

Key Passages in Lucretius On Images: The Impact of Images Directly On The Mind

Post by "Cassius" of February 6, 2021 at 4:29 PM

I agree with what you are saying Don and as you probably expect, I would go further. I am not prepared to say that some versions of the mechanisms described by Lucretius are impossible, especially since I am far from comfortable that I even understand what he is saying. I do not think it is productive to try to lock down his descriptions with more detail than our scanty texts allow us to be sure of, and I think the best way to deal with them is always first to try to understand where he is coming from before we decide whether he is wrong or right.

So when you say "our brains do not receive images/films/eidōlon like a radio receives radio waves" I can completely agree - our brain is not a radio receiver and we are not going to be able to tune into to a local radio station without mechanical assistance. But that doesn't mean that next year new scientists aren't going to be able to rig new experiments and determine that there are currently-unknown waves that can stimulate our minds directly, and so my own position at present is basically what you are saying - that this theory represents a non-supernatural way of explaining phenomena that are even today difficult to understand, and that we should make of it what we will.

I am firmly convinced that nothing has changed in human nature since Epicurus and Lucretius first articulated this theory, so they would have faced the same issues of testing and observation of how it works that we do today -- and they would have had the same experiential results that we have - that the receipt of information in this way is not a way to communicate with gods or to reliably organize our daily efforts to live our lives happily. Whatever Epicurus thought about the theory, he was dealing with the exact same facts and human nature that we are dealing with today, so he would not have had facts which are not available to us to flesh out the theory any more than we can today.

All of which leads me to conclude that to the extent Epicurus thought this aspect of his philosophy was important it appears to have had a very specific and limited role, so I would not assign any more importance to it today than he did then.