

Episode Seventy - More On The End of The World

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Welcome to Episode Seventy 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 70 we will read approximately Latin line 324 of Book V, and we will talk more about the end of the world, destruction by fire and water, and take an interesting excursion into what this passage may mean about the immortality of the [Epicurean gods](#). Now let's join Charles reading today's text.

Latin Lines 324--415

Munro Notes-

324-350 If the world had no beginning, why did history commence with the wars of Thebes and Troy? nay the world began but lately; and so arts and sciences are still in progress: if it be said all these existed before, but were destroyed by some great catastrophe, then you must the more admit that the world will come to an end: when it suffered so grievously, had the causes been more powerful, it must have perished altogether; thus we all know we shall die, because we have the same diseases as those who are already dead.

351-379 : again that which is everlasting must either be impenetrable like atoms, or intangible like void, or must have nothing without it into which it can pass or out of which destructive forces can conic; and this is the case with the universe: but we have shewn that not one of these conditions is true of our world; it is therefore doomed to destruction; and therefore it had a beginning too; for being mortal, it could not have lasted from eternity.

380-415: again since its chief members contend in such furious civil strife, the world may perish either when fire has overcome water, or water fire: thus, as poets fable, fire once was near conquering when Phaeton was run away with by the horses of the sun : this story may represent some real event; as may the flood of Deucalion some temporary victory of water.

Browne 1743

Further, if the heavens and the earth had no beginning, but were from eternity the same, how comes it that no poets have sung of any great events beyond the Theban War and the destruction of Troy? How came the exploits of so many heroes to be buried in oblivion that none of their great actions are recorded in the eternal monuments of fame, to live forever? For no other reason, I conceive, but that the world is of a late creation, that the substance of the world is new, and began not long ago. And therefore some arts are but lately known, others are polished and refined, many new discoveries are made in navigation, and the masters of music have but now brought sound and harmony to perfection; and, in the last place, this very nature of things which I now write of, and the reasons of them, are but lately found out, and I call myself one of the first who have attempted to convey them to posterity in Latin verse. But if you think that these things were long before the same they are now, but that mankind was destroyed by the rage of fire, or cities were overwhelmed by earthquakes (the great terrors of the world) or that the rapid rivers, by continual showers, overflowed the earth, and covered whole towns, you have still the more reason to be convinced, and to allow, that the earth and the heavens will at last be destroyed. For if things were liable to feel so great convulsions, and suffer so great dangers, it is plain if the cause of these ruins had been more violent, they must have perished and been utterly dissolved. Nor have we any other rule to judge that we ourselves are mortal, and must die, but that we sicken with the same diseases as those endured whom death has removed from this life.

Besides, whatever is eternal must be so either because it consists of solid seeds, or it cannot be broken by blows; nor will it suffer anything to pierce it, to disunite the close contexture of its parts; of this sort are the seeds of matter, whose nature we have shown before; or things would remain forever, because they are out of the power of stroke, as a void is, which is not to be touched nor can be affected by force; or because there is no extent of space about them into which their parts may fall when they are dissolved. For this reason the universe, or all, is eternal - there is no place beyond, where its scattered seeds may retire, nor are there any bodies to beat upon it, and by violent blows break it into pieces. But as I said, the substance of the world is not formed altogether of solid seeds, because a void is mixed with its parts, nor is it wholly void, nor are there wanting bodies, rising to strike and overthrow with mighty force this world, or to bring it into danger of ruin some other way; nor is there any defect of place or space beyond, into which the walls of the world may tumble down, or they may fall to pieces by some other force, and be dissolved. The Gate of death therefore is not barred against the heavens, nor the sun, nor the earth, nor the deep waters of the sea; but stands open, with its wide and gaping jaws, to receive them all. For these reasons it must needs be allowed that these things had a beginning, for whatever is formed of mortal seeds, and must die, could not from eternity resist the strong attacks of infinite past time and the power of age.

Lastly, since the elements (the first principles of the world) are continually fighting, and carrying on an implacable war among themselves; can there be no end, think you, or their long contests? If the sun, suppose, or the fire, by sucking up all the moisture should get the better, which they strive to do, but have not yet effected their design; such a supply of water do the rivers pour in, and the sea from its mighty deeps rather threatens to drown the world. But in

vain – the brushing winds are continually licking up and lessening the tide, and the hot sun, with its rays, drinks up a part, and things rather seem in danger of being dried up than of perishing by a flood of waters. With such equal success is the war carried on, and their powers are so disputed with equal force. Yet time was when the rage of fire once prevailed over the world; and the water (as they say) once got the dominion, and drowned the earth. The fire had the victory, and set everything in a flame, when the mad fury of the horses of the sun, flying out of their course, dragged the wretched Phaeton through the whole heavens, and over all the regions of the world; but great Jupiter, in his fierce rage, suddenly struck the daring youth with a thunderbolt, and tumbled him headlong from his horses to the Earth. And Phoebus, meeting him as he fell, gathered up the scattered rays of the sun, the great luminary of the world, brought back the distracted horses, and harnessed them trembling to the chariot again; and driving them in the right course, recovered things to their proper order. This tale the Grecian poets sung of old, which is absurd and against all belief, yet the fire may get the mastery, if the large supplies of fiery seeds are brought from the great mass of matter into the world. The rage of these seeds must by some force be weakened and suppressed, or things by so scorching heats must perish and be burnt up. The Water likewise prevailed once, as they say, when it overthrew many cities, but when the seeds that were supplied from the mass of matter were turned into some other channel, the rain ceased and the rivers flowed again within their banks.

Munro 1886

Again, if there was no birth-time of earth and heaven and they have been from everlasting, why before the Theban war and the destruction of Troy have not other poets as well sung other themes? Whither have so many deeds of men so often passed away, why live they nowhere embodied in lasting records of fame? The truth methinks is that the sum has but a recent date and the nature of the world is new and has but lately had its commencement. Wherefore even now some arts are receiving their last polish, some are even in course of growth: just now many improvements have been made in ships; only yesterday musicians have given birth to tuneful melodies; then too this nature or system of things has been discovered lately, and I the very first of all have only now been found able to transfer it into native words. But if haply you believe that before this all things have existed just the same, but that the generations of men have perished by burning heat, or that cities have fallen by some great concussion of the world, or that after constant rains devouring rivers have gone forth over the earth and have whelmed towns, so much the more you must yield and admit that there will be entire destruction too of earth and heaven; for when things were tried by so great distempers and so great dangers, at that time had a more disastrous cause pressed upon them, they would far and wide have gone to destruction and mighty ruin. And in no other way are we proved to be mortals, except because we all alike in turn fall sick of the same diseases which those had whom nature has withdrawn from life.

Again whatever things last for ever, must either, because they are of solid body, repel strokes and not suffer ought to pass into them, sufficient to disunite the closely massed parts within:

such are the bodies of matter whose nature we have shown before: or they must be able to endure through all time for this reason, because they are exempt from blows, as void is which remains untouched and suffers not a jot from any stroke; or else because there is no extent of room around, into which things so to say may depart and be broken up: in this way the sum of sums is eternal and there is no place outside into which things may spring asunder, nor are there anybodies which can fall upon them and dissolve them by a powerful blow. But the nature of the world, as I have shown, is neither of solid body, since void is mixed up in things, nor is it again like void, no nor is there lack of bodies that may haply rise up in mass out of the infinite and overthrow this sum of things with furious tornado or bring upon them some other perilous disaster; nor further is the nature of room or the space of deep void wanting, into which the walls of the world may be scattered abroad; or they may be assailed and perish by some other force. Therefore the gate of death is not closed against heaven or sun or earth or the deep waters of the sea, but stands open and looks towards them with huge wide-gaping maw. And therefore also you must admit that these things likewise had a birth; for things which are of mortal body could not for an infinite time back up to the present have been able to set at naught the puissant strength of immeasurable age.

Again since the chiefest members of the world fight so hotly together, fiercely stirred by no hallowed civil warfare, see you not that some limit may be set to their long struggle? Either when the sun and all heat shall have drunk up all the waters and gotten the mastery: this they are ever striving to do, but as yet are unable to accomplish their endeavors: such abundant supplies the rivers furnish, and threaten to turn aggressors and flood all things with a deluge from the deep gulfs of ocean; all in vain, since the winds sweeping over the seas and the ethereal sun decomposing them with his rays do lessen them, and trust to be able to dry all things up before water can attain the end of its endeavor. Such a war do they breathe out with undecided issue, and strive with each other to determine it for mighty ends; though once by the way fire got the upper hand and once, as the story goes, water reigned paramount in the fields. Fire gained the mastery and licked and burnt up many things, when the headstrong might of the horses of the sun dashed from the course and hurried Phaethon through the whole sky and over all lands. But the almighty father, stirred then to fierce wrath, with a sudden thunderstroke dashed Phaethon down from his horses to earth, and the sun meeting him as he fell caught from him the ever-burning lamp of the world and got in hand the scattered steeds and yoked them shaking all over; then guided them on their proper course and gave fresh life to all things. Thus to wit have the old poets of the Greeks sung; though it is all too widely at variance with true reason. Fire may gain the mastery when more bodies of matter than usual have gathered themselves up out of the infinite; and then its powers decay, vanquished in some way or other, or else things perish burnt up by the torrid air. Water too of yore gathered itself and began to get the mastery, as the story goes, when it whelmed many cities of men; and then when all that force that had gathered itself up out of the infinite, by some means or other was turned aside and withdrew, the rains were stayed and the rivers abated their fury.

Bailey 1921

Moreover, if there was no birth and beginning of the earth and sky, and they were always from everlasting, why beyond the Theban war and the doom of Troy have not other poets sung of other happenings as well? whither have so many deeds of men so often passed away? why are they nowhere enshrined in glory in the everlasting memorials of fame? But indeed, I trow, our whole world is in its youth, and quite new is the nature of the firmament, nor long ago did it receive its first-beginnings. Wherefore even now certain arts are being perfected, even now are growing; much now has been added to ships, but a while ago musicians gave birth to tuneful harmonies. Again, this nature of things, this philosophy, is but lately discovered, and I myself was found the very first of all who could turn it into the speech of my country. But if by chance you think that all these same things were aforetime, but that the generations of men perished in burning heat, or that cities have fallen in some great upheaval of the world, or that from ceaseless rains ravaging rivers have issued over the lands and swallowed up cities, all the more must you be vanquished and confess that there will come to pass a perishing of earth and sky as well. For when things were assailed by such great maladies and dangers, then if a more fatal cause had pressed upon them, far and wide would they have spread their destruction and mighty ruin. Nor in any other way do we see one another to be mortal; except that we fall sick of the same diseases as those whom nature has sundered from life.

Moreover, if ever things abide for everlasting, it must needs be either that, because they are of solid body, they beat back assaults, nor suffer anything to come within them, which might unloose the close-locked parts within, such as are the bodies of matter, whose nature we have declared before; or that they are able to continue through all time, because they are exempt from blows, as is the void, which abides untouched nor suffers a whit from assault; or else because there is no supply of room all around, into which things might part asunder and be broken up—even as the sum of sums is eternal—nor is there any room without into which they may leap apart, nor are there bodies which might fall upon them and break them up with stout blow. But neither, as I have shown, is the nature of the world endowed with solid body, since there is void mingled in things; nor yet is it as the void, nor indeed are bodies lacking, which might by chance gather together out of infinite space and overwhelm this sum of things with headstrong hurricane, or bear down on it some other form of dangerous destruction; nor again is there nature of room or space in the deep wanting, into which the walls of the world might be scattered forth; or else they may be pounded and perish by any other force you will. The gate of death then is not shut on sky or sun or earth or the deep waters of the sea, but it stands open facing them with huge vast gaping maw. Wherefore, again, you must needs confess that these same things have a birth; for indeed, things that are of mortal body could not from limitless time up till now have been able to set at defiance the stern strength of immeasurable age.

Again, since the mighty members of the world so furiously fight one against the other, stirred up in most unhallowed warfare, do you not see that some end may be set to their long contest? Either when the sun and every kind of heat have drunk up all the moisture and won the day: which they are struggling to do, but as yet they have not accomplished their effort: so great a supply do the rivers bring and threaten to go beyond their bounds, and deluge all things from out the deep abyss of ocean; all in vain, since the winds as they sweep the seas, diminish them,

and so does the sun in heaven, as he unravels their fabric with his rays, and they boast that they can dry up all things, ere moisture can reach the end of its task. So vast a war do they breathe out in equal contest, as they struggle and strive one with another for mighty issues; yet once in this fight fire gained the upper hand, and once, as the story goes, moisture reigned supreme on the plains. For fire won its way and burnt up many things, all-devouring, when the resistless might of the horses of the sun went astray and carried Phaethon again through the whole heavens and over all lands. But, thereupon, the almighty father, thrilled with keen anger, with sudden stroke of his thunder dashed high-souled Phaethon from his chariot to earth, and the sun, meeting him as he fell, caught the everlasting lamp of the world, and tamed the scattered steeds, and yoked them trembling, and so guiding them along their own path, replenished all things; so forsooth sang the old poets of the Greeks: but it is exceeding far removed from true reasoning. For fire can only prevail when more bodies of its substance have risen up out of infinite space; and then its strength fails, vanquished in some way, or else things perish, burnt up by its fiery breath. Moisture likewise, once gathered together and began to prevail, as the story goes, when it overwhelmed living men with its waves. Thereafter, when its force was by some means turned aside and went its way, even all that had gathered together from infinite space, the rains ceased, and the strength of the rivers was brought low.