

# Episode 254 - The Skeptic Asks: Does Not Epicurus Undermine Religion As Much As Any Outright Atheist? - Cicero's OTNOTG 29

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2024 at 3:55 PM

Welcome to Episode 254 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 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

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.

XLIV. How much more reasonable is the doctrine of the Stoics, whom you censure? It is one of their maxims that the wise are friends to the wise, though unknown to each other; for as nothing is more amiable than virtue, he who possesses it is worthy our love, to whatever country he belongs. But what evils do your principles bring, when you make good actions and

benevolence the marks of imbecility! For, not to mention the power and nature of the Gods, you hold that even men, if they had no need of mutual assistance, would be neither courteous nor beneficent. Is there no natural charity in the dispositions of good men? The very name of love, from which friendship is derived, is dear to men; and if friendship is to centre in our own advantage only, without regard to him whom we esteem a friend, it cannot be called friendship, but a sort of traffic for our own profit. Pastures, lands, and herds of cattle are valued in the same manner on account of the profit we gather from them; but charity and friendship expect no return. How much more reason have we to think that the Gods, who want nothing, should love each other, and employ themselves about us! If it were not so, why should we pray to or adore them? Why do the priests preside over the altars, and the augurs over the auspices? What have we to ask of the Gods, and why do we prefer our vows to them?

But Epicurus, you say, has written a book concerning sanctity. A trifling performance by a man whose wit is not so remarkable in it, as the unrestrained license of writing which he has permitted himself; for what sanctity can there be if the Gods take no care of human affairs? Or how can that nature be called animated which neither regards nor performs anything? Therefore our friend Posidonius has well observed, in his fifth book of the Nature of the Gods, that Epicurus believed there were no Gods, and that what he had said about the immortal Gods was only said from a desire to avoid unpopularity. He could not be so weak as to imagine that the Deity has only the outward features of a simple mortal, without any real solidity; that he has all the members of a man, without the least power to use them—a certain unsubstantial pellucid being, neither favorable nor beneficial to any one, neither regarding nor doing anything. There can be no such being in nature; and as Epicurus said this plainly, he allows the Gods in words, and destroys them in fact; and if the Deity is truly such a being that he shows no favor, no benevolence to mankind, away with him! For why should I entreat him to be propitious? He can be propitious to none, since, as you say, all his favor and benevolence are the effects of imbecility.

- End of Book One -

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62696490>

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**Post by “Joshua” of November 10, 2024 at 4:05 AM**

[Quote from John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4137-episode-254-the-skeptic-asks-does-not-epicurus-undermine-religion-as-much-as-any/>

All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind that the one is true and the other well pleasing unto God, such profession and such practice, far from being any furtherance, are indeed great obstacles to our salvation.

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No way whatsoever that I shall walk in against the dictates of my conscience will ever bring me to the mansions of the blessed. I may grow rich by an art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some disease by remedies that I have not faith in; but I cannot be saved by a religion that I distrust and by a worship that I abhor.

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Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration. As for other practical opinions, though not absolutely free from all error, if they do not tend to establish domination over others, or civil impunity to the Church in which they are taught, there can be no reason why they should not be tolerated.

Quote from Thomas More, Utopia

[Utopus] made a solemn and severe law against such as should so far degenerate from the dignity of human nature, as to think that our souls died with our bodies, or that the world was governed by chance, without a wise overruling Providence: for they all formerly believed that there was a state of rewards and punishments to the good and bad after this life; and they now look on those that think otherwise as scarce fit to be counted men, since they degrade so noble a being as the soul, and reckon it no better than a beast's: thus they are far from looking on such men as fit for human society, or to be citizens of a well-ordered commonwealth; since a man of such principles must needs, as oft as he dares do it, despise all their laws and customs: for there is no doubt to be made, that a man who is afraid of nothing but the law, and apprehends nothing after death, will not scruple to break through all the laws of his country, either by fraud or force, when by this means he may satisfy his appetites.

[Thomas More and his "Utopia"](#)

## Post by “Cassius” of November 10, 2024 at 7:44 AM

### [Diogenes of Oinoanda Fragment 20:](#)

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before.

That not only [is our doctrine] helpful, [but also the opposite doctrine harmful, is clearly shown by] the [Stoics as they go astray. For they say in opposition to us] that the god both is maker of [the] world and takes providential care of it, providing for all things, including human beings. Well, in the first place, we come to this question: was it, may I ask, for his own sake that the god created the world [or for the sake of human beings? For it is obvious that it was from a wish to benefit either himself or human beings that he embarked on this] undertaking. For how could it have been otherwise, if nothing is produced without a cause and these things are produced by a god? Let us then examine this view and what Stoics mean. It was, they say, from a wish to have a city and fellow-citizens, just as if [he were an exile from a city, that] the god [created the world and human beings. However, this supposition, a concoction of empty talking, is] self-evidently a fable, composed to gain the attention of an audience, not a natural philosopher's argument searching for the truth and inferring from probabilities things not palpable to sense.

Yet even if, in the belief that he was doing some good [to himself, the god] really [made the world and human beings], .....

For god [is, I say], a living being, indestructible [and] blessed from [age to] age, having complete [self-sufficiency]. Moreover, what [god, if] he had existed for infinite [time] and enjoyed tranquillity [for thousands of years, would have got] this idea that he needed a city and fellow-citizens? Add to this absurdity that he, being a god, should seek to have beings as fellow-citizens.

And there is this further point too: if he had created the world as a habitation and city for himself, I seek to know where he was living before the world was created; I do not find an answer, at any rate not one consistent with the doctrine of these people when they declare that this world is unique. So for that infinite time, apparently, the god of these people was cityless and homeless and, like an unfortunate man — I do not say «god» —, having neither city nor fellow-citizens, he was destitute and roaming about at random. If therefore the divine nature shall be deemed to have created things for its own sake, all this is absurd; and if for the sake of men, there are yet other more absurd consequences.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 10, 2024 at 11:15 AM**

In the ending of today's episode I cited the section of Thucydides that Emily Austin points us to in her book as the way that Lucretius might well have intended to end his poem:

[Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, THE SECOND BOOK, chapter 53](#)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 11, 2024 at 9:06 AM**

One thing worthy of note in the text we discussed this week is that Cicero appears to offer us very clear difference between "religio" and "superstitio." Given that these words appear in different contexts in Lucretius it should be helpful to compare the usage between Cicero and Lucretius and see if we think they are being used in the same way. At the very least, this passage should serve as a major reference showing that the Latin philosophers at the time of Lucretius certainly thought there was a difference between groundless fears of the gods and some other more correct view of them.

XLII:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4137-episode-254-the-skeptic-asks-does-not-epicurus-undermine-religion-as-much-as-any/>

Yonge: 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.

Rackham: For the doctrines of all these thinkers abolish not only superstition, which implies a groundless fear of the gods, but also religion, which consists in piously worshipping them.

Latin: Horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt in qua inest timor inanis deorum, sed etiam religionem quae deorum cultu pio continetur.

Would be interesting to compare Lucretius' use of these words in some of his famous passages.

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### **Post by “Don” of November 11, 2024 at 9:23 AM**

I did a quick search in Perseus' Latin Lucretius and found 11 instances of religio:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/searchresults?target=la&inContent=true&q=religio&doc=Perseus%3A>

However, I found no results, zero, when searching superstitio! I tried a couple permutations and nothing.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 11, 2024 at 10:38 AM**

Thanks for looking for that Don. The discussion in this podcast starts around the 12 minute mark but editing may not finish before tomorrow.

We did mention this one from Don's link - it is RELIGIO that Epicurus through underfoot.

[foede cum vita iaceret in terris oppressa gravi sub religione, quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat horribili super ... qua nam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens. quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim opteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.](#)

Maybe the most famous quote would be the one about the sacrifice of the king's daughter, and how such great evils religion can inspire, and that one's pretty clearly "religio" rather than superstitio, so it's questionable whether Lucretius makes a sharp distinction between the two words, even though translators seem to want to come to the aid of "religion"

Line 101 of book one: tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4137-episode-254-the-skeptic-asks-does-not-epicurus-undermine-religion-as-much-as-any/>

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 11, 2024 at 10:40 AM

Oh two more things...

Joshua points out that Lucetius does speak about PIETA.

I don't think we went back to see how Velleius used religio / pieta / superstitio earlier in Book One of On the Nature of the Gods, so it would help to look at that as well.

I bet there's one or more academic articles over the years that has done this analysis.

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## Post by “Don” of November 11, 2024 at 10:46 AM

Here's pietas:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/searchresults?target=la&inContent=true&q=pietas&doc=Perseus%3A>

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## Post by “Don” of November 11, 2024 at 10:57 AM

As I understand, both Lucretius and Epicurus believed that true, correct understanding of the gods \*was\* pietas / εὐσέβεια. Does it seem Lucretius was more concerned with pietas than religio, the inward correct understanding than the outward visible practices? If the inside was correct, the practices could reflect that inward understanding.

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## Post by “Joshua” of November 11, 2024 at 11:07 AM

Here's my understanding of things;

Superstitio      Religio Pietas

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4137-episode-254-the-skeptic-asks-does-not-epicurus-undermine-religion-as-much-as-any/>

Lucretius Not mentioned Bad Good  
Cicero Bad Good Good

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 11, 2024 at 11:10 AM**

#### Quote

How unfortunate for men that they they charged the gods with control of the universe and coupled with that power bitter wrath! What groanings did they then beget for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for our children’s children! It is no act of piety to be seen with veiled head, turning to a stone and approaching every altar, falling prostrate on the ground, spreading out the palms before the statues of the gods, sprinkling the altars with the blood of beasts, and linking vow on to vow. Rather, true piety is to be able to look on all things with a mind at peace.

-Lucretius

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 11, 2024 at 4:22 PM**

Episode 254 upcoming within the hour. I want to commend Joshua again for coming up with a brilliant subtopic to close the episode -citing Emily Austin's suggestion of what Lucretius had in mind for the closing of his poem. Really pulls together a lot of what we have been talking about. Posting soon.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 11, 2024 at 4:42 PM**

Lucretius Today Episode 254 is now available: "The Skeptic Asks: Does Not Epicurus Undermine Religion As Much as Any Outright Atheist?"

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/62696490>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4137-episode-254-the-skeptic-asks-does-not-epicurus-undermine-religion-as-much-as-any/>