

Episode Fifty-One - The Workings of Images

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Welcome to Episode Fifty-One 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. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. 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.

In today's podcast we will discuss the workings of images, and we will cover approximately Latin lines 110 - 229.

Munro Notes

110-128: learn now how fine these images are: and first let me remind you how exceedingly minute first-beginnings are: think of the smallest animalcule, then of its heart or eye, then of the atoms which form its soul: what is their size? touch again a strong-scented herb with the tips of two fingers: what an amount of smell it emits! [what then must be the size of the atoms of smell? from all this you may conceive how thin these images or idols may be, and yet consist of material atoms:] such then fly about on all hands unseen unfelt.

129-142: besides these images which come front things, there are others which form in the air of themselves and present the outlines of all kinds of shapes, giants mountains rocks beasts.

113-175: images stream incessantly from the surfaces of all things: some things they pass through, by others they are broken; from others, at once hard and bright, they are reflected back: they stream as constantly from things, as light from the sun, so that as soon as a mirror is turned to a thing, its image appears in it at once: often too the sky in a moment is overcast with thick clouds: what a multitude then of these thin images must in an instant be shed from them, to allow of these being seen by us!

176-229: the velocity with which these images travel is enormous: light things made of fine atoms often travel very swiftly, as sunlight; it is natural then that these images should do the same; of which too there is a constant succession one following on the other like light or heat from the sun : again these images proceed from the very surface of things and should therefore

travel more swiftly than light: a proof of the prodigious swiftness of these images is this: put water in the open air, and at once all the stars of heaven are reflected in it. As images come from all things to the sight, so do things producing smell taste sound and the like; so that all the senses are similarly moved.

Browne 1743

There are therefore tenuous and fine shapes of the same figure with the things themselves, which, though they cannot singly be distinguished by the sight, yet being reflected, and swiftly and constantly repelled from the smooth plane of the glass, become visible, nor can any other reason be so properly offered why forms so like the things are returned to us. And now conceive, if you can, of what a tenuous and subtle nature an image consists, and for this reason, in the first place, because the seeds of things are so much beyond the reach and discovery of our senses, and are infinitely less than those bodies that escape the observation of the most curious eye; as a proof how subtle the first principles of things are, attend to these short observations. And first there are animals so exceeding small, that one third part of them cannot possibly by any means be discovered. What are you to conceive of the bowels of these creatures? Of their little hearts and eyes? What of their members? What are you to think of their limbs? How small are they? What besides of the seeds which compose the soul and mind, don't you imagine how subtle and minute they are? Besides, herbs that exhale a sharp smell from their bodies, such as all-heal, bitter wormwood, strong southernwood, and four centaury, if you shake any of these ever so lightly you may be sure many particles fly off, and scatter every way, but without force, and too weak to affect the sense; yet how small and subtle are the images that are formed from these, no one can conceive or express.

But lest you should think that the images that fly off the surface of bodies are the only things that wander abroad, there are other shapes that are fashioned of their own accord, and are produced in the lower region we call the air; these are framed in various manners, are carried upward, and being very subtle and less compact in their contexture, are ever changing their figure, and assume all variety of forms. Thus we see the clouds sometimes thicken in the sky, darkening the serene face of the heavens, and wounding the air by violence of their motion; now the shape of giants seem to fly abroad, and project their shadows all round; and then huge hills, and rocks torn from the mountaintop, are born before the sun, and hide his light. Others again advance and represent the shape of monsters wandering through the sky. Now learn in how easy and swift a manner these images are produced; how they continually fly and fall off from the surface of bodies; for there is always a store of forms upon the outside of things ready to be thrown off.

These, when they light upon some things, pass through them, as a garment for instance; but when they strike upon sharp rocks, or upon wood, they are immediately broken and divided, so that no image can be reflected; but when they are opposed by dense and polished bodies, such as looking-glass, then nothing of this happens; for they can neither pass through this as through a garment, nor are they divided before the glass preserves their figure perfect and entire. Hence it is that these forms are presented to our sight, and place a thing ever so

suddenly, and in a moment of time, before the glass, and the image instantly appears. So that you find there are subtle textures of things, and subtle images continually flowing from the surface of bodies; and therefore many of these forms are produced in a short space of time, and may be justly said to receive their being from a very swift motion.

And as the sun is obliged to emit many of its rays in an instant, that the whole air might be full of light, so many images of things must needs be carried off in the smallest point of time, and scattered every way abroad; for place your glass in what manner you please, the things appear in the same color and figure they really are. So often, when the face of the sky is most serene and bright, it becomes on all sides black and horrid of a sudden, that you would think the while body of darkness had left the regions below, and filled the wide arch of heaven, so dreadful does the night appear from driving clouds, and scatters gloomy terror from above, but how small in comparison of these clouds are the images of things no one can conceive or express.

And now, with how swift courage these images are carried on, how suddenly they make their passage through the air, how they outstrip dull time, wherever by various motion they intend their way, I choose in sweetest numbers than in tedious verse to show: As the swan's short song is more melodious than the harsh noise of cranes, scattered by winds through all the air. First then, we observe that light things that are formed of small particles, are very swift in their motion; of this sort are the rays and heat of the sun, because they are composed of very minute seeds which are easily thrust forward, as it were, through the interjacent air, the following urging on the part that went before; for one beam of light is instantly supplied by another, and every ray is pressed on by another behind. By the same rule, the images may pass through an unaccountable space in a moment of time: first, because there is always a force behind to drive and urge them forward, and then their texture, as they fly off, is so thin and subtle, that they can pierce through any bodies, and, as it were, flow through the air that lies between.

Besides, if those corpuscles that lie in the inward parts of bodies are discharged from above down upon the earth, such as the light and heat of the sun; if these, we observe, descend in a point of time, and spread themselves through all the expansion of the air, and fly over the sea, the Earth, and the upper regions of the heavens; if these are diffused with such wonderful celerity, what shall we say? Those particles that are always ready upon the utmost surface of things, when they are thrown off, and have nothing to obstruct their motions, don't you see how those may fly swifter, and go further, and pass through a much greater space in the same time than the beams of the sun take up to make their way through? Another notable instance which fully proves with how swift a motion the images are carried on is this: as soon as a bowl of clear water is placed in the open air, in starlight night, the shining stars are seen twinkling in the still water; don't you see therefore in what point of time the images descend upon the earth from the upper regions of the air? Again then, and again, you must allow that particles are perpetually flowing fro the surface of bodies, which present themselves to our eyes and strike our sight: from some bodies a train of smells are always flying off, so cold is emitted from the rivers, heat from the sun, a salt vapor from the water of the sea that eats through walls along the shore, and sounds are always flying through the air. Lastly, as we walk upon the strand a

salt taste offends our mouth; and when we see a bunch of wormwood bruised, the bitterness strikes upon the palate. So plain it is that something is continually flowing off from all bodies, and is scattered all about; there is no intermission, the seeds never cease to flow, because we still continue to feel, to see, to smell, and hear.

Munro

Now mark, and learn how thin in the nature of an image is. And first of all, since first-beginnings are so far below the ken of our senses and much smaller than the things which our eyes first begin to be unable to see, to strengthen yet more the proof of this also, learn in a few words how minutely fine are the beginnings of all things. First, living things are in some cases so very little, that their third part cannot be seen at all. Of what size are we to suppose any gut of such creatures to be? Or the ball of the heart or the eyes? The limbs? Or any part of the frame? How small they must be! And then further, the several first-beginnings of which their soul and the nature of their mind must be formed? Do you not perceive how fine, how minute they are? Again in the case of all things which exhale from their body a pungent smell, all-heal, nauseous wormwood, strong scented southernwood and the bitter centauries, any one of which, if you happen to [feel it] lightly between two [fingers, will impregnate them with a strong smell] but rather you are to know that idols of things wander about many in number in many ways, of no force, powerless to excite sense.

But lest haply you suppose that only those idols of things which go off from things and no others wander about, there are likewise those which are spontaneously begotten and are formed by themselves in this lower heaven which is called air: these fashioned in many ways are borne along on high and being in a fluid state cease not to alter their appearance and change it into the outline of shapes of every possible kind; as we see clouds sometimes gather into masses on high and blot the calm clear face of heaven, fanning the air with their motion. Thus often the faces of giants are seen to fly along and draw after them a far-spreading shadow; sometimes great mountains and rocks torn from the mountains are seen to go in advance and pass across the sun; and then some huge beast is observed to draw with it and bring on the other storm clouds. Now [I will proceed to show] with what ease and celerity they are begotten and how incessantly they flow and fall away from things. The outermost surface is ever streaming off from things and admits of being discharged: when this reaches some things, it passes through them, glass especially. But when it reaches rough stones or the matter of wood, it is then so torn that it cannot give back any idol. But when objects at once shining and dense have been put in its way, a mirror especially, none of these results has place: it can neither pass through it, like glass, nor can it be torn either; such perfect safety the polished surface minds to ensure. In consequence of this idols stream back to us from such objects; and however suddenly at any moment you place anything opposite a mirror, an image shows itself: hence you may be sure that thin textures and thin shapes of things incessantly stream from their surface. Therefore many idols are begotten in a short time, so that the birth of such things is with good reason named a rapid one.

And as the sun must send forth many rays of light in a short time in order that all things may be continually filled with it, so also for alike reason there must be carried away from things in a moment of time idols of things many in number in many ways in all directions round; since to whatever part of them we present a mirror before their surfaces, other things correspond to these in the mirror of a like shape and like color. Moreover, though the state of heaven has just before been of unsullied purity, with exceeding suddenness it becomes so hideously overcast, that you might imagine all its darkness had abandoned Acheron throughout and filled up the great vaults of heaven: in such numbers do faces of black horror rise up from amid the frightful night of storm clouds and hang over us on high. Now there is no one who can tell how small a fraction of these an image is, or express that sum in language.

Now mark: how swift the motion is with which idols are borne along, and what velocity is assigned to them as they glide through the air, so that but a short hour is spent on a journey through long space, whatever the spot towards which they go with a movement of varied tendency, all this I will tell in sweetly worded rather than in many verses; as the short song of the swan is better than the loud noise of cranes scattered abroad amid the ethereal clouds of the south. First of all we may very often observe that things which are light and made of minute bodies are swift. Of this kind are the light of the sun and its heat, because they are made of minute first things which are knocked forward so to speak and do not hesitate to pass through the space of air between, ever driven on by a blow following behind; for light on the instant is supplied by fresh light and brightness goaded to show its brightness in what you might call an ever on-moving team. Therefore in like manner idols must be able to scour in a moment of time through space unspeakable, first because they are exceeding small and there is a cause at their back to carry and impel them far forward; where moreover they move on with such winged lightness; next because when emitted they are possessed of so rare a texture, that they can readily pass through any things and stream as it were through the space of air between.

Again, if those minute bodies of things which are given out from the inmost depths of these things, as the light and heat of the sun, are seen in a moment of time to glide and spread themselves through the length and breadth of heaven, fly over sea and lands and flood the heaven, what then of those which stand ready posted in front rank, when they are discharged and nothing obstructs their egress? How much faster, you see, and farther must they travel, scouring through many times the same amount of space in the same time that the sunlight takes to spread over heaven ! This too appears to be an eminently true proof of the velocity with which idols of things are borne along: as soon as ever the brightness of water is set down in the open air, if the heaven is starry, in a moment the clear radiant constellations of ether imaged in the water correspond to those in the heaven. Now do you see in what a moment of time an image drops down from the borders of heaven to the borders of earth? Therefore, again and again I repeat you must admit that bodies capable of striking the eyes and of provoking vision [constantly travel] with a marvelous [velocity]. Smells too incessantly stream from certain things; as does cold from rivers, heat from the sun, spray from the waves of the sea, that enter into walls near the shore. Various sounds also cease not to fly through the air. Then too a moist salt flavor often comes into the mouth, when we are moving about beside the sea;

and when we look on at the mixing of a decoction of wormwood, its bitterness affects us. In such a constant stream from all things the several qualities are carried and are transmitted in all directions round, and no delay, no respite in the flow is ever granted, since we constantly have feeling, and may at any time see smell and hear the sound of anything.

Bailey

Come now and learn of how thin a nature this image is formed. And to begin with, since the first-beginnings are so far beneath the ken of our senses, and so much smaller than the things which our eyes first begin to be unable to descry, yet now that I may assure you of this too, learn in a few words how fine in texture are the beginnings of all things. First of all there are living things sometimes so small that a third part of them could by no means be seen. Of what kind must we think any one of their entrails to be? What of the round ball of their heart or eye? what of their members? what of their limbs? how small are they? still more, what of the several first-beginnings whereof their soul and the nature of their mind must needs be formed? do you not see how fine and how tiny they are? Moreover, whatever things breathe out a pungent savour from their body, panacea, sickly wormwood, and strongly-smelling abrotanum, and bitter centaury; if by chance [you press] any one of these lightly between two [fingers, the scent will for long cling to your fingers, though never will you see anything at all: so that you may know how fine is the nature of the first-beginnings, whereof the scent is formed . . .] . . . and not rather learn that many idols of things wander abroad in many ways with no powers, unable to be perceived?

But that you may not by chance think that after all only those idols of things wander abroad, which come off from things, there are those too which are begotten of their own accord, and are formed of themselves in this sky which is called air; which moulded in many ways are borne along on high, and being fluid cease not to change their appearance, and to turn it into the outline of forms of every kind; even as from time to time we see clouds lightly gathering together in the deep sky, and staining the calm face of the firmament, caressing the air with their motion. For often the faces of giants are seen to fly along and to trail a shadow far and wide, and sometimes mighty mountains and rocks torn from the mountains are seen to go on ahead and to pass before the sun; and then a huge beast seems to draw on and lead forward the storm clouds. Come now, in what swift and easy ways those idols are begotten, and flow unceasingly from things and fall off and part from them, [I will set forth . . .]. For ever the outermost surface is streaming away from things, that so they may cast it off. And when this reaches some things, it passes through them, as above all through glass: but when it reaches rough stones or the substance of wood, there at once it is torn, so that it cannot give back any idol. But when things that are formed bright and dense are set athwart its path, such as above all is the mirror, neither of these things comes to pass. For neither can they pass through, as through glass, nor yet be torn; for the smoothness is careful to ensure their safety. Wherefore it comes to pass that the idols stream back from it to us. And however suddenly, at any time you will, you place each several thing against the mirror, the image comes to view; so that you may know that from the outermost body there flow off unceasingly thin webs and thin shapes of things. Therefore many idols are begotten in a short moment, so that rightly is the creation of

these things said to be swift.

And just as the sun must needs shoot out many rays of light in a short moment, so that the whole world may unceasingly be filled, so too in like manner from things it must needs be that many idols of things are borne off in an instant of time in many ways in all directions on every side; inasmuch as to whatever side we turn the mirror to meet the surface of things, things in the mirror answer back alike in form and colour. Moreover, even when the weather in the sky has but now been most clear, exceeding suddenly it becomes foully stormy, so that on all sides you might think that all darkness has left Acheron, and filled the great vault of the sky; so terribly, when the noisome night of clouds has gathered together, do the shapes of black fear hang over us on high; yet how small a part of these is an idol, there is no one who could say or give an account of this in words.

Come now, with what swift motion the idols are carried on, and what speed is given them as they swim through the air, so that a short hour is spent on a long course, towards whatever place they each strain on with diverse impulse, I will proclaim in verses of sweet discourse rather than in many; even as the brief song of a swan is better than the clamour of cranes, which spreads abroad among the clouds of the south high in heaven. First of all very often we may see that light things made of tiny bodies are swift. In this class there is the light of the sun and his heat, because they are made of tiny first-particles, which, as it were, are knocked forward, and do not pause in passing on through the space of air between, smitten by the blow from those that follow. For in hot haste the place of light is taken by light, and as though driven in a team, one flash is goaded by another flash. Wherefore in like manner it must needs be that the idols can course through space unthinkable in an instant of time, first because it is a tiny cause, far away behind which drives and carries them forward, and after that, in that they are borne on with so swift a lightness of bulk; and then because they are given off endowed with texture so rare that they can easily pass into anything you will, and as it were ooze through the intervening air.

Moreover, when particles of things are given out abroad from deep within, like the sun's light and heat, these are seen to fall in a moment of time and spread themselves over the whole expanse of heaven, and to fly over sea and earth and flood the sky. What then of those things which are ready at once in the forefront? When they are cast off and nothing hinders their discharge, do you not see that they must needs move swifter and further, and course through many times the same expanse of space in the same time in which the rays of the sun crowd the sky? This, too, more than all seems to show forth truly in what swift motion the idols of things are borne on, that as soon as a bright surface of water is placed beneath the open sky, when the heaven is starry, in a moment the calm beaming stars of the firmament appear in answer in the water. Do you not then see now in how short an instant of time the image falls from the coasts of heaven to the coasts of earth? Wherefore more and more you must needs confess that bodies are sent off such as strike the eyes and awake our vision. And from certain things scents stream off unceasingly; just as cold streams off from rivers, heat from the sun, spray from the waves of the sea, which gnaws away walls all around the shores. Nor do diverse voices cease to fly abroad through the air. Again, often moisture of a salt savour comes into our

mouth, when we walk by the sea, and on the other hand, when we watch wormwood being diluted and mixed, a bitter taste touches it. So surely from all things each several thing is carried off in a stream, and is sent abroad to every quarter on all sides, nor is any delay or respite granted in this flux, since we feel unceasingly, and we are suffered always to descry and smell all things, and to hear them sound.