

# Episode 255 - Cotta Argues That Epicurean Gods Are As Despicable As Are Epicureans Themselves - Cicero's OTNOTG 30

Post by "Cassius" of November 13, 2024 at 8:15 AM

Welcome to Episode 255 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

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/62790723>

---

## Post by “Cassius” of November 13, 2024 at 8:18 AM

I originally posted this reference for last week's episode, but we deferred it til this week as it is more appropriate here in the closing:

### [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.

---

**Post by “Cassius” of November 18, 2024 at 1:38 PM**

Lucretius Today Episode 255 is now available: "Cicero's Cotta Argues That [Epicurean Gods](#) Are As Despicable As Are Epicureans Themselves"

<https://www.speaker.com/episode/62790723>

---

**Post by “Patrikios” of October 12, 2025 at 10:28 AM**

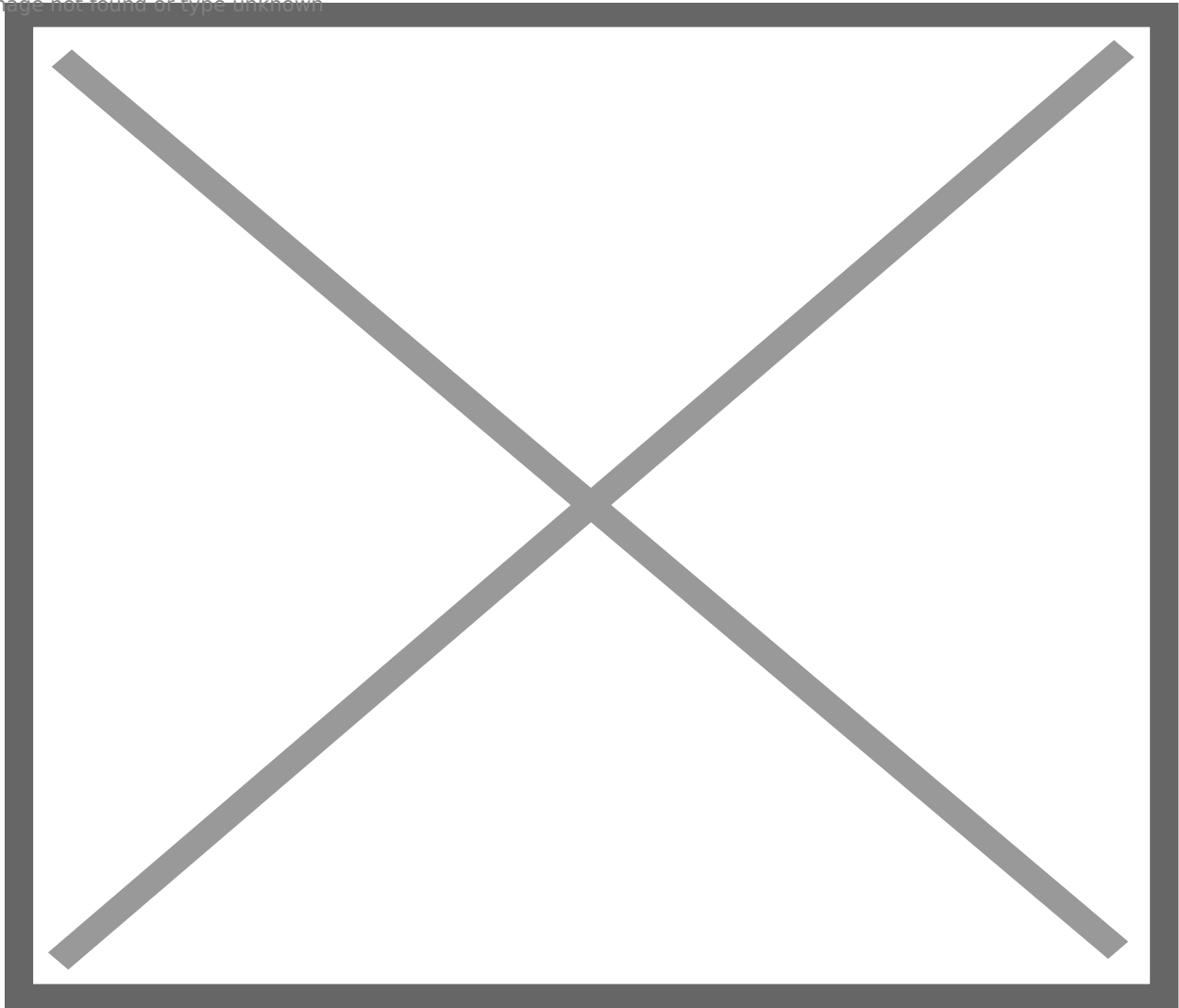
**[“Where Is God in Gaza?”](#)**

The question of the role of ‘God’ in allowing the evil of war continues to play out in this NYT article **[“Where Is God in Gaza?”](#)**

Quote

The war’s grotesque details, live-streamed around the world, are an example of **“the problem of evil,”** an idea attributed to the Greek philosopher **Epicurus**. It’s an issue that has vexed people throughout history as they tried to reconcile the existence of suffering with the belief in a benevolent God.

Image not found or type unknown



### [Where Is God in Gaza?](#)

The war, which has killed tens of thousands, laid waste to the Gaza Strip and shredded Israel's reputation abroad, could soon be over. We explore how people...

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

The author doesn't discuss what Epicurus meant by "the problem of evil", or how she would contrast the Epicurean view on wars fought over different religious beliefs.

It would have made for a more interesting article if the author addressed the question from Diogenes.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4141-episode-255-cotta-argues-that-epicurean-gods-are-as-despicable-as-are-epicureans/>

***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.

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2025 at 12:21 PM**

**Admin Note:** I scanned over the article Patrikios posted, and it's behind a paywall so as I write this I have seen only the general opening. "The problem of evil" is a very important philosophical question so while the post seems to me at the moment to be ok, I'm putting this here just as a caution. "The problem of evil" is fair game, but a detailed discussion of who is right or wrong or whatever in the specifics of this very hot-button issue would be beyond the scope of the forum and violate our no-politics rule. Please keep that rule in mind in assessing any follow-up commentary (or lack thereof) on the article. Lurkers should not take the allowance of the post or any further posting or non-posting in response to it as taking sides on that issue. Everyone can and probably should do that in their private lives, especially since this issue is so closely tied to the disasters that come from supernatural religion. Aside from the philosophical side, most or all of the rest of this issue should not be part of our discussion here.

---

### **Post by "Pacatus" of October 12, 2025 at 3:05 PM**

From the article cited by [Patrikios](#) :

"As David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher, put it: Is God 'willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?'"

There is actually a fourth logical alternative (which I find terribly unpalatable, but which some Christians raised in some old discussions): The world is perfect as it is (in God's eyes) - and one less atrocity or baby suffering horribly from incurable disease, the world would be less perfect. These Christians also tend to blame all evil - including "natural evils" (as opposed to moral evils), such as hurricanes - on inherent human sinfulness ("original sin"). 😡😭

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2025 at 4:02 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4141-episode-255-cotta-argues-that-epicurean-gods-are-as-despicable-as-are-epicureans/>

Thank you Pacatus! That last post as it is a perfect example of the best way to pursue the topic Patrikios has raised while staying within the forum rules!

---

### Post by “Pacatus” of October 12, 2025 at 4:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

while staying within the forum rules!

I try, Cassius, I try! 😊

The trilemma stated by Hume in the article is often credited originally to Epicurus.

---

### Post by “Patrikios” of October 14, 2025 at 9:55 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

while staying within the forum rules!

I try, Cassius, I try! 😊

The trilemma stated by Hume in the article is often credited originally to Epicurus.

[Cassius](#)

My main point in posting the article was to gain some background knowledge on what the author referenced “***the problem of evil***”. Does that phrase reference any historical writing?

Quote

“**the problem of evil**,” an idea attributed to the Greek philosopher **Epicurus**.

---

### **Post by “Joshua” of October 14, 2025 at 12:08 PM**

The christian apologist Lactantius attributed the formulation of the paradox to Epicurus in the late third or early fourth century AD. Nothing like it survives in any of the extant writings of Epicurus, and the earliest source is in the works of the Pyrrhonist philosopher Sextus Empiricus of the second century, who does not attribute it to him. It probably has its origin in ancient Skepticism.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of October 14, 2025 at 12:23 PM**

Yes and and Joshua says it also comes to us through Hume. I have a link on that somewhere that I will look for. And just to be clear I thought your post was fine - I mainly wanted to head off anyone who might be newer and might be tempted to expand the topic.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of October 14, 2025 at 12:27 PM**

This is not exactly what i was remembering -- apparently Gassendi predates Hume in the chain. There are some links here which might be helpful:

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

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of October 14, 2025 at 2:04 PM**

Also, [Patrikios](#) , I see maybe our most exhaustive discussion of this is here:

Thread

[\*\*Episode 253 - How The "Riddle Of Epicurus" Fits Into the Epicurean View of The Gods - Cicero's OTNOTG 28\*\*](#)

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...**



Cassius

October 27, 2024 at 11:13 AM

But [Joshua](#) I do not see that it mentions Sextus Empiricus. Do you have something on that?

---

## Post by "Joshua" of October 14, 2025 at 3:09 PM

Thread

[Sextus Empiricus](#)

[...]

It looks like there is a possibility that Sextus Empiricus could be the possible source of the "Epicurean paradox" or "Epicurean dilemma". Doing a quick Google search you find it sometimes stated as some kind of fact that it was written by Epicurus. However, no extant writings of Epicurus contain this argument and it is possible that it has been misattributed to him.

"The "Epicurean paradox" is a version of the problem of evil. Lactantius attributes this trilemma to Epicurus in De Ira Dei:

...



Kalosyni

November 4, 2022 at 9:40 AM

---

## Post by "Cassius" of October 14, 2025 at 3:44 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4141-episode-255-cotta-argues-that-epicurean-gods-are-as-despicable-as-are-epicureans/>

Excellent thank you Joshua and Kalosyni! For anyone glancing through this thread, the link to Kalosynis post is an important one to follow.