

# Episode 321 - EATAQ 03 - The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates For Denouncing Natural Science

Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2026 at 12:00 PM

Welcome to Episode 321 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.

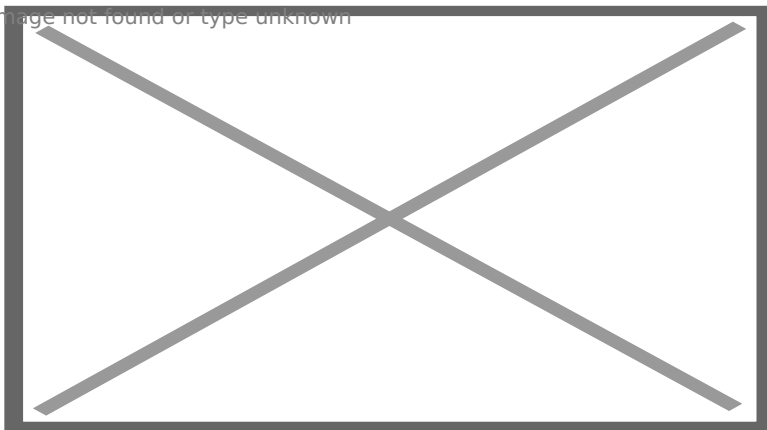
This week we start are continuing our series reviewing Cicero's "Academic Questions" from an Epicurean perspective. We are focusing first on what is referred to as Book One, which provides an overview of the issues that split Plato's Academy and gives us an overview of the philosophical issues being dealt with at the time of Epicurus. This week will continue in [Section 2](#) and our focus will include a statement by Varro in praise of Socrates, and possible Epicurean responses to it.

Our text will come from

[Cicero - Academic Questions - Yonge](#) We'll likely stick with Yonge primarily, but we'll also refer to the Rackam translation here:

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[Cicero On Nature Of Gods Academica Loeb Rackham : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

## Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2026 at 12:03 PM

In addition to the reference in Academic Questions, we have these additional citations to consider in contrasting Cicero's praise of Socrates to the Epicurean criticism of Socrates. The Epicurean criticism divides into at least two categories (1) Socrates' abandonment of the study of natural science, with all the many implications of that decision, and - related to that - (2) Socrates' assertion that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing

- Quote

Nor was Pythagoras the inventor only of the name, but he enlarged also the thing itself, and, when he came into Italy after this conversation at Phlius, he adorned that Greece, which is called Great Greece, both privately and publicly, with the most excellent institutions and arts; but of his school and system, I shall, perhaps, find another opportunity to speak. But numbers and motions, and the beginning and end of all things, were the subjects of the ancient philosophy down to Socrates, who was a pupil of Archelaus, who had been the disciple of Anaxagoras. These made diligent inquiry into the magnitude of the stars, their distances, courses, and all that relates to the heavens. **But Socrates was the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens, placed it in cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine into life and morals, and good and evil.** And his different methods of discussing questions, together with the variety of his topics, and the greatness of his abilities, being immortalized by the memory and writings of Plato, gave rise to many sects of philosophers of different sentiments: of all which I have principally adhered to that one which, in my opinion, Socrates himself followed; and argue so as to conceal my own opinion, while I deliver others from their errors, and so discover what has the greatest appearance of probability in every question. And the custom Carneades adopted with great copiousness and acuteness, and I myself have often given in to it on many occasions elsewhere, and in this manner, too, I disputed lately, in my Tusculan villa; indeed I have sent you a book of the four former days' discussions; but the fifth day, when we had seated ourselves as before, what we were to dispute on

was proposed thus:—

--Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Book 5, paragraph 4

That's what I would contrast with the statements of Epicurus emphasizing natural philosophy as essential, and then Diogenes of Oinoanda

Fr. 4

... [as is supposed by] some of the philosophers and especially the Socratics. They say that pursuing natural science and busying oneself with investigation of [celestial phenomena] is superfluous and unprofitable, and they do [not even] deign [to concern themselves with such matters.]

Fr. 5

Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

And the so-called [ephectic philosophers], of whom Lacydes [of Cyrene]...

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**Post by "Joshua" of February 15, 2026 at 1:01 PM**

Quote

For the art of mechanics, now so celebrated and admired, was first originated by Eudoxus and Archytas, who embellished geometry with its subtleties, and gave to problems incapable of proof by word and diagram, a support derived from mechanical illustrations that were patent to the senses. For instance, in solving the problem of finding two mean proportional lines, a necessary requisite for many geometrical figures, both mathematicians had recourse to mechanical arrangements, adapting to their purposes certain intermediate portions of curved lines and sections. **But Plato was incensed at this, and inveighed against them as corrupters and destroyers of the pure excellence of geometry, which thus turned her back upon the incorporeal things of abstract thought and descended to the things of sense, making use, moreover, of objects which required much mean and manual labour.** For this reason mechanics was made entirely distinct from geometry, and being for a long time ignored by philosophers, came to be regarded as one of the military arts.

-Plutarch, [Life of Marcellus](#)

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## Post by “Joshua” of February 15, 2026 at 1:49 PM

[Robert](#) From the [Thread](#) on Thomas More's *Utopia*:

Quote

[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.**

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2026 at 3:00 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4941-episode-321-eataq-03-the-epicurean-criticism-of-socrates-for-denouncing-natural/>

Here are a number of references we're incorporating into the current discussion of Socrates:

## Reference to Lucian's statements in "Alexander the Oracle Monger"

Thread

[Lucian: Alexander, The Oracle-Monger](#)

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## Alexander the Oracle-Monger

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By Lucian of Samosata, translated by H. W. and F. G. Fowler (1905)

(other links to this text: [Sacred-texts.com](#), [Lucianofsamosata.info](#), [Epicurism.info](#))

Characters: Lucian, writing a letter to a friend.

Context: Lucian relates the story of a famous fraud.

You, my dear Celsus, possibly suppose yourself to be laying upon me quite a trifling task: Write me down in a book and send me the life and adventures, the tricks and frauds, of the impostor Alexander of...



Cassius

February 14, 2019 at 8:54 AM

- Picture to yourself a little chamber into which no very brilliant light was admitted, with a crowd of people from all quarters, excited, carefully worked up, all aflutter with expectation. As they came in, they might naturally find a miracle in the development of that little crawling thing of a few days ago into this great, tame, human-looking serpent. Then they had to get on at once towards the exit, being pressed forward by the new arrivals before they could have a good look. An exit had been specially made just opposite the entrance, for all the world like the Macedonian device at Babylon when Alexander was ill. He was in extremis, you remember, and the crowd round the palace

were eager to take their last look and give their last greeting. Our scoundrel's exhibition, though, is said to have been given not once, but many times, especially for the benefit of any wealthy new-comers.

- And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics. The poor uneducated 'fat-heads' might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by scepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility.

## Reference to Carl Sagan's [Cosmos Episode 7 "Backbone of the Night"](#)

- Start about the 20 minute mark
- 25:00 - Anaximander and evolution (positive)
- 26:27 - Empedocles discovers air; discussion of "water thief" (positive)
- 28:36 - Democritus and atoms (positive)
- 33:30 - Anaxagoras advances in astronomy but was persecuted (positive)
- 34:13 - Pythagoras "The mystics were beginning to win" - continuity between him and Christianity. Mathematical harmony underlies all of nature - "music of the spheres" - "cosmos means 'ordered.'" Pythagoras said laws of nature deduced by PURE THOUGHT - they were mathematicians and thoroughgoing mystics- the dodecahedron - ordinary people to be kept ignorant of the dodecahedron - they suppressed knowledge of the square root of two as "irrational" Pythagoreans ignored "experiment" (highly negative)
- 39:07 Plato — Followed in steps of Pythagoras and extended them - ideas are more real than the natural world - advised ignoring astronomy in favor of thinking - taught contempt for the real world - he and his followers extinguished the light of science and experiment. Unease with the world of the senses and dominated and stifled western philosophy.
- 40:44 - Pythagoras and Plato "provided an intellectually respectable justification for a corrupt social order."
- 41:13 - "Plato and Aristotle were comfortable in a slave society. They offered justifications for oppression. They served tyrants. They taught the alienation of the body from the mind - a natural enough idea I suppose in a slave society. They separated thought from matter. They divorced the earth from the heavens. Divisions which were to dominate western thinking for more than 20 centuries. The Pythagoreans had won. ... The books of the Ionian scientists are entirely lost. Their views were suppressed, ridiculed and forgotten by the Platonists and by the Christians who adopted much of the science of Plato.
- Background as to Socrates, in addition to general criticism of Socrates' honesty as contained in "the Epicurean Criticism of Socrates. Just putting this out there so we know

the major issues. This is Grok:

## **What was Socrates' position on whether it is important to study natural science and the nature of the universe?**

Socrates did not consider the study of natural science (what the ancient Greeks called *physis* or inquiries into the nature of the cosmos, astronomy, meteorology, the elements, and the physical causes of phenomena) to be important or worthwhile for human life — at least not as a primary pursuit. He famously shifted the focus of philosophy away from these cosmological and physical speculations — which had dominated earlier thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, and Anaxagoras (the so-called pre-Socratics) — toward ethics, the examination of human affairs, virtue, justice, piety, and how one ought to live. Key Evidence from Primary Sources

- In Plato's *Apology* (Socrates' defense speech at his trial), he explicitly denies the popular accusation that he was a natural philosopher who investigated "things in the sky and below the earth." He says he has no interest in or expertise in such matters and that the charge stems from a caricature (like Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*, which mocks him as someone dangling in a basket measuring fleas and speculating about celestial phenomena). Socrates insists his real activity is questioning people about moral and ethical concepts in the marketplace.
- In Plato's *Phaedo* (set on the day of Socrates' death), he gives a more autobiographical account: As a young man, he was enthusiastic about natural philosophy and eagerly studied the works of pre-Socratic thinkers, hoping to discover the true causes of things (e.g., why things grow, why the earth is shaped as it is, or what makes the universe orderly). He became disillusioned when these materialistic explanations (e.g., Anaxagoras' "Mind" as a cosmic force) failed to provide satisfying answers, especially about why things are ordered for the best or good. He abandoned this path as futile or misguided for human concerns and turned instead to examining human life, ethics, and the soul through dialectical questioning. He calls this his "second sailing" — a turn to *logos* (reasoned discourse) rather than direct empirical or physical investigation.
- In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (another student's account of Socrates), Xenophon defends Socrates against similar charges by stating that he did not discuss "the nature of the universe" or speculate about the cosmos "as the others did." Socrates reportedly argued that such inquiries were foolish: humans should focus on what is within their grasp (human affairs, ethics, practical wisdom), while leaving divine or cosmic matters to the gods (via divination if needed). He saw preoccupation with unreachable questions as neglect of more urgent human ones.

Why This Shift? Socrates believed true wisdom and the good life lie in self-knowledge ("know thyself") and understanding moral concepts like virtue (which he often treated as a kind of knowledge). Speculating about the physical universe or its material causes did little to improve

one's character or make one a better person — it could even distract from ethical living or lead to impiety if it undermined traditional reverence for the divine order. He viewed the cosmos as intelligently ordered (with hints of divine design in Xenophon), but probing its mechanics mechanistically was not the path to virtue or happiness. In short, Socrates regarded the study of natural science and cosmology as largely unimportant — even potentially misguided — for the serious pursuit of wisdom and a good life. He prioritized the human realm (ethics, the soul, and moral improvement) over the natural one. This “Socratic turn” profoundly influenced later philosophy, marking a pivot from pre-Socratic naturalism to ethical and metaphysical inquiry in Plato and beyond.

### **Confirmed as the common view by Chatgpt:**

What was Socrates' position on whether it is important to study natural science and the nature of the universe?

In the ancient sources, **Socrates** is consistently portrayed as *downplaying* the importance of studying natural science and the physical structure of the universe, especially when compared with ethical inquiry.

According to **Plato's Apology**, Socrates explicitly denies engaging in investigations “in the sky or below the earth,” distancing himself from the natural philosophers (physikoi) who speculated about cosmology, astronomy, and the ultimate constituents of matter. He presents this denial not merely as a defense against specific charges, but as a principled statement of his philosophical priorities. For Socrates, inquiry into nature was both uncertain and largely irrelevant to the central human task.

Socrates held that the most important questions concern how one ought to live: the nature of virtue, justice, piety, and the proper care of the soul. He believed that studying the cosmos does not reliably improve moral character and may even distract from self-knowledge. This stance is reinforced by later testimonies (such as those in Xenophon), which depict Socrates as skeptical that cosmological speculation yields practical or ethical benefit.

In short, Socrates did not regard the study of natural science or the nature of the universe as intrinsically valuable. He deliberately redirected philosophy away from cosmology and toward ethics, holding that understanding how to live well is far more important than understanding how the universe is structured.

More detail and specific reference to Epicurus from Claude:

Socrates famously argued **against** the importance of studying natural science and cosmology, representing a major shift in Greek philosophy from the natural philosophers (like Thales, Anaximander, and Democritus) who preceded him.

**In Plato's *Apology***, Socrates explicitly distances himself from natural philosophy when defending against charges. He denies investigating “things in the sky and below the earth,” stating he has no knowledge or expertise in such matters (*Apology* 19b-c).

**In Plato's *Phaedo***, Socrates describes his youthful interest in natural philosophy and his ultimate disappointment with it. He found that explanations based on material causes (like Anaxagoras's system) failed to answer the questions that truly mattered to him - questions about purpose, goodness, and why things are as they should be (*Phaedo* 96a-99d).

**Xenophon's *Memorabilia*** (IV.7) records Socrates actively discouraging students from studying astronomy, geometry, and other natural sciences beyond what's practically necessary. He argued that such studies were:

- Endless and possibly futile
- A distraction from more important matters
- Less valuable than self-knowledge and ethical inquiry

**Cicero** famously credited Socrates with bringing “philosophy down from the heavens” and making it concerned with human life, ethics, and how one should live (*Tusculan Disputations* V.10).

Instead, Socrates insisted on the priority of **self-knowledge** (“Know thyself”) and ethical questions about virtue, justice, and the good life - what he considered truly important for human flourishing.

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Socrates’ Alternative Focus:

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### **Diogenes of Oinoanda:**

Fr. 4

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### **And from Epicurus:**

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 37

Wherefore since the method I have described is valuable to all those who are accustomed to the investigation of nature, I who urge upon others the constant occupation in the investigation

of nature, and find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied, have composed for you another epitome on these lines, summing up the first principles of the whole doctrine. (Bailey)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 11

Were we not upset by the worries that celestial phenomena and death might matter to us, and also by failure to appreciate the limits of pains and desires, we would have no need for natural philosophy. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 12

There is no way to dispel the fear about matters of supreme importance, for someone who does not know what the nature of the universe is but retains some of the fears based on mythology. Hence without natural philosophy there is no way of securing the purity of our pleasures. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 13

There is no benefit in creating security with respect to men while retaining worries about things up above, things beneath the earth, and generally things in the infinite. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Vatican Saying 29

I would rather speak with the frankness of a natural philosopher, and reveal the things which are expedient to all mankind, even if no one is going to understand me, than assent to the received opinions and reap the adulation lavishly bestowed by the multitude. (L&S-THP)

Epicurus, Vatican Saying 45

Natural philosophy does not make people boastful and loud-mouthed, nor flaunters of culture, the thing so hotly competed for among the multitude, but modest and self-sufficient, and proud at their own goods, not at those of their circumstances. (L&S-THP)

Lucretius 1.62-79

(1) When human life lay foul to see and groveling upon the ground, crushed by the weight of Religion, who displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, (2) a man of Greece dared first to raise his mortal eyes against her, first to make a stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar, but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul to long to be the first to burst through the close-set bolts of nature's gates. (3) Therefore his vigorous mind won through, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless universe; (4) whence returning victorious he reports to us what can arise, what cannot, and by what principle each thing has its powers limited and its deep-set boundary stone. (5) Therefore Religion is now in turn cast down and trampled underfoot, while we by the victory are exalted high as heaven. (L&S-THP)

# Riley - The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates



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## Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2026 at 3:16 PM

It's beginning to be clear that the Socratic position mentioned by Diogenes of Oinoanda as being opposed to the study of natural science constitute a major bright line division between them and Epicurus. Apparently that same distinction did not exist between Epicurus and the Stoics. Pending confirmation here's an AI summary:

### Quote

In contrast to Socrates, the **Stoics** regarded the study of natural science (*physikē*) as not only desirable but philosophically necessary.

For the Stoics—beginning with **Zeno of Citium** and systematized by thinkers such as **Chrysippus**—philosophy was divided into three interdependent parts: logic, ethics, and physics. Physics, which included cosmology, theology, and the study of nature as a rational, ordered whole, was essential because it grounded ethics. One could not fully understand how to live well without understanding how the universe itself is structured and governed.

The Stoics held that the universe is an ordered, rational system permeated by *logos* (reason). Studying nature therefore reveals the rational principles by which the cosmos operates, including divine providence and necessity. Ethical ideals such as “living in accordance with nature” depend directly on correct physical understanding; without physics, moral prescriptions would lack foundation. In this sense, natural science had clear ethical value, not merely speculative interest.

This position marks a clear disagreement with **Socrates**. Whereas Socrates treated cosmological inquiry as largely irrelevant or distracting from moral self-examination, the Stoics saw it as indispensable to moral progress. While they agreed with Socrates

that ethics is the ultimate aim of philosophy, they rejected his dismissal of natural science and instead integrated it tightly into their ethical system.

In summary, the Stoics explicitly *did not* agree with Socrates on this point: they affirmed the study of natural science as a crucial and valuable component of philosophy, necessary for understanding both the cosmos and the proper conduct of human life.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2026 at 1:54 PM

This will deserve its own thread - Socrates' "Second Sailing" and its implications from the Epicurean perspective.

Thread

### [An Analogy That Should Live Forever In Infamy Along With His Ridiculous "Cave" Analogy - Socrates' "Second Sailing"](#)

Carl Sagan's "Backbone of the Night" episode has me wanting to pursue further the condemnation of Socrates and Plato for deprecating the study of natural philosophy. Here's some initial research into a term apparently that is a key part of that terrible turn of philosophy:

### What was Socrates' "second sailing"?

Socrates' "second sailing" (in Greek: *deuteros plous*, δέυτερος πλοῦς) is a famous metaphor and methodological turning point described in [Plato's Phaedo \(around 99c-d\)](#). It occurs during...



Cassius

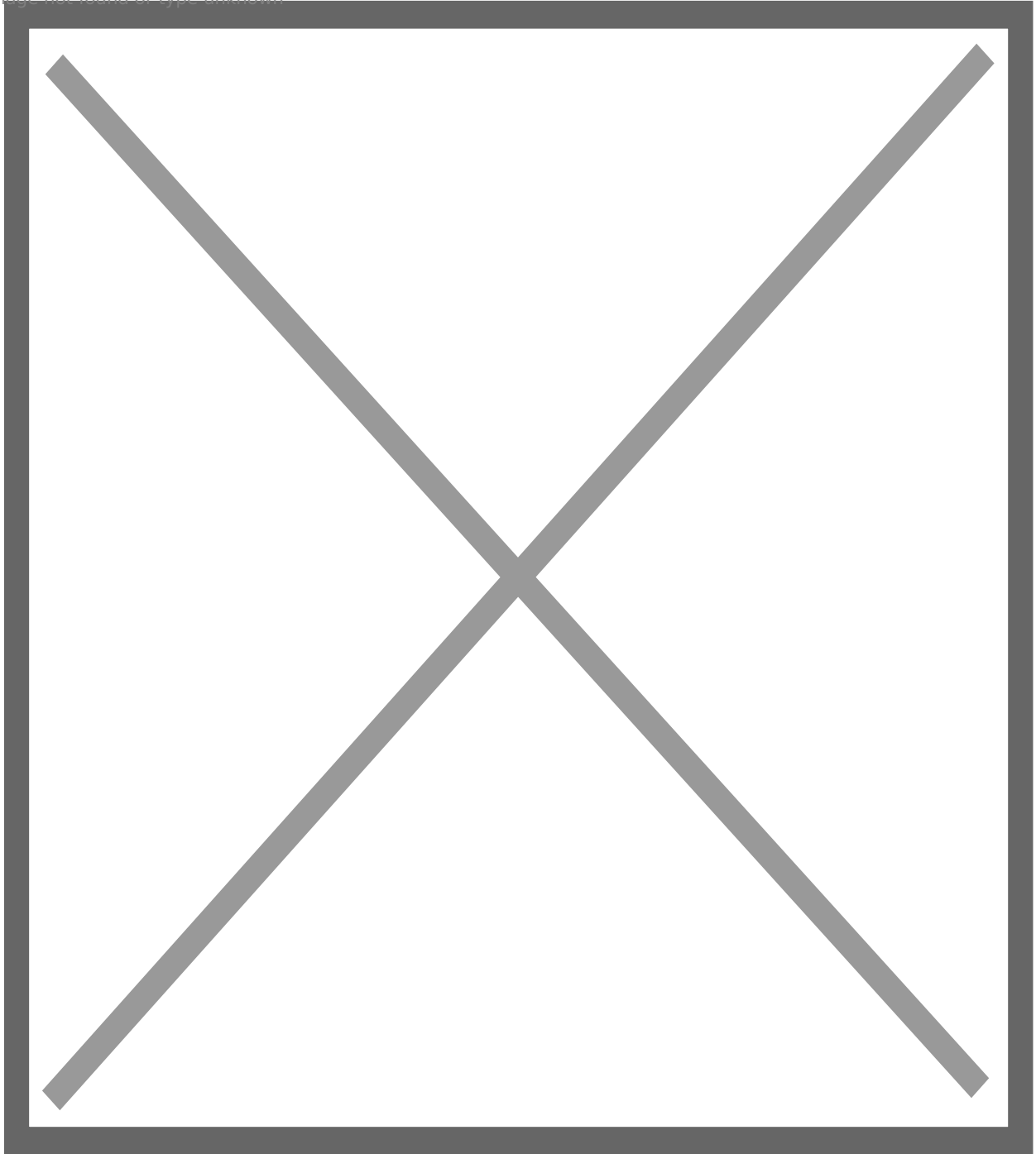
February 19, 2026 at 1:52 PM

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2026 at 9:23 AM

Current Link to Cosmos Episode 7 - Backbone of the Night - Attacking the Socratic/Platonic abandonment of the study of Nature (mentioned in this episode of the podcast)

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[Carl Sagan Cosmos Episode 7 - The Backbone of Night - Greek subtitles, ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΙ ΥΠΟΤΙΤΛΟΙ](#)

Cosmos: A Personal Voyage is a thirteen-part television series written by Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter, with Sagan as presenter. It was...

odysee.com

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4941-episode-321-eataq-03-the-epicurean-criticism-of-socrates-for-denouncing-natural/>

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**Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2026 at 10:43 AM**

Episode 321 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates For Denouncing Natural Science"

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/70179149/media>

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**Post by “Eikadistes” of February 20, 2026 at 11:51 AM**

My man!



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**Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2026 at 3:09 PM**

Complete Show transcript is here:

[Episode 321 - The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates For Denouncing Natural Science](#)

Lucretius Today Podcast Episode 321

[epicurustoday.com](http://epicurustoday.com)

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## Post by “Patrikios” of February 26, 2026 at 3:32 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Current Link to Cosmos Episode 7 - Backbone of the Night - Attacking the Socratic/Platonic abandonment of the study of Nature (mentioned in this episode of the podcast)

### [Cassius](#) ,

Thanks for including this link to that 25 minute segment (~20:00- 45:00).

Sagan highlights Samos and the Ionian islands as sources of new ideas. The way he shows the sequence of thought is quite helpful, even after reading all of DeWitt's history of Epicurean ideas. If this reference to that Cosmos segment is not in the [recommended reading](#)/watching list, please consider adding it.

Sagan's summary of the Socratic-Platonic thoughts that support a “slave society” are very relevant today.

Thanks again to you and [Joshua](#) for a very informative podcast!