

Episode Fifty-Eight - The Mind's Direct Receipt of Images

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Welcome to Episode Fifty-Eight of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please check back to [Episode One](#) for a discussion of our goals and our ground rules. If you have any question about that, please be sure to contact us at Epicureanfriends.com for more information.

Podcast 58 - The Mind's Direct Receipt of Images

Latin Lines 722 - 822

Munro Notes

722-748: the mind too receives its impressions from images flying about on all hands, which however are much finer than those by which we see: images are of different kinds, some formed spontaneously in the air, some coming from things or formed from a union of several ; and thus we see centaurs and the like, though such never existed, from the chance union for instance of the image of a man and horse; the extreme fineness of such images makes them readily unite, and the wondrous agility of the mind itself at once receives them.

749-776: so far as what the mind sees resembles what the eye sees, their causes must be like: now the lion we see in mind is the same we see with the eyes, both therefore are seen by images: and thus in sleep we see, for instance one who is dead, by images coming to the mind; the senses and memory being then inactive and not able to detect the absurdity: again images move as we see them in sleep, merely because some are coming others going every instant, so that they appear to be the same in different postures.

777-817: this question offers many difficulties: why does a man think of whatever he wishes to think, sea or earth or sky? while others in the same place have quite other thoughts: why too in sleep are these images seen to move rhythmically? are they forsooth trained by art? or is it that in the least sensible time many times are latent, in which many images can appear? the mind

again, like the eye, in order to see must often attend and exert itself, else they will pass unheeded: again the mind adds many false inferences to what is seen.

818-822 (826): sometimes too a woman will change to a man, or the like, but in sleep we do not perceive the incongruity.

Browne 1743

And now attend, and observe in short, what things affect the mind, and from whence proceed those objects that make an impression upon it. First then, I say that subtle images of things, a numerous train of them, wander about in every way and in various manners. These, as they meet, easily twine and are joined together in the air, as threads of gold or the web of a spider; for these are much finer in their contexture than those images that strike the eye and move the sight. These pierce through the pores of the body and move the subtle nature of the mind within, and affect the sense. Hence it is that we see Centaurs, and the limbs of Scylla's, and the heads of Cerberus, and the shadows of those who have long since been dead, and whose bones are rotting in the grave; because images of all kinds are ever wandering about; some of their own accord are formed in the air, some are continually flying off from various bodies, and others rise from these images mixed together. For it is certain that the image of a Centaur never flowed from one that was alive; for there was never such an animal in nature, but when the image of a horse met by chance with the image of a man, it immediately stuck to it, which it easily does, by reason of the subtlety of its nature and the fineness of its texture; and all other monstrous figures are formed after the same manner. These images being exceeding light, and easily put in motion (as I observed before) each of them affects the mind at one stroke; for the mind is of a very subtle nature, and wonderfully disposed to move.

That the mind is moved, as I observed, by the images of things, you may easily collect from hence, that what we perceive by the mind is exactly like what we see with our eyes, and therefore they must of necessity be both affected by the same things, and in the same manner. And so, when I said, for instance, that I see a lion by means of the image that strikes upon the eyes, I know by the same rule that the mind is moved by another image of a lion, which it equally and no less sees, than the eye sees the image proper to it; with this difference only, that the mind can perceive images of a more thin and subtle nature.

Nor from any other reason is the mind awake when the body is asleep, but because those very images affect the mind which were used to move the sense when we were awake, so that we fully believe we see a person who has been long since dead and buried in the grave; and it cannot well be otherwise, because all the senses of the body are obstructed and bound up by sleep, and therefore have no power to convince us of the contrary. Besides, the memory is feeble and languishes by rest, and makes no objection to satisfy us, that the man has been long in the arms of death, whom the mind really believes it sees alive.

And then it is no wonder that the images seem to move, and to throw their arms and the rest of their limbs to exact time, and thus they seem to do when we are in a dream, for when the first image is gone, and another springs up in a different posture, the first, we think, has changed its shape; and all this, you must conceive, is done in an instant of time. There are many other inquiries about things of this nature and we must enter into long disputes if we attempt to give a distinct answer to every one.

First then, it is asked, How is it that whatever we desire to think of the mind immediately thinks upon that very thing? Is it that the images are always ready at the command of the will? Does the image immediately occur to us the moment we desire? If we fancy to think of the sea, the earth, the heavens, of senates, shows, feasts, battles, does nature form these and provide them ready at our nod? Especially since the minds of others, that are in the same country and in the same place with us, think things quite different from these? And then, since we see images in our sleep to step to time, to move their pliant limbs, and throw about their tender arms alternately, and keep due measure with their feet, are they taught this by Art? Have they learnt to dance, that thus they play their wanton sports by night? Is not this the truth rather, that what we take for one moment of time, this present Now, has many parts included, as we find by reason? And therefore it is that in every instant there are a thousand different images always ready in every place, so numerous are they, and so apt to move; and then they are so exceeding subtle, that the mind cannot possibly perceive them distinctly, without the nicest diligence. And so those images die away unobserved, which the mind does not apply itself to receive, but it does apply itself closely to distinguish the image it hopes to find, and therefore sees it.

Don't you observe that the eyes, when they would discover an object exceeding small, contract themselves close and provide for it, nor can they accurately distinguish, except they do so? And you will find, even in things ever so plain, unless you strictly apply your mind, they will be as if they were utterly obscure, and at the greatest distance undiscovered. Where is the wonder then that the mind should lose the observation of all other images but those it particularly inquires after and is employed about? Besides, we often mistake small objects for great, and so we contribute to our own delusion and impose upon ourselves. It happens likewise that sometimes an image of a different kind presents itself to the mind. Thus the form that was before a woman now shows itself a man, or some other person of a different age and complexion, but this we are not to wonder at, since the senses are all asleep, and we are wholly in a state of forgetfulness.

Munro 1886

Now mark, and hear what things move the mind, and learn in a few words whence the things which come into it do come. I say first of all, that idols of things wander about many in number in many ways in all directions round, extremely thin; and these when they meet, readily unite, like a cobweb or piece of gold-leaf. For these idols are far thinner in texture than those which take possession of the eyes and provoke vision; since these enter in through the porous parts of the body and stir the fine nature of the mind within and provoke sensation. Therefore we see

Centaur and limbs of Scyllas and Cerberus-like faces of dogs and idols of those who are dead, whose bones earth holds in its embrace; since idols of every kind are everywhere borne about, partly those which are spontaneously produced within the air, partly all those which withdraw from various things and those which are formed by compounding the shapes of these. For assuredly no image of Centaur is formed out of a live one, since no such nature of living creature ever existed; but when images of a horse and a man have by chance come together, they readily adhere at once, as we said before, on account of their fine nature and thin texture. All other things of the kind are produced in like fashion. And when these from extreme lightness are borne on with velocity, as I showed before, any one subtle composite image you like readily moves the mind by a single stroke; for the mind is fine and is itself wondrously nimble.

That all this is done as I relate you may easily learn from what follows. So far as the one is like another, seeing with the mind and seeing with the eyes must be produced in a like way. Well then since I have shown that I perceive for instance a lion by means of idols which provoke the eyes, you may be sure that the mind is moved in a like way, which by means of idols sees a lion or anything else just as well as the eyes, with this difference that it perceives much thinner idols. And when sleep has prostrated the body, for no other reason does the mind's intelligence wake, except because the very same idols provoke our minds which provoke them when we are awake, and to such a degree that we seem without a doubt to perceive him whom life has left and death and earth gotten hold of. This nature constrains to come to pass because all the senses of the body are then hampered and at rest throughout the limbs and cannot refute the unreal by real things. Moreover memory is prostrate and relaxed in sleep and protests not that he has long been in the grasp of death and destruction whom the mind believes it sees alive. Furthermore it is not strange that idols move and throw about their arms and other limbs in regular measure: for sometimes in sleep an image is seen to do this: when the first to wit has gone and a second then been born in another posture, that former one seems to have altered its attitude. This remember you must assume to take place with exceeding celerity: so great is the velocity, so great the store of things; so great in any one unit of time that sense can seize is the store of particles, out of which the supply may go on.

And here many questions present themselves and many points must be cleared up by us, if we desire to give a plain exposition of things. The first question is why, when the wish has occurred to any one to think of a thing, his mind on the instant thinks of that very thing. Do idols observe our will, and so soon as we will does an image present itself to us, if sea, if earth, ay or heaven is what we wish? Assemblies of men, a procession, feasts, battles, everything in short does nature at command produce and provide? And though to increase the marvel the mind of others in the same spot and room is thinking of things all quite different. What again are we to say, when we see in sleep idols advance in measured tread and move their pliant limbs, when in nimble wise they put out each pliant arm in turn and represent to the eyes over and over again an action with foot that moves in time? Idols to wit are imbued with art and move about well-trained, to be able in the night-time to exhibit such plays. Or will this rather be the truth? Because in one unit of time, when we can perceive it by sense and while one single word is uttered, many latent times are contained which reason finds to exist, therefore in any time you

please all the several idols are at hand ready prepared in each several place. And because they are so thin, the mind can see distinctly only those which it strains itself to see; therefore all that there are besides are lost, save only those for which it has made itself ready. Moreover, it makes itself ready and hopes to see that which follows upon each thing; therefore the result does follow. Do you not see that the eyes also, when they essay to discern things which are thin and fine, strain themselves and make themselves ready, and without that we cannot see distinctly? And yet you may observe even in things which are plain before us, that if you do not attend, it is just as if the thing were all the time away and far distant? What wonder then, if the mind loses all other things save those with which it is itself earnestly occupied? Then too from small indications we draw the widest inferences and by our own fault entangle ourselves in the meshes of self-delusion.

Sometimes it happens too that an image of the same kind is not supplied, but what before was a woman, turns out in our hands to have changed into a man; or a different face and age succeed to the first. But sleep and forgetfulness prevent us from feeling surprise at this.

Bailey 1921

Come now, let me tell you what things stir the mind, and learn in a few words whence come the things which come into the understanding. First of all I say this, that many idols of things wander about in many ways in all directions on every side, fine idols, which easily become linked with one another in the air, when they come across one another's path, like spider's web and gold leaf. For indeed these idols are far finer in their texture than those which fill the eyes and arouse sight, since these pierce through the pores of the body and awake the fine nature of the mind within, and arouse its sensation. And so we see Centaurs and the limbs of Scyllas, and the dog-faces of Cerberus and idols of those who have met death, and whose bones are held in the embrace of earth; since idols of every kind are borne everywhere, some which are created of their own accord even in the air, some which depart in each case from diverse things, and those again which are made and put together from the shapes of these. For in truth the image of the Centaur comes not from a living thing, since there never was the nature of such a living creature, but when by chance the images of man and horse have met, they cling together readily at once, as we have said ere now, because of their subtle nature and fine fabric. All other things of this kind are fashioned in the same way. And when they move nimbly with exceeding lightness, as I have shown ere now, any one such subtle image stirs their mind; for the mind is fine and of itself wondrous nimble.

That these things come to pass as I tell, you may easily learn from this. Inasmuch as the one is like the other, what we see with the mind, and what we see with the eyes, they must needs be created in like manner. Now, therefore, since I have shown that I see a lion maybe, by means of idols, which severally stir the eyes, we may know that the mind is moved in like manner, in that it sees a lion and all else neither more nor less than the eyes, except that it sees finer idols. And when sleep has relaxed the limbs, the understanding of the mind is for no other cause awake, but that these same idols stir our minds then, as when we are awake, insomuch that we seem surely to behold even one who has quitted life, and is holden by death and the earth. This

nature constrains to come to pass just because all the senses of the body are checked and at rest throughout the limbs, nor can they refute the falsehood by true facts. Moreover, the memory lies at rest, and is torpid in slumber, nor does it argue against us that he, whom the understanding believes that it beholds alive, has long ago won to death and doom. For the rest, it is not wonderful that the idols should move and toss their arms and their other limbs in rhythmic time. For it comes to pass that the image in sleep seems to do this; inasmuch as when the first image passes away and then another comes to birth in a different posture, the former seems then to have changed its gesture. And indeed we must suppose that this comes to pass in quick process: so great is the speed, so great the store of things, so great, in any one instant that we can perceive, the abundance of the little parts of images, whereby the supply may be continued.

And in these matters many questions are asked, and there are many things we must make clear, if we wish to set forth the truth plainly. First of all it is asked why, whatever the whim may come to each of us to think of, straightway his mind thinks of that very thing. Do the idols keep watch on our will, and does the image rise up before us, as soon as we desire, whether it pleases us to think of sea or land or sky either? Gatherings of men, a procession, banquets, battles, does nature create all things at a word, and make them ready for us? And that when in the same place and spot the mind of others is thinking of things all far different. What, again, when in sleep we behold idols dancing forward in rhythmic measure, and moving their supple limbs, when alternately they shoot out swiftly their supple arms, and repeat to the eyes a gesture made by the feet in harmony? Idols in sooth are steeped in art and wander about trained to be able to tread their dance in the nighttime. Or will this be nearer truth? Because within a single time, which we perceive, that is, when a single word is uttered, many times lie unnoted, which reasoning discovers, therefore it comes to pass that in any time however small the several idols are there ready at hand in all the several spots. So great is the speed, so great the store of things. Therefore when the first image passes away and then another comes to birth in a different posture, the former seems then to have changed its gesture. Again, because they are fine, the mind cannot discern them sharply, save those which it strains to see; therefore all that there are besides these pass away, save those for which it has made itself ready. Moreover, the mind makes itself ready, and hopes it will come to pass that it will see what follows upon each several thing; therefore it comes to be. Do you not see the eyes too, when they begin to perceive things which are fine, strain themselves and make themselves ready, and that without that it cannot come to pass that we see things sharply? And yet even in things plain to see you might notice that, if you do not turn your mind to them, it is just as if the thing were sundered from you all the time, and very far away. How then is it strange, if the mind loses all else, save only the things to which it is itself given up? Then too on small signs we base wide opinions, and involve ourselves in the snare of self-deceit.

It happens too that from time to time an image of different kind rises before us, and what was before a woman, seems now to have become a man before our very eyes, or else one face or age follows after another. But that we should not think this strange, sleep and its forgetfulness secure.