

Episode Fifty-Six - More On The Operation of the Senses - Hearing And Taste

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Welcome to Episode Fifty-Six 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.

Latin Lines 522 - 632

Munro Notes

522-548: the way in which the other senses are acted upon, may now be easily understood : sound is corporeal, since it is by striking on the ear that it excites sensation; often too the atoms of sound in passing through the narrow windpipe graze it and make it rough; again a long speech spoken in a loud voice takes much strength and substance from a man: smoothness of sound comes from smoothness of its atoms, roughness from roughness in them.

549-594: as the sounds are coming out, the tongue forms them into articulate words ; every one of which is distinctly heard near at hand; but at a greater distance the sound is indistinctly perceived, as it gets broken in passing through the air: again a single word often strikes the ears of a whole multitude; it must divide therefore into so many distinct words : often too voices are echoed distinctly back, sometimes six or seven in answer to one : these the wonder-loving multitude believes to be the voices and music of nymphs and woodland gods, Pan and the rest.

595-614: sounds will come through places, through which you cannot see, because their particles can pass by crooked ways, while images can only travel through straight passages: again one voice bursts into many similar voices, as a spark of fire into many sparks; so that all the corners of a building may be filled with sound; but even sound is deadened and broken in coming through such obstructions.

615-632: taste is quite as easy to explain ; the flavour is pressed out from food by chewing and passes into the pores of tongue and palate: the flavour is pleasant, if its atoms are smooth, but

the contrary, if these are rough : when the food has got below the palate, the flavour is no longer perceived, and the food is then indifferent, if only it can be digested.

Brown 1743

And now, in what manner each of the other senses distinguishes its proper object is a subject of no great difficulty to explain. And first, sound and all voices are heard when they enter the ears, and strike with their bodies upon the sense; for we must allow that sound and voice are bodies, because they have power to make impression upon the sense; for the voice often scrapes the jaws, and the noise makes the windpipe rough as it passes through. When the seeds of words begin to hurry in a crowd through the narrow nerves, and to rush abroad, those vessels being full, the throat is raked and made hoarse, and the voice wounds the passage through which it goes into the air. There is no question then but voice and words consist of corporeal principles, because they affect and hurt the sense. You are likewise to observe how much a continual speaking, from morning to night, takes off from the body; how much it wears away from the very nerves and strength of the speaker, especially if it be delivered in the highest stretch of the voice. Of necessity therefore voice must be a body, because the speaker loses many parts from himself. The roughness then of the voice depends upon the roughness of the seeds, as the smoothness is produced from smooth seeds; nor are the seeds from the same figure that strike the ears when the trumpet sounds with grave and murmuring blasts, as when the sackbut rings with its hoarse noise, or swans in the cold vales of Helicon sing out with mournful notes their sweet complaint.

When therefore we press out this voice from the lungs, and send it abroad directly through the open mouth, the nimble tongue, with curious art, fashions it into words, and the motion of the lips assists likewise in the formation of them. And when the distance is not long from whence any voice proceeds, the words must of necessity be plainly heard and articulately distinguished, for in this case the voice preserves its proper frame and figure; but if the interjacent space be more than it should be, the words must needs be confused by reason of the length of air, and the voice be disordered as it passes through. Hence it is that you may hear a sound only, but discover nothing at all of the meaning of the words, the voice becomes so broken and obstructed. Besides, one sentence delivered from the mouth of a bawling cryer strikes the ears of all about him; for the one general voice, that is pronounced instantly, breaks instantly into innumerable little voices, and so reaches every particular ear, giving a proper form and a distinct sound to every word. But that part of the voice that does not reach the ear is diffused through the air to no purpose, but there dies; some parts strike upon solid places, and being reflected return a sound, and sometimes disappoint us with the echo or image of the word. If you well consider this, you will be able to account to yourself and others why, in solitary places, the rocks regularly return words the same with those we speak, while we seek our companions wandering over the dark mountains, or call after them aloud when they are dispersed and lose their way. I myself have seen places that return six words for one; the hills so reverberate the words from one another that they severally repeat them and send them back. The neighboring people fondly imagine such places to be frequented by goat-footed satyrs and nymphs, and tell stories of the fawns. They say that the dead silence of the night is disturbed by their late revels

and wanton sports, that they hear the sound of music, and the soft notes of the harp, as the artist touches and sings to it together; that the swains all about can distinguish when Pan, shaking his garland of pine-leaves upon his head, with long-hung lip, runs over the hollow reeds, and so his pipe prolongs his rural song. They speak of many other strange sights, and monstrous fables of the same kind; lest, perhaps, they should be thought to dwell in places where the gods never come, and therefore they invent their wonderful tales like these; or they are induced by some reason or other, as mankind in general are mighty eager after prodigies.

In short, it is nothing strange that those places through which the eye can see nothing, that through such the voice can pass and strike the ears. We can converse together in different rooms, when the doors are shut, as we frequently do, because voice can pierce safely through the crooked pores of bodies, which images cannot, for they are broken if the passages are not straight; such are the pores of glass through which all sorts of images freely find way. Besides, the voice divides itself into several little voices, and these are broken again into others, as soon as the first single voice breaks into many more, like a spark of fire that leaps abroad into a thousand; so that all places about, even those behind you, are filled with voice, and are moved by the sound; but all images direct their course through straight passages as soon as they are thrown off from bodies, and therefore no one can see anything over his head; you hear words that are spoken without, yet even these, as they pass through the doors that are shut, grow weak, and strike the ear in a confused manner, so that we seem to hear a sound than to distinguish the words.

Nor is the account of the tongue and palate, by which we taste, a subject of greater nicety or more difficult to explain. And first, we perceive a taste in the mouth when we squeeze the juice from our food by chewing, as if we were to press a sponge full of water in our hands to make it dry; then the juice we draw out is spread over the pores of the palate, and through the crooked passages of the spongy tongue. When the seeds of this flowing juice are smooth, they gently touch, and affect all the moist and sweating surface of the tongue with sweet delight; but the seeds, the more rough and sharp they are, the more they stimulate and tear the sense. And then the pleasure of taste we feel no further than the palate; when the food is driven down through the jaws and divided among the limbs, the pleasure is gone; nor is it of any concern with what meat our bodies are nourished, if you can but digest what you eat, and separate it among the members, and preserve the moist tenor of the stomach.

Munro 1886

And now to explain in what way the other senses do each perceive their several objects, is the nowise arduous task which is still left. In the first place, all sound and voice is heard when they have made their way into the ears and have struck with their body the sense of hearing. For voice too and sound you must admit to be bodily, since they are able to act upon the senses. Again, voice often abrades the throat, and shouting in passing forth makes the windpipe more rough: when to wit the first-beginnings of voices have risen up in larger mass and commenced to pass abroad through their strait passage, you are to know the door of the mouth now crammed itself is abraded. There is no doubt then that voices and words consist of bodily first

beginnings, with the power to hurt; nor can you fail to know how much of body is taken away and how much is withdrawn from men's very sinews and strength by a speech continued without interruption from the dawning brightness of morning to the shadow of black night, above all if it has been poured forth with much loud shouting. Voice therefore must be bodily, since a man by much speaking loses a portion from his body. Next roughness of voice comes from roughness of first-beginnings, as smoothness is produced from smoothness. Nor are the first-beginnings of like shape which pierce the ears in these two cases: when the trumpet brays dully in deep low tones, the barbarian country roused echoing back the hoarse hollow sound, and when swans from the headstrong torrents of Helicon raise their clear-toned dirge with plaintive voice.

When therefore we force these voices forth from the depths of our body and discharge them straight out at the mouth, the pliant tongue, deft fashioner of words, gives them articulate utterance and the structure of the lips does its part in shaping them. Therefore when the distance is not long between the point from which each several voice has started and that at which it arrives, the very words too must be plainly heard and distinguished syllable by syllable; for each voice retains its structure and retains its shape. But if the space between be more than is suitable, the words must be huddled together in passing through much air and the voice be disorganized in its flight through the same. Therefore it is that you can hear a sound, yet cannot distinguish what the meaning of the words is: so huddled and hampered is the voice when it comes. Again a single word often stirs the ears of a whole assembly of people, when uttered by the crier's mouth. One voice therefore in a moment starts asunder into many voices, since it distributes itself separately into all the ears, stamping upon them the form and distinct sound of the word. But such of the voices as do not fall directly on the ears, are carried past and lost, fruitlessly dispersed in air: some striking upon solid spots are thrown back and give back a sound and sometimes mock by an echo of the word. When you fully perceive all this, you may explain to yourself and others how it is that in lonely spots rocks give back in regular succession forms of words like to those sent forth, as we seek our comrades straying about among the darkened hills and with loud voice call upon them scattered abroad. I have seen places give back as many as six or seven voices, when you sent forth one: in such wise did the very hills dash back on hills and repeat the words thus trained to come back. These spots the people round fancy that the goat-footed satyrs and nymphs inhabit, and tell that they are the fauns by whose night-pervading noise and sportive play as they declare the still silence is broken and sounds produced of stringed instruments and sweet plaintive melodies, such as the pipe pours forth when beaten by the fingers of the players; the country-people hearing far and wide, what time Pan nodding the piny covering of his head half a beast's oft runs over the gaping reeds with curved lip, making the pipe without ceasing to pour forth its woodland song. Other such like prodigies and marvels they tell of, that they may not haply bethought to inhabit lonely places, abandoned even by the gods. On this account they vaunt such wonders in their stories or are led on by some other reason; inasmuch as the whole race of man is all too greedy after listening ears.

To proceed, you need not wonder how it is that through places, through which the eyes cannot see plain things, voices come and strike the ears. We often see a conversation go on even through closed doors, sure enough because the voice can pass uninjured through the winding openings of things, while idols refuse to pass: they are torn to shreds, if the openings through which they glide are not straight, like those of glass, through which every image passes. Again, a voice distributes itself in all directions, since voices are begotten one out of another, when a single voice has once gone forth and sprung into many, as a spark of fire is often wont to distribute itself into its constituent fires. Therefore places are filled with voices which though far withdrawn out of view yet are all in commotion and stirred by sound. But idols all proceed in straight courses as soon as they have been discharged; and therefore you can never see beyond a wall, but you may hear voices outside it. And yet this very voice even in passing through the walls of houses is blunted and enters the ears in a huddled state, and we seem to hear the sound rather than the actual words.

The tongue and palate whereby we perceive flavor, have not in them anything that calls for longer explanation or offers more difficulty. In the first place we perceive flavor in the mouth when we press it out in chewing our food, in the same way as when one haply begins to squeeze with his hand and dry a sponge full of water. Next the whole of what we press out distributes itself through the cavities of the palate and the intricate openings of the porous tongue. Therefore when the bodies of oozing flavor are smooth, they pleasantly touch and pleasantly feel all the parts if about the moist exuding quarters of the palate. But on the other hand, when they rise in a mass they puncture and tear the sense according to the degree in which they are pervaded by roughness. Next the pleasure from the flavor reaches as far as the palate; when however it has passed down through the throat, there is no pleasure while it is all distributing itself into the frame. And it makes no matter what the food is with which the body is nurtured, provided you can digest what you take and transmit it into the frame and keep the stomach in an equable condition of moistness.

Bailey 1921

Now it is left to explain in what manner the other senses perceive each their own object—a path by no means stony to tread. First of all, every kind of sound and voice is heard, when they have found their way into the ears and struck upon the sense with their body. For that voice too and sound are bodily you must grant, since they can strike on the senses. Moreover, the voice often scrapes the throat and shouting makes the windpipe over-rough as it issues forth; since, indeed, the first-beginnings of voices have risen up in greater throng through the narrow passage, and begun to pass forth: and then, in truth, when the passages are crammed, the door too is scraped. There is no doubt then that voices and words are composed of bodily elements, so that they can hurt. And likewise it does not escape you how much body is taken away and drawn off from men's very sinews and strength by speech continued without pause from the glimmer of rising dawn to the shades of dark night, above all if it is poured out with loud shouting. And so the voice must needs be of bodily form, since one who speaks much loses a part from his body. Now roughness of voice comes from roughness in its first-beginnings, and likewise smoothness is begotten of their smoothness. Nor do the first-beginnings pierce the

ears with like form, when the trumpet bellows deep with muffled tones, and when the barbarous Bercyntian pipe shrieks with shrill buzzing sound, and when the swans at night from the cold marches of Helicon lift with mournful voice their clear lament.

These voices then, when we force them forth from deep within our body, and shoot them abroad straight through our mouth, the pliant tongue, artificer of words, severs apart, and the shaping of the lips in its turn gives them form. Therefore, when it is no long distance from which each single utterance starts and reaches to us, it must needs be that the very words too are clearly heard and distinguished sound by sound. For each utterance preserves its shaping and preserves its form. But if the space set between be over great, passing through much air the words must needs be jostled together, and the utterance disordered, while it flies across the breezes. And so it comes to pass that you can perceive the sound, yet not distinguish what is the meaning of the words: so confounded and entangled does the utterance come to you. Again one single word often awakes the ears of all in an assembly, shot out from the crier's mouth. Therefore one voice flies apart immediately into many voices, since it sunders itself into all the several ears, imprinting on the words a shape and a clear-cut sound. But that part of the voices which falls not straight upon the ears, passes by and perishes scattered in vain through the air. Some beating upon solid spots are cast back, and give back the sound, and at times mock us with the echo of a word. And when you see this clearly, you could give account to yourself and others, in what manner among solitary places rocks give back the counterparts of words each in due order, when we seek our comrades wandering amid the dark hills, and with loud voice summon them scattered here and there. I have seen places give back even six or seven cries, when you sent forth but one: so surely did one hill beat back to another and repeat the words trained to come back again. Such places the dwellers around fancy to be the haunt of goat-footed satyrs and nymphs, and they say that there are fauns, by whose clamour spreading through the night and sportive revels they declare that the dumb silence is often broken; and that sounds of strings are awakened, and sweet sad melodies, which the pipe pours forth, stopped by the fingers of players; and that the race of country folk hears far and wide, when Pan, tossing the piny covering of his half-monstrous head, oftentimes with curling lip runs over the open reeds, so that the pipe ceases not to pour forth woodland music. All other marvels and prodigies of this kind they tell, lest by chance they be thought to live in lonely places, deserted even of the gods. Therefore they boast such wonders in discourse, or else are led on in some other way, even as the whole race of man is over greedy of prattling tales.

For the rest, we need not wonder by what means voices come and arouse the ears through places, though which the eyes cannot see things clear to view. Often too we see a talk carried on through closed doors, because, we may be sure, voice can pass unharmed through winding pores in things, but idols refuse to pass. For they are torn asunder, unless they stream through straight pores, as are those in glass, through which every image can fly. Moreover, a voice is severed in every direction, since voices are begotten one from another, when once one voice has issued forth and sprung apart into many, even as a spark of fire is often wont to scatter itself into its several fires. And so places hidden far from sight are filled with voices; they are in a ferment all around, alive with sound. But all idols press on in the direct line, as they have

once been started; wherefore no one can see beyond the wall, but can perceive voices outside. And yet even this voice, while it passes through the walls of the house, is dulled, and enters the ear all confounded, and we seem to hear a sound rather than words.

Nor do the tongue and palate, whereby we perceive taste, need longer account or give more trouble. First of all we perceive taste in our mouth, when we press it out in chewing our food, just as if one by chance begins to squeeze with the hand and dry a sponge full of water. Then what we press out is all spread abroad through the pores of the palate, and through the winding passages of the loose-meshed tongue. Therefore, when the bodies of the oozing savour are smooth, they touch pleasantly, and pleasantly stroke all around the moist sweating vault above the tongue. But, on the other hand, the more each several thing is filled with roughness, the more does it prick the sense and tear it in its onslaught. Next pleasure comes from the savour within the limit of the palate; but when it has passed headlong down through the jaws, there is no pleasure while it is all being spread abroad into the limbs. Nor does it matter a whit with what diet the body is nourished, provided only you can digest what you take, and spread it abroad in the limbs, and keep an even moistness in the stomach.