

Episode Fifty-Seven - Taste, Smell, and The Subjectivity of the Senses

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Welcome to Episode Fifty-Seven 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 57 - Food, Smell, and Taste

Latin Lines 632 - 721

Munro Notes

633-672: I will now explain why what is one creature's meat is another's poison : all creatures differ within and without; therefore they consist of different atoms; and the atoms being different, the pores and passages of the whole body, and also of the mouth and palate must differ: thus if food is pleasant to one creature, its smooth elements must suit the pores of that creature; if unpleasant, then its rough elements must more readily adapt themselves to them ; and thus in disease, what was before sweet to a man may become bitter.

673-686 : next to explain smell: it must stream on all sides from many things; but, as in taste, one kind suits one creature, another another; bees are attracted from far by the smell of honey, and so on; thus each creature is drawn to its proper food and avoids poison.

637-705: one smell will travel farther than another, but none so far as sound; I need not add as the images which excite sight; for it travels slowly and is soon lost, because it comes with much ado from the inmost parts of things, as proved by this that things when pounded or dissolved by fire smell more strongly : the atoms too of smell are greater than those of voice, since often a wall will stop the one and not the other; and thus too clogs often lose the scent.

706-721 : but in the case of the form and colours of things, as well as smells and tastes, some are suited to one creature, unsuited to another: thus for example the lion fierce as he is cannot face the cock.

Browne 1743

I shall now account why, as we find, different sorts of food are agreeable to different palates; or why, what is sour and bitter to some seems to others exceeding sweet. In these cases the variety and difference are so great that what is food to one will prove sharp poison to another; and it happens that a serpent touched with the spittle of a man expires and bites himself to death. Besides, to us Hellebore is strong poison, but goats it fattens, and is nourishment to quails; and to understand by what means this comes to pass, you must recollect what we observed before, that seeds of different kinds are mingled in the composition of all bodies. And then all animals supported by food, as they differ in outward shape, and after their several kinds have a different form of body and limbs, so they consist of seeds of different figures, and since their seeds differ, the pores and passages which (as we said) were in all the parts, and in the mouth and palate itself, must differ likewise; some must be less, some greater, some with three, some with four squares; many round, and some with many corners in various manners: For as the frame of the seeds and their motions require, the pores must differ in their figure. The difference of the pores depends upon the texture of the seeds, and therefore what is sweet to one is bitter to another: It is sweet because the smoothest seeds gently enter into the pores of the palate; but the same food is bitter to another because the sharp and hooked particles pierce the jaws and wound the sense. Now by observing this things will appear plain, for when a man has a fever, either by the overflowing of the gall, or whether the violence of the disease be raised by any other means, in such a case the body is disturbed, and all the order and disposition of the seeds are changed. And hence it is that the juices that were before agreeable to the sense are no longer pleasing, and those are more fit to enter the pores that fret and produce a bitter taste; for even in honey there is a mixture of rough and smooth seeds, as we had frequent occasion to mention to you before.

And now shall I pass on and show in what manner the approach of smells affect the nose. And first, a various stream of odors is continuously flowing from all bodies; for you must suppose that smells are perpetually thrown off, are emitted and dispersed abroad; but some are more peculiar to some animals than others, because they consist of seeds of different figures; and therefore the bee is attracted by the smell of honey in the air afar off, and vultures by the stink of carcases; and so the natural quality of the hound drives him on where the hoof of the stag has led the way, and the white goose (the savior of the capitol) can perceive the smell of a man at a great distance. So it is the difference of smell, peculiar to different creatures, that directs every species to its proper food, and makes it start at the approach of poison; and by that means the race of beasts is constantly preserved.

But this smell or odor that affects the nose, some kinds of it are emitted much further than others, but no one of them is carried so far as sound or voice (not to speak of those images that strike the eye and provoke the sight) for they wander about and move lazily, and being

scattered through the air, die away by degrees before they have gone far, and for this reason because they flow with difficulty from the most inward parts of bodies; and that odors are emitted from the lowest profundity of the subject is proved from this, that the more they are broken or scattered by fire, the stronger they smell. And then we may observe that smells are formed of larger seeds than those of voice; for they cannot pierce through walls of stone, where voice and sound can freely pass; and therefore we cannot so easily distinguish on which side of us the body is placed that diffuses the smell, for the stroke grows cold as it moves through the air, nor does the hot scent briskly touch the organ, and therefore hounds are often at fault and hunt about for the trail.

And this happens not only in cases of smell and taste, but the images of things, and all colors, do not affect the eyes of men all alike, but to some they are more sharp and painful to the sense than they are to others. For the cock that claps his wings and drives away the darkness and by his clear notes calls forth the morning light, the fiercest lion dares not stand against this creature, nor look him in the face, but instantly prepares for flight; and for this reason, because there are certain seeds in the body of the cock that when emitted into the eyes of the lion fret and tear the balls, and cause a very acute pain, which the beast in all his courage is not able to bear; and yet these particles are in no way hurtful to our eyes; either they do not pierce them, or if they do, they find a free passage and return easily from the eyes again, so that they do not the least prejudice to the sight.

Munro 1886

I will now explain how it is that different food is pleasant and nutritious for different creatures; also why that which to some is nauseous and bitter, may yet to others seem passing sweet; and why in these matters the difference and discrepancy is so great that what to one man is food, to another is rank poison; and there is actually a serpent which on being touched by a man's spittle wastes away and destroys itself by gnawing its body. Again hellebore for us is rank poison, but helps to fatten goats and quails. That you may know how this comes to pass, first of all you must remember what we have said before, that the seeds which are contained in things are mixed up in manifold ways. Again all living creatures soever which take food, even as they are unlike on the outside, and, differing in each after its kind, an exterior contour of limbs bounds them, so likewise are they formed of seeds of varying shape. Again since the seeds differ, there must be a discrepancy in the spaces between and the passages, which we name openings, in all the limbs and mouth and palate as well. Some openings therefore must be smaller, some larger; some things must have them three-cornered, others square; many must be round, some many-angled after many fashions. For as the relation between the shapes of seeds and their motions require, the openings also must differ accordingly in their shapes; and the passages must vary, as varies the texture formed by the seeds which bound them. For this reason when that which is sweet to some becomes bitter to others, for that creature to whom it is sweet the smoothest bodies must enter the cavities of the palate with power to feel them all over; but on the other hand in the case of those to whom the same thing is bitter within, rough and barbed seeds sure enough pass down the throat. It is easy now from these principles to understand all particular cases: thus when a fever has attacked any one from too great a flow

of bile, or a violent disease has been excited in any other way, thereupon the whole body is disordered and all the arrangements of particles then and there changed; the consequence of which is that the bodies which before were suited to excite sensation, suit no more; and those fit it better, which are able to make their way in and beget a bitter sense. Both kinds for instance are mixed up in the flavor of honey: a point we have often proved before.

Now mark me, and I will discuss the way in which the contact of smell affects the nostrils: and first there must be many things from which a varied flow of smells streams and rolls on; and we must suppose that they thus stream and discharge and disperse themselves among all things alike; but one smell fits itself better to one creature, another to another on account of their unlike shapes; and therefore bees are drawn on by the smell of honey through the air to a very great distance, and so are vultures by carcasses. Also the onward-reaching power of scent in dogs leads them whithersoever the cloven hoof of wild beasts has carried them in their course; and the smell of man is felt far away by the savior of the Romans' citadel, the bright white goose. Thus different scents assigned to different creatures led each to its appropriate food and constrain them to recoil from nauseous poison, and in this way the races of beasts are preserved.

Of all these different smells then which strike the nostrils one may reach to a much greater distance than another; though none of them is carried so far as sound, as voice, to say nothing of things which strike the eyesight and provoke vision. For in its lazy course each comes slowly on and is sooner lost, being gradually dispersed into the readily receiving expanse of air; first because coming out of its depths it with difficulty discharges itself from the thing: for the fact that all things are found to have a stronger smell when crushed, when pounded, when broken up by fire, shows that odors stream and withdraw from the inner parts of things: next you may see that smell is formed of larger first-beginnings than voice, since it does not pass through stone walls, through which voice and sound are borne without fail. For this reason also you will find that it is not so easy to trace out in what quarter a thing which smells is situated; for the blow cools down as it loiters through the air, and the courier particles of things are no longer hot when they finish their race to sense; for which reason dogs are often at fault and lose the scent.

But what I have said is not found in smells and in the class of flavors only, but also the forms and colors of things are not all so well suited to the senses of all, but that some will be more distressing to the sight than others. Moreover ravenous lions cannot face and bear to gaze upon a cock with flapping wings putting night to rout and wont to summon morning with shrill voice: in such wise they at once bethink themselves of flight, because sure enough in the body of cocks are certain seeds, and these, when they have been discharged into the eyes of lions, bore into the pupils and cause such sharp pain that courageous though they be, they cannot continue to face them; while at the same time these things cannot hurt at all our sight, either because they do not enter in or because the moment they enter a free passage out of the eyes is granted them, so that they cannot by staying behind hurt the eyes in any part!

Bailey 1921

Now how for different creatures there is different food and poison I will unfold, or for what cause, what to some is noisome and bitter, can yet seem to others most sweet to eat. And there is herein a difference and disagreement so great that what is food to one, is to others biting poison; even as there is a certain serpent, which, when touched by a man's spittle, dies and puts an end to itself by gnawing its own body. Moreover, to us hellebore is biting poison, but it makes goats and quails grow fat. That you may be able to learn by what means this comes to be, first of all it is right that you remember what we have said ere now, that the seeds contained in things are mingled in many ways. Besides all living creatures which take food, just as they are unlike to outer view and a diverse outward contour of the limbs encloses them each after their kind, so also are they fashioned of seeds of varying shape. And further, since the seeds are unlike, so must the spaces and passages, which we call the openings, be different in all their limbs, and in the mouth and palate too. Some of these then must needs be smaller, some greater, they must be three-cornered for some creatures, square for others, many again round, and some of many angles in many ways. For according as the arrangement of shapes and the motions demand, so the shapes of the openings must needs differ, and the passages vary according to the texture which shuts them in. Therefore, when what is sweet to some becomes bitter to others, for the man to whom it is sweet, the smoothest bodies must needs enter the pores of the palate caressingly, but, on the other hand, for those to whom the same thing is sour within, we can be sure it is the rough and hooked bodies which penetrate the passages. Now from these facts it is easy to learn of each case: thus when fever has attacked a man, and his bile rises high, or the violence of disease is aroused in some other way, then his whole body is disordered, and then all the positions of the first-beginnings are changed about; it comes to pass that the bodies which before suited his taste, suit it no longer, and others are better fitted, which can win their way in and beget a sour taste. For both kinds are mingled in the savour of honey; as I have often shown you above ere now.

Come now, I will tell in what manner the impact of smell touches the nostrils. First there must needs be many things whence the varying stream of scents flows and rolls on, and we must think that it is always streaming off and being cast and scattered everywhere abroad; but one smell is better fitted to some living things, another to others, on account of the unlike shapes of the elements. And so through the breezes bees are drawn on however far by the scent of honey, and vultures by corpses. Then the strength of dogs sent on before leads on the hunters whithersoever the cloven hoof of the wild beasts has turned its steps, and the white goose, saviour of the citadel of Romulus's sons, scents far ahead the smell of man. So diverse scents assigned to diverse creatures lead on each to its own food, and constrain them to recoil from noisome poison, and in that way are preserved the races of wild beasts.

This very smell then, whenever it stirs the nostrils, may in one case be thrown further than in another. But yet no smell at all is carried as far as sound, as voice, I forebear to say as the bodies which strike the pupil of the eyes and stir the sight. For it strays abroad and comes but slowly, and dies away too soon, its frail nature scattered little by little among the breezes of air. Firstly, because coming from deep within it is not readily set loose from the thing: for that smells stream off and depart from things far beneath the surface is shown because all things

seem to smell more when broken, when crushed, when melted in the fire. Again, one may see that it is fashioned of larger first-beginnings than voice, since it does not find a path through stone walls, where voice and sound commonly pass. Wherefore too you will see that it is not so easy to trace in what spot that which smells has its place. For the blow grows cool as it dallies through the air, nor do tidings of things rush hot to the sense. And so dogs often go astray, and have to look for the footprints.

Yet this does not happen only among smells and in the class of savours, but likewise the forms and colours of things are not all so well fitted to the senses of all, but that certain of them are too pungent to the sight of some creatures. Nay, indeed, ravening lions can by no means face and gaze upon the cock, whose wont it is with clapping wings to drive out the night, and with shrill cry to summon dawn; so surely do they at once bethink themselves of flight, because, we may be sure, there are in the body of cocks certain seeds, which, when they are cast into the eyes of lions, stab into the pupils, and cause sharp pain, so that they cannot bear up against them in fierce confidence; and yet these things cannot in any way hurt our eyes, either because they do not pierce them or because, although they do, a free outlet from the eyes is afforded them, so that they cannot by staying there hurt the eyes in any part.