

Episode 331 - EATAQ 13 - The Self-Defeating Paradox of Radical Skepticism

Post by “Cassius” of April 25, 2026 at 1:47 PM

Welcome to Episode 331 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 focus on [Section 12](#). and transition to Book Two, where we will begin with [Section 7](#)

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:

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

XII.

And when he had spoken thus — You have, said I, O Varro, explained the principles both of the Old Academy and of the Stoics with brevity, but also with great clearness. But I think it to be true, as Antiochus, a great friend of mine, used to assert, that it is to be considered rather as a corrected edition of the Old Academy, than as any new sect.

Then Varro replied — It is your part now, who revolt from the principles of the ancients, and who approve of the innovations which have been made by Arcesilas, to explain what that division of the two schools which he made was, and why he made it; so that we may see whether that revolt of his was justifiable.

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 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.

This they call the New Academy, which however appears to me to be the old one, if, at least, we reckon Plato as one of that Old Academy. For in his books nothing is affirmed positively, and many arguments are allowed on both sides of a question; everything is investigated, and nothing positive affirmed. Still let the school whose principles I have explained, be called the Old Academy, and this other the New; which, having continued to the time of Carneades, who was the fourth in succession after Arcesilas, continued in the same principles and system as Arcesilas. But Carneades, being a man ignorant of no part of philosophy, and, as I have learned from those who had been his pupils, and particularly from Zeno the Epicurean, who, though he greatly differed from him in opinion, still admired him above all other men, was also a person of incredible abilities...

The rest of this Book is lost.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/71829188/media>

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2026 at 9:28 AM

This week's podcast (to be released later today or tomorrow) is a bridge between Book One and Book Two of Academic Questions, with the focus changing to the Skeptical turn of the Academy and the dispute with the Stoics (who were not skeptics).

A key figure in this turn was Arcesilaus, who Epicurus disliked, and whose name is unfortunately similar to an early philosopher (Archelaus) who Epicurus had praised. Bryan gives us some distinguishing notes in his comments on U239 (below). I note this because the names can be difficult to distinguish so if we slip and use the wrong form in the podcast this week or in the future please be sure to avoid our mistake.

Arcesilaus (Ἀρκεσίλαος, "assisting the people," c. 275 BCE), whose skepticism Epicurus greatly criticized (a pupil of Theophrastus and Pyrrho)

———— must be clearly distinguished from ————

Archelaus (Ἀρχελαός, "leader of the people," fl. c. 450 BCE), whom Epicurus praised for his physics-based philosophy (a pupil of Anaxagoras)

10. Arcesilaus – Criticized

[U239]

Plutarch (c. 80 CE), Against Colotes, 26, 1121 E ff.

Arcesilaus (Ἀρκεσίλαος, "assisting the people") was 25 years younger than Epicurus and was a student of both Theophrastus and Pyrrho.

Arcesilaus was popular and influential during Epicurus' lifetime. He was elected the sixth scholarch of the academy in 264 BCE – upon the death of Crates of Athens, the last scholarch of the Old Academy (6 years after Epicurus' death).

Arcesilaus bridged Peripatetic, Skeptical, and Academic traditions – and turned the Academy toward Academic Skepticism:

Inspired by Pyrrhonist skepticism, Arcesilaus emphasized the skepticism present in Plato's writings, moved the Academy from Pythagoras toward Pyrrho, and initiated Academic Skepticism (and in doing so, also initiated the "Middle Academy").

"Arcesilaus said nothing of his own" probably refers to the fact that Arcesilaus did not write any words (another way in which he was very unlike Epicurus). Diogenes reports that he "never wrote a book because he suspended judgment on all matters" (although "he was caught revising certain works") – instead he was "devoted to dialectic."

"Arcesilaus produced supposition and opinion in unlettered people" refers to Arcesilaus' affirmation of Skepticism.

Arcesilaus' reputation rightfully disappointed Epicurus – but Epicurus' popularity bothered Arcesilaus, as Laertius says "to someone who asked why pupils from all the other schools leave [the Academy] to join the Epicureans, but no one ever leaves the Epicureans he said 'because men may become eunuchs, but no eunuch ever become a man'"

Arcesilaus was a fan of Homer, and an extravagant wealthy aristocrat – who is also reported to have been "lecherous and fond of boys" (Laertius 4.43)

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2026 at 10:53 AM

I have added Bryan's information into this sketch of key philosophers here:

[Sketch of Major Ancient Philosophers From An Epicurean Perspective](#)

An alphabetical guide to major Greek and Roman philosophers with approximate dates, school affiliations, and commentary on their relationship to Epicurean...

epicurustoday.com

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2026 at 10:17 AM

Episode 331 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "The Self-Defeating Paradox of Radical Skepticism." (a quote from Joshua near the end)

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/71829188/media>