must of necessity have both fear, and inclination, and desire, and the other affections which belong to human weakness."

- Lactantius presents this as a direct quotation, but I am not familiar with it. Perhaps it comes from a lost work. Again from **Lucretius** we have a thematically similar passage;

*O what emoluments could it confer
Upon Immortals and upon the Blessed
That they should take a step to manage aught
For sake of us? Or what new factor could,
After so long a time, inveigle them—
The hitherto reposeful—to desire
To change their former life? For rather he
Whom old things chafe seems likely to rejoice
At new; but one that in fore-passed time
Hath chanced upon no ill, through goodly years,
O what could ever enkindle in such an one
Passion for strange experiment?*

Display More

I'm inclined to doubt that it was Epicurus who composed the trilemma that bears his name. For one, the [Epicurean gods](#) themselves take no pains to prevent evil in our world; they would themselves fall on the horns of the trilemma as either "feeble" or "envious" or at best totally indifferent. Indeed, a god who was willing to prevent evil would not be untroubled, and so would not, according to Epicurus, be a god.

That being said, there was an instance above of Lactantius quoting Lucretius but putting his words into the mouth of Epicurus. Either Lucretius directly quoted Epicurus in Book 1, lines 44-49 (and in book 2), or Lactantius was in error.

So it strikes me as possible that Lactantius could be responding to the work of a later unknown Epicurean who lived during the Christian era and argued against it, but quoted that later Epicurean as if it were Epicurus himself.

Another possibility is that the trilemma evolved out of prolonged strife between Christians and pagans and that it was assigned to Epicurus because of his reputation for atheism. In which case the argument is neither Epicurean nor Skeptical, neither Cynical nor Stoic nor Academic, but simply and broadly pagan.

Post by “Joshua” of November 3, 2024 at 2:07 AM

Lactantius lived c.250-c.325

Origen of Caesarea (c.185-c.253), in his work *Contra Celsus* (Celsus being possibly though not certainly an Epicurean (see highlight below)), touches on the 'able but not willing' formulation. Celsus' book does not survive except as quoted by Origen.

Quote

Now in our judgment God can do everything which it is possible for Him to do without ceasing to be God, and good, and wise. But Celsus asserts — not comprehending the meaning of the expression God can do all things — that He will not desire to do anything wicked, admitting that He has the power, but not the will, to commit evil. We, on the contrary, maintain that as that which by nature possesses the property of sweetening other things through its own inherent sweetness cannot produce bitterness contrary to its own peculiar nature, nor that whose nature it is to produce light through its being light can cause darkness; so neither is God able to commit wickedness, for the power of doing evil is contrary to His deity and its omnipotence. Whereas if any one among existing things is able to commit wickedness from being inclined to wickedness by nature, it does so from not having in its nature the ability not to do evil.

The argument which Celsus employs against us and the Jews will be turned against himself thus: My good sir, does the God who is over all things know what takes place among men, or does He not know? Now if you admit the existence of a God and of providence, as your treatise indicates, He must of necessity know. And if He does know, why does He not make (men) better? Is it obligatory, then, on us to defend God's procedure in not making men better, although He knows their state, but not equally

binding on you, who do not distinctly show by your treatise that you are an Epicurean, but pretend to recognise a providence, to explain why God, although knowing all that takes place among men, does not make them better, nor by divine power liberate all men from evil?

But as he asserts that the Mosaic narrative most impiously represents God as in a state of weakness from the very commencement (of things), and as unable to gain over (to obedience) even one single man whom He Himself had formed, we say in answer that the objection is much the same as if one were to find fault with the existence of evil, which God has not been able to prevent even in the case of a single individual, so that one man might be found from the very beginning of things who was born into the world untainted by sin.

Post by “Cassius” of November 3, 2024 at 6:40 AM

Two things to add at the moment:

1) So where does that "WHY CALL HIM GOD?" structure come from in the English formulation? Are we not seeing that in any of the authorities, even Hume?

2) As to the Academic Sceptics wanting to construct arguments against the Stoics as much as against the Epicureans, we not only have that setup in Humes Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion, where one of the main speakers is named Cleanthes, and the anti-Stoic sections (which we have not covered) in On Ends and On The Nature of the Gods, but also this from the opening sections of Cicero's *Academica* (Yonge translation). He's previously in the text referenced conflicts between the Academics and Epicureans and Stoics, and then says this:

Quote

... For those men are so simple as to think the good of a sheep and of a man the same thing. While you know the character and extent of the accuracy which philosophers of our school profess. Again, if you follow Zeno, it is a hard thing to make any one understand what that genuine and simple good is which cannot be separated from honesty; while Epicurus asserts that he is wholly unable to comprehend what the character of that good may be which is unconnected with pleasures which affect the senses. But if we follow the doctrines of the Old Academy which, as you know, we prefer, then with what accuracy must we apply ourselves to explain it; with what

shrewdness and even with what obscurity must we argue against the Stoics!

Just in terms of our own discussions in the podcast and the forum, there is a lot of background evidence that would justify re-orienting our thoughts to how Cicero considered the Stoics to be almost as wrong-headed as the Epicureans, but since Cicero didn't quarrel with the Stoic ethics Cicero isn't as remembered today for being anti-Stoic. And in our discussions we haven't scratched the surface of Carneades, who appears to have been oriented against the Stoics similarly as Cicero.

Even a brief review of the first book of the Academic questions helps a lot to put the relationships between the Academics, the Peripatetics, the Stoics and even the Epicureans into perspective, with everything revolving around the issue of knowledge and when (or if) we are ever justified in claiming it:

Quote

Then I replied—Arcesilas, as we understand, directed all his attacks against Zeno, not out of obstinacy or any desire of gaining the victory, as it appears to me, but by reason of the obscurity of those things which had brought Socrates to the confession of ignorance, and even before Socrates, Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and nearly all the ancients; who asserted that nothing could be ascertained, or perceived, or known: that the senses of man were narrow, his mind feeble, the course of his life short, and that truth, as Democritus said, was sunk in the deep; that everything depended on opinions and established customs; that nothing was left to truth. They said in short, that everything was enveloped in darkness; therefore Arcesilas asserted that there was nothing which could be known, not even that very piece of knowledge which Socrates had left himself. Thus he thought that everything lay hid in secret, and that there was nothing which could be discerned or understood; for which reasons it was not right for any one to profess or affirm anything, or sanction anything by his assent, but men ought always to restrain their rashness and to keep it in check [pg 021] so as to guard it against every fall. For rashness would be very remarkable when anything unknown or false was approved of; and nothing could be more discreditable than for a man's assent and approbation to precede his knowledge and perception of a fact. And he used to act consistently with these principles, so as to pass most of his days in arguing against every one's opinion, in order that when equally important reasons were found for both sides of the same question, the judgment might more naturally be suspended, and prevented from giving assent to either.

Post by “Cassius” of November 5, 2024 at 4:21 PM

Episode 253 will be released later today. As I complete editing I am struck by Joshua's summation on a subject that isn't expressed in the episode title but which I am increasingly convinced is the heart of Epicurean philosophy: it's not Epicurus' precise conclusions about gods, or even about pleasure, that Lucretius and others seemed to see as his greatest achievement. It was Epicurus' "canon of truth" - the volume that they talk about as celestial or falling from the heavens, that is the real core to understanding Epicurus. And the core of that approach was the response that Epicurus developed to the great challenge of radical skepticism.

Coming up soon.

Post by “Cassius” of November 5, 2024 at 6:46 PM

Lucretius Today Episode 253 is now available: "How The Riddle of Epicurus Fits Into The Epicurean View Of The Gods"

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62630139>