

Episode Sixty-Seven - Did The Gods Wake Up One Day To Create The Universe?

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Welcome to Episode Sixty-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.

In this Episode 67 we continue our discussion of Book 5 with Charles reading today's text, starting with approximately Latin Line 146:

Munro Notes

146-194 : the gods dwell not in the world, but apart in seats fine as themselves their nature is not sensible to our bodily sense, but only to the finer sense of the mind: again to say that this world was created by the gods and will be eternal, and that it is impiety to gainsay this, is sheer folly: what could induce them to take such trouble? or what harm were it to us never to have been born? whence did the gods get the notion of man, so as to know how to make him? nay, this world and all in it was gradually formed by mere natural causes, as explained already. Munro Comment: "That Epic. and Lucr. believed in these gods is certain, as there observed : no less certain are the difficulties in reconciling that belief with their general system."

195-234: nay, if I did not know the first-beginnings of things, the imperfection of this world would prove to me the gods did not make it for man's use: see after all how small a part of the whole earth he can bring under tillage, and that with the sweat of his brow; and then his labour is often thrown away: look at all the miseries he suffers, dangers by sea and land, diseases, untimely death; compare the helpless baby with the young of other animals.

Browne 1743

Nor are you to believe that the sacred mansions of the gods are placed in any parts of this world of ours, for the nature of the gods is so subtle, and at so remote a distance from our senses, that it can scarce be apprehended by the mind. Since therefore it cannot be touched or felt by our hands, it can touch nothing that it is the object of our senses, for nothing has a

power to touch that is incapable of being touched itself. For this reason the abodes of the gods must be far different from ours; they must be subtle, and answerable to their own nature. But the truth of this I shall more fully prove in another place. And then, to say that the gods designed this noble fabric of the world for the sake of man, and therefore we are to speak honorably of this excellent work, and conceive it to be eternal, and shall remain forever; and that it is impious to prove that this frame of the world, contrived by the gods to continue forever for the use of man, shall fall to ruin; or to offer to disturb its duration by words or arguments, and so overturn things from their very foundations - to pretend and enlarge upon this, and more such stuff, my Memmius, is all madness; for what advantage can any acknowledgements of ours bestow upon divinities happy and immortal, that they should give themselves any trouble upon our account?

Or what new pleasure could prevail upon the gods, who lived at rest for so many ages before, to desire to change their former state of ease and tranquility? Those generally rejoice in a new condition who have been unhappy in the last, but the man who has felt no misfortunes in his former state, but has lived pleasantly and undisturbed, what could excite the love of novelty in such a one as this? Was the life of the gods spent in darkness and melancholy till the structure of the World shone out and cleared their spirits? Or what evil had we suffered if we had never been created? Indeed, when we are once born, we should strive (whoever he be) to preserve our life, so long as we find an engaging pleasure in our being, but he who never tasted the love of life, nor was enrolled among the living, what harm could he complain of if he had never been? Besides, what model had the gods to work by, when they set about the creation of the world? From whence had they any previous knowledge of man to inform them, and give their mind an idea of what they proposed to make? How could they become acquainted with the powers and force of the atoms, and with what they were able to effect by the changes of their site and order, if Nature herself had not afforded them first a specimen of creation? For the seeds of bodies were from all eternity so variously agitated by blows from without, and driven so about by their own weight, and tried every way to unite, and attempted all sorts of motion that might end at last in the formation of things, that no wonder they at last fell into such dispositions, and so decent order, as to produce the universe, and continually preserve and renew it.

For were I wholly ignorant of the origin of things, yet I could prove this truth from the heavens, and by many other reasons, that the frame of the world was by no means raised by the gods for the use of man, so faulty it is, and contrived so ill. And first, the Earth, covered over by the violent whirl of the heavens, huge mountains and woods, the harbor of wild beasts, and rocks and vast lakes, and the sea, which widely separates the distant shores, take up a great part of it; and then the torrid heat, and continual cold, rob mankind almost of two parts, and make them uninhabitable. The fruitful fields that remain, nature of herself would spread over with thorns if the labor of man did not prevent it; if he did not, to preserve life, force the earth by constant toil with strong tools, and cut it through with the plough; if we did not turn up the fruitful clods with the crooked share, and compel the soil to exert its strength, of its own accord it would produce nothing. And yet, when the fruits are raised with great labor, when they look

green upon the ground, and all things flourish; either the sun's rays burn everything up with their fierce heat, or sudden showers, or piercing frosts, destroy our hopes; of the blasts of wind, with terrible hurricanes, blow them away. And then, why does Nature nourish and increase the dreadful race of wild beasts, by sea and land, the professed enemies to humankind? Why do the seasons of the year bring disease with them? Why does untimely death wander every way abroad?

Besides, a child, like a shipwrecked mariner on shore by the cruel tide, lies naked upon the ground; a wretched infant, destitute of every help of life, as soon as Nature, by the mother's pangs, has thrown him from the womb into light; and then he fills the air with mournful cries, as he has reason to do, since in the course of life he has such a series of evils to pass through. But cattle of every kind, and herds, and wild beasts, grow up with ease. They have no need of rattles to divert them; they have no occasion for the kind nurse, by her fond and broken words, to keep them in humor; they require no difference of dress for the several seasons of the year; they have no need of arms, nor high walls, to secure their property; for the Earth, with curious contrivance, of herself produces everything in abundance for the whole variety of creatures to feed and support them.

Munro 1886

This too you may not possibly believe, that the holy seats of the gods exist in any parts of the world: the fine nature of the gods far withdrawn from our senses is hardly seen by the thought of the mind; and since it has ever eluded the touch and stroke of the hands, it must touch nothing which is tangible for us; for that cannot touch which does not admit of being touched in turn. And therefore their seats as well must be unlike our seats, fine, even as their bodies are fine. All which I will prove to you later in copious argument. To say again that for the sake of men they have willed to set in order the glorious nature of the world and therefore it is meet to praise the work of the gods, calling as it does for all praise, and to believe that it will be eternal and immortal, and that it is an unholy thing ever to shake by any force from its fixed seats that which by the forethought of the gods in ancient days has been established on everlasting foundations for mankind, or to assail it by speech and utterly overturn it from top to bottom; and to invent and add other figments of the kind, Memmius, is all sheer folly. For what advantage can our gratitude bestow on immortal and blessed beings, that for our sakes they should take in hand to administer aught?

And what novel incident should have induced them hitherto at rest so long after to desire to change their former life? For it seems natural he should rejoice in a new state of things, whom old things annoy; but for him whom no ill has befallen in times gone by when he passed a pleasant existence, what could have kindled in such a one a love of change? Did life lie groveling in darkness and sorrow, until the first dawn of the birth time of things? Or what evil had it been for us never to have been born? Whoever has been born must want to continue in life, so long as fond pleasure shall keep him; but for him who has never tasted the love, never been on the lists of life, what harm not to have been born? Whence again was first implanted in the gods a pattern for begetting things in general as well as the preconception of what men

are, so that they knew and saw in mind what they wanted to make? And in what way was the power of first-beginnings ever ascertained, and what they could effect by a change in their mutual arrangements, unless nature herself gave the model for making things? For in such wise the first-beginnings of things many in number in many ways impelled by blows for infinite ages back and kept in motion by their own weights have been wont to be carried along and to unite in all manner of ways and thoroughly test every kind of production possible by their mutual combinations; that it is not strange if they have also fallen into arrangements and have come into courses like to those out of which this sum of things is now carried on by constant renewing.

But if I did not know what first-beginnings of things are, yet this judging by the very arrangements of heaven I would venture to affirm, and led by many other facts to maintain, that the nature of things has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it is encumbered. In the first place of all, the space which the vast reach of heaven covers, a portion greedy mountains and forests of wild beasts have occupied, rocks and wasteful pools take up and the sea which holds wide apart the coasts of different lands. Next, of nearly two thirds burning heat and the constant fall of frost rob mortals. What is left for tillage, even that nature by its power would overrun with thorns, unless the force of man made head against it, accustomed for the sake of a livelihood to groan beneath the strong hoe and to cut through the earth by pressing down the plow. Unless by turning up the fruitful clods with the share and laboring the soil of the earth we stimulate things to rise, they could not spontaneously come up into the clear air; and even then sometimes when things earned with great toil now put forth their leaves over the lands and are all in blossom, either the ethereal sun bums them up with excessive heats or sudden rains and cold frosts cut them off, and the blasts of the winds waste them by a furious hurricane. Again, why does nature give food and increase to the frightful race of wild beasts dangerous to mankind both by sea and land? Why do the seasons of the year bring diseases in their train? Why stalks abroad untimely death?

Then, too the baby, like to a sailor cast away by the cruel waves, lies naked on the ground, speechless, wanting every furtherance of life, soon as nature by the throes of birth has shed him forth from his mother's womb into the borders of light: he fills the room with a rueful wading, as well he may whose destiny it is to go through in life so many ills. But the different flocks herds and wild beasts grow up; they want no rattles; to none of them need be addressed the fond broken accents of the fostering nurse; they ask not different dresses according to the season; no nor do they want arms or lofty walls, whereby to protect their own, the earth itself and nature manifold in her works producing in plenty all things for all.

Bailey 1921

This, too, it cannot be that you should believe, that there are holy abodes of the gods in any parts of the world, For the fine nature of the gods, far sundered from our senses, is scarcely seen by the understanding of the mind; and since it lies far beneath all touch or blow from our hands, it cannot indeed touch anything which can be touched by us. For nothing can touch which may not itself be touched. Therefore even their abodes too must needs be unlike our

abodes, fine even as are their bodies; all which I will hereafter prove to you with plenteous argument. Further, to say that for man's sake they were willing to fashion the glorious nature of the world, and for that cause 'tis fitting to praise the work of the gods, which is worthy to be praised, and to believe that it will be everlasting and immortal, and that it is sin ever to stir from its seats by any force what was established for the races of men for all time by the ancient wisdom of the gods, or to assail it with argument, and to overthrow it from top to bottom; to imagine and to add all else of this sort, Memmius, is but foolishness. For what profit could our thanks bestow on the immortal and blessed ones, that they should essay to do anything for our sakes? Or what new thing could have enticed them so long after, when they were aforetime at rest, to desire to change their former life?

For it is clear that he must take joy in new things, to whom the old are painful; but for him, whom no sorrow has befallen in the time gone by, when he led a life of happiness, for such an one what could have kindled a passion for new things? Or what ill had it been to us never to have been made? Did our life, forsooth, lie wallowing in darkness and grief, until the first creation of things dawned upon us? For whosoever has been born must needs wish to abide in life, so long as enticing pleasure shall hold him. But for him, who has never tasted the love of life, and was never in the ranks of the living, what harm is it never to have been made? Further, how was there first implanted in the gods a pattern for the begetting of things, yea, and the concept of man, so that they might know and see in their mind what they wished to do, or in what way was the power of the first-beginnings ever learnt, or what they could do when they shifted their order one with the other, if nature did not herself give a model of creation? For so many first-beginnings of things in many ways, driven on by blows from time everlasting until now, and moved by their own weight, have been wont to be borne on, and to unite in every way, and essay everything that they might create, meeting one with another, that it is no wonder if they have fallen also into such arrangements, and have passed into such movements, as those whereby this present sum of things is carried on, ever and again replenished.

But even if I knew not what are the first-beginnings of things, yet this I would dare to affirm from the very workings of heaven, and to prove from many other things as well, that by no means has the nature of things been fashioned for us by divine grace: so great are the flaws with which it stands beset. First, of all that the huge expanse of heaven covers, half thereof mountains and forests of wild beasts have greedily seized; rocks possess it, and waste pools and the sea, which holds far apart the shores of the lands. Besides, two-thirds almost burning heat and the ceaseless fall of frost steal from mortals. Of all the field-land that remains, yet nature would by her force cover it up with thorns, were it not that the force of man resisted her, ever wont for his livelihood to groan over the strong mattock and to furrow the earth with the deep-pressed plough. But that by turning the fertile clods with the share, and subduing the soil of the earth we summon them to birth, of their own accord the crops could not spring up into the liquid air; and even now sometimes, when won by great toil things grow leafy throughout the land, and are all in flower, either the sun in heaven burns them with too much heat, or sudden rains destroy them and chill frosts, and the blasts of the winds harry them with headstrong hurricane. Moreover, why does nature foster and increase the awesome tribe of

wild beasts to do harm to the race of man by land and sea? Why do the seasons of the year bring maladies? Why does death stalk abroad before her time?

Then again, the child, like a sailor tossed ashore by the cruel waves, lies naked on the ground, dumb, lacking all help for life, when first nature has cast him forth by travail from his mother's womb into the coasts of light, and he fills the place with woful wailing, as is but right for one for whom it remains in life to pass through so much trouble. But the diverse flocks and herds grow up and the wild beasts, nor have they need of rattles, nor must there be spoken to any of them the fond and broken prattle of the fostering nurse, nor do they seek diverse garments to suit the season of heaven, nay, and they have no need of weapons or lofty walls, whereby to protect their own, since for all of them the earth itself brings forth all things bounteously, and nature, the quaint artificer of things.