

Episode Eighty-Eight - The Waters of the Nile And The Sulfur Pits That Are Fatal To Birds

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Welcome to Episode Eighty-Eight 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 visit EpicureanFriends.com, and let us know if you have any questions or comments.

In this Episode 88 we continue in Book Six and we will read approximately Latin lines 694-818 as we discuss the waters of the Nile and the sulphur pits that kill the birds that fly over them.

Now let's join Don reading today's text.

Munro Notes-

703-711: in the case of many things you must state several causes, to be sure of including the actual cause: for instance if you see a dead body at some distance, you may have to suggest this and that cause, though you are sure only one has occasioned the death.—Such an introduction to a series of cases which admit of more than one explanation is, as has often been remarked above and as may be seen in [Epicurus' letter to Pythocles](#), very characteristic of this philosophy.

712-737: the Nile may rise from various causes: from the etesian winds blowing up the stream and stopping the waters; or from sand accumulating at the mouth; or perhaps rather from the rains at its source caused by these winds collecting the clouds there against the high mountains; or from snow melting on the lofty Ethiopian hills.

738- 768: Avernian districts are so called because birds cannot live there: there is one at Cumae, another in the acropolis of Atheus, another in Syria: the effects are quite natural, so that you need not look on them as the gates of hell.

769-780: let me repeat that the earth has atoms of all shapes, some pleasant, some offensive to the taste, and to all the other senses.

781-817: then many things are noxious, often fatal, either to men generally or to men in certain conditions of health; as the shade of certain trees, steam of hot water, fumes of charcoal, sulphureous exhalations, still more so those from mines.

818-829: in the same way these Avernian spots send up a poisonous steam, so that birds on coming across it are disabled and tumble down ; and when they reach the sources of it, are quite killed.

Browne 1743

[694] Besides, the sea, for a great way, dashes its waves against the roots of this mountain, and then again sucks up its tide. The waters press into these caverns that lie directly under those open jaws above. This you must allow, and the flames yielding to the driving flood there force their passage out, and fly abroad, and cast the fire on high, and throw out rocks, and raise whole clouds of sand, for on the summit there are certain basins where wind is generated: the Greeks call them so; we call them mouths and jaws.

[703] There are some things, observe, for which it is not sufficient to assign one reason, but many: out of which only one is the true. As when you see the dead body of a man lying at a distance upon the ground, you are to recollect all the causes which possibly might occasion his death in order to find out the right, for you cannot correctly say whether he died by the sword, or by cold, or by disease, or perhaps by poison, though we know it was by one of these, and every one thinks so. The same method you are to observe in many other cases.

[712] The Nile, the only river in all Egypt, increases in the summer, and overflows the fields. It waters the country of Egypt about the middle of summer either because in summer the north winds are opposite to the mouths of the river, at the season when the Etesia's blow, and beating hard against the stream stop the current, and driving the waters upwards fill the channel, and force back the flood; for without doubt those northern winds blow directly against the tide. The river flows from the warm climate of the south and divides the country of the black Aethiopians that are thoroughly sodden with the sun's heat, and rises far in the most southern part of the world.

[724] And it may be that great heaps of sand that are raised against the stream choke the mouths of the river when the sea, by the violence of the winds, drives the sand into the channel and stops it up. By this means the passages of the river are more confined and the current of the water is slower and of less force.

[729] Or perhaps the rains are more violent near the head of the river at that season of the year when the Etesian winds blow from the north, and drive all the clouds to the more southern parts. When the clouds meet in that warm quarter they are condensed and pressed hard against the high mountains, and by that force the rain is squeezed out.

[735] Or, lastly, the increase in the river may proceed from the high mountains of the Aethiopians when the sun, that searches all things with his dissolving rays, forces the melted snow to descend into the plains.

[738] And now the nature of that place or lake we call Avernan I shall next explain.

[740] And first, it takes its name from its effect, because tis fatal to birds; for when the feathered kind fly to this place their flight is stopped, they flutter in the air, and fall with hanging wing and bended head upon the earth, if haply it be earth, or in the water if it be a lake. At Cuma there is a place like this, and on the Mount Vesuvius, which, filled with burning sulphur, throws out smoke.

[749] Another of the same there is within the walls of Athens, upon the top of that high tower near which the kind Tritonian Pallas has her temple. Here the hoarse ravens never steer their flight, not when the altars smoke with slaughtered victims. They do not shun this tower to fly the rage of angry Pallas for their officious care, as Greek poets sing, but tis the noxious nature of the place that drives them hence.

[756] They say there's such a place as this in Syria, where beasts no sooner venture with their feet but the pernicious vapor strikes them dead, as if by sudden stroke they fell a sacrifice to infernal gods.

[760] All these things proceed from natural causes, and what these causes are will soon appear, by tracing out their principles, lest you should think in places such as these Hell-Gates are fixed, and fancy that the gods below draw through these passages departed souls into the infernal shades, as the swift deer are said by smelling to draw out the lurking serpents from their holes. But how absurd to reason are such thoughts; observe, for now I am going to explain.

[769] And first I say, as I have often said before, that in the earth are seeds of things of very shape, many that prolong the life of man, and many that inflict disease and hasten death. And I have shown that there are other seeds peculiarly disposed to serve the use of other creatures, and support their life; because these seeds are different in their nature they vary in their texture and their shape. Many hurtful seeds pass through the ears and many sharp and stinking seeds affect the nose; some are offensive to the touch, some to be avoided by the sight, and others bitter to the taste.

[781] And thus you see how many things there are deadly, distasteful, odious to the sense. Some trees are so pernicious by their shade that they affect the head with grievous pain if one lies on the grass beneath the boughs. There is a tree that grows on the high hill of Helicon, whose blossoms by their smell give present death; for in the earth are seeds of every kind, variously mixed, which she with curious art separates and applies to things, as each in its own nature most requires. A lamp, just extinguished, is by its smell so offensive to the nose that it stupefies, as if a man were struck down by a fit of apoplexy. A woman will fall dead asleep at the nauseous smell of an ointment made of the testicles of the beaver; her fine work will drop

from her tender fingers, especially if she smells it when her fluors are upon her. Besides, there are many things that entirely dissolve the feeble limbs all over the body, and shake the soul within out of her place. If you stay long in a warm bath, and continue in the vessel of hot water when the belly is full, how apt will you be to faint before you get out? The suffocating power of charcoal and its stifling smell, how soon do they find a passage to the brain, unless you have drank plentifully of water before? When a burning fever has seized upon the limbs, the smell of wine is like a stroke that takes away the sense. Don't you observe likewise that sulphur and bitumen, with its noxious smell, are generated in the bowels of the earth itself? And so when men pursue the veins of gold and silver, and with their tools dig in the very entrails of the earth, what hurtful vapors do the mines exhale? What deadly damps flow from the golden ore? How wretchedly the miners look? How wan their color? Have you not seen or heard how soon they die, how short their life is who are condemned to this sad servitude? The earth then must needs belch out these poisonous exhalations, and send them all abroad, and taint the open air.

Munro 1886

[694] Again the sea to a great extent breaks its waves and sucks back its surf at the roots of that mountain. Caverns reach from this sea as far as the deep gorges of the mountain below. Through these you must admit \[that air mixed up with water passes; and\] the nature of the case compels \[this air to enter in from that\] open sea and pass right within and then go out in blasts and so lift up flame and throw out stones and raise clouds of sand; for on the summit are craters, as they name them in their own language; what we call gorges and mouths.

[703] There are things too not a few for which it is not sufficient to assign one cause; you must give several, one of which at the same time is the real cause. For instance should you see the lifeless body of a man lying at some distance, it would be natural to mention all the different causes of death, in order that the one real cause of that man's death be mentioned among them. Thus you may be able to prove that he has not died by steel or cold or from disease or haply from poison; yet we know that it is something of this kind which has befallen him; and so in many other cases we may make the same remark.

[712] The Nile rises every summer and overflows the plains, that one sole river throughout the whole land of Egypt. It waters Egypt often in the middle of the hot season, either because in summer there are north winds opposite its mouths, which at that time of year go by the name of etesian winds. Blowing up the river they retard it and driving the waters backwards fill its channel full and force the river to stand still; for beyond a doubt these blasts which start from the icy constellations of the pole are carried right up the stream. That river comes from the south out of the heat-fraught country, rising far up from the central region of day among races of men black in their sun-baked complexion.

[724] It is quite possible too that the great accumulation of sand may bar up the mouths against the opposing waves, when the sea stirred up by the winds throws up the sand within the channel; whereby the outlet of the river is rendered less free and the current of the waters

at the same time less rapid in its downward flow.

[729] It may be also that the rains are more frequent at its source in that season, because the etesian blasts of the north winds drive all the clouds together into those parts at that time. And, you are to know, when they have been driven on to the central region of day and have gathered together, then the clouds jammed close against the high mountains are massed together and violently compressed.

[735] Perhaps too it gets its increase high up from the lofty mountains of the Ethiopians, when the all-surveying sun with his thawing rays constrains the white snows to descend into the plains.

[738] Now mark, and I will make clear to you what kind of nature the several Avernian places and lakes possess.

[740] First of all, as to the name Avernian by which they are called, it has been given to them from their real nature, because they are noxious to all birds; for when they have arrived in flight just opposite those spots, they forget to row with their wings, they drop their sails and fall with soft neck outstretched headlong to the earth, if so be that the nature of the ground admit of that, or into the water, if so be that a lake of Avernus spreads below. There is such a spot at Cumae, where the mountains are charged with acrid sulfur, and smoke enriched with hot springs.

[749] Such a spot there also is within the Athenian walls, on the very summit of the citadel, beside the temple of bountiful Tritonian Pallas; which croaking crows never come near on the wing; no not when the high altars smoke with offerings: so constantly they fly, not before the sharp wrath of Pallas for the sake of yon vigil kept, as the poets of the Greeks have sung, but the nature of the place suffices by its own proper power.

[756] In Syria too as well a spot, we are told, is found to exist of such a sort that as soon as ever even four-footed beasts have entered in, its mere natural power forces them to fall down heavily, just as if they were felled in a moment as sacrifices to the manes gods.

[760] Now all these things go on by a natural law, and it is quite plain whence spring the causes from which they are produced; that the gate of Orcus be not haply believed to exist in such spots; and next we imagine that the manes gods from beneath do haply draw souls down from them to the borders of Acheron; as wing-footed stags are supposed often by their scent to draw out from their holes the savage serpent-tribes. How widely opposed to true reason this is, now learn; for now I essay to tell of the real fact.

[769] First of all I say, as I have often said before, that in the earth are elements of things of every kind: many, which serve for food, helpful to life; and many whose property it is to cause diseases and hasten death. And we have shown before that one thing is more adapted to one, another thing to another living creature for the purposes of life, because of their natures and their textures and their primary elements being all unlike the one to the other. Many which are noxious pass through the ears, many make their way too through the nostrils, dangerous and

harsh when they come in contact; and not a few are to be shunned by the touch, and not a few to be avoided by the sight, and others are nauseous in taste.

[781] Again you may see how many things are for man of a virulently noxious sensation and are nauseous and oppressive; to certain trees for instance has been given so very oppressive a shade that they often cause headaches when a man has lain down under them extended on the grass. There is a tree too on the great hills of Helicon which has the property of killing a man by the noisome scent of its flower. All these things you are to know rise up out of the earth, because it contains many seeds of many things in many ways mixed up together and gives them out in a state of separation. Again when a newly extinguished night-light encounters the nostrils with its acrid stench, it sends to sleep then and there a man who from disease is subject to falling down and foaming at the mouth. A woman is put to sleep by oppressive castor and falls back in her seat, and her gay work drops out of her soft hands, if she has smelt it at the time when she has her monthly discharges. And many things besides relax through all the frame the fainting limbs and shake the soul in its seats within. Then too if you linger long in the hot baths when you are somewhat full and do bathe, how liable you are to tumble down in a fit while seated in the midst of the hot water! Again, how readily do the oppressive power and fumes of charcoal make their way into the brain, if we have not first taken water! But when burning violently it has filled the chambers of a house, the fumes of the virulent substance act on the nerves like a murderous blow. See you not too that even within the earth sulfur is generated and asphalt forms incrustations of a noisome stench? See you not, when they are following up the veins of silver and gold and searching with the pick quite into the bowels of the earth, what stench Scaptensula exhales from below? Then what mischief do gold mines exhale! To what state do they reduce men's faces and what a complexion they produce! Know you not by sight or hearsay how they commonly perish in a short time and how all vital power fails those whom the hard compulsion of necessity confines in such an employment? All such exhalations then the earth steams forth and breathes out into the open air and light of heaven.

Bailey 1921

[694] Moreover, in great part the sea makes its waves break and sucks in its tide at the roots of that mountain. From this sea caves stretch underneath right to the deep jaws of the mountain. By this path we must admit that [water] passes in, and the fact compels us [to believe that wind is mingled with it] and pierces deep in from the open sea, and then breathes out, and so lifts up the flame and casts up rocks and raises clouds of dust. For on the topmost peak are craters, as the inhabitants name them; what we call jaws or mouths.

[703] Some things there are, too, not a few, for which to tell one cause is not enough; we must give more, one of which is yet the actual cause; just as if you yourself were to see the lifeless body of a man lying before you, it would be right that you should name all causes of death, in order that the one cause of that man's death might be told. For you could not prove that he had perished by the sword or of cold, or by disease or perchance by poison, but we know that it was something of this sort which was his fate. Likewise, we can say the same in many cases.

[712] The Nile, the river of all Egypt, alone in the world rises, as summer comes, and overflows the plains. It waters Egypt often amid the hot season, either because in summer the north winds, which at that time are said to be the etesian winds, are dead against its mouths; blowing against its stream they check it, and driving the waters upwards fill the channel and make it stop. For without doubt these blasts, which are started from the chill constellations of the pole are driven full against the stream. The river comes from the south out of the quarter where heat is born, rising among the black races of men of sunburnt colour far inland in the region of mid-day.

[724] It may be too that a great heaping up of sand may choke up the mouths as a bar against the opposing waves, when the sea, troubled by the winds, drives the sand within; and in this manner it comes to pass that the river has less free issue, and the waves likewise a less easy downward flow.

[729] It may be, too, perhaps that rains occur more at its source at that season, because the etesian blasts of the north winds then drive all the clouds together into those quarters. And, we may suppose, when they have come together driven towards the region of mid-day, there at last the clouds, thrust together upon the high mountains, are massed and violently pressed.

[735] Perchance it swells from deep among the high mountains of the Ethiopians, where the sun, traversing all with his melting rays, forces the white snows to run down into the plains.

[738] Come now, I will unfold to you with what nature are endowed all Avernian places and lakes.

[740] First of all, in that they are called by the name Avernian, that is given them from the fact, because they are harmful to all birds, in that, when they have come right over those spots in their flight, forgetting the oarage of their wings, they slack their sails, and fall headlong, drooping with languid neck to earth, if by chance the nature of the spots so determines it, or into the water, if by chance the lake of Avernus spreads beneath them. That spot is by Cumae, where mountains smoke, choked with biting sulphur and enriched with hot springs.

[749] There is too a spot within the walls of Athens, on the very summit of the citadel, by the temple of Pallas Tritonis, the life-giver, whither croaking crows never steer their bodies on the wing, not even when the altars smoke with offerings. So surely do they fly, not in truth from the fierce wrath of Pallas, because of their vigil, as the poets of the Greeks have sung, but the nature of the spot of its own force accomplishes the task.

[756] In Syria, too, it is said that there is likewise a spot to be seen, where, as soon as even four-footed beasts have set foot, its natural force constrains them to fall heavily, as though they were on a sudden slaughtered to the gods of the dead.

[760] Yet all these things are brought about by a natural law, and it is clearly seen from what causes to begin with they come to be; lest by chance the gateway of Orcus should be thought to be in these regions; and thereafter we should by chance believe that the gods of the dead lead the souls below from this spot to the shores of Acheron; even as stags of winged feet are

often thought by their scent to drag from their lairs the races of crawling serpents. And how far removed this is from true reason, now learn; for now I will try to tell of the true fact.

[769] First of all I say, what I have often said before as well, that in the earth there are shapes of things of every kind; many which are good for food, helpful to life, and many which can induce diseases and hasten death. And that for different animals different things are suited for the purpose of life, I have shown before, because their nature and texture and the shapes of their first-beginnings are unlike, the one to the other. Many things which are harmful pass through the ears, many which are dangerous and rough to draw in find their way even through the nostrils, nor are there a few which should be avoided by the touch, yea, and shunned by the sight, or else are bitter to the taste.

[781] Next we may see how many things are for man of a sensation keenly harmful, and are nauseous and noxious; first, certain trees are endowed with a shade so exceeding noxious, that often they cause an aching of the head, if one has lain beneath them, stretched upon the grass. There is, too, a tree on the great mountains of Helicon, which is wont to kill a man with the noisome scent of its flower. We may be sure that these things all grow in this way from the earth, because the earth contains in itself many seeds of many things, mingled in many ways, and gives them forth singled out. Again, a light but newly extinguished at night, when it meets the nostrils with its pungent smell, at once puts to sleep a man who is wont through disease to fall down and foam at the mouth. And a woman will fall back asleep with the heavy scent of castor, and her gay-coloured work slips from her delicate hands, if she has smelt it at the time when she has her monthly discharge. And many other things too slacken the drooping members throughout the frame, and make the soul totter within its abode. Once again, if you dally in the hot bath when you are too full, how easily it comes to pass often that you fall down, as you sit on the stool in the middle of the boiling water. And how easily the noxious force and smell of charcoal finds its way into the brain, unless we have taken water beforehand. And when the burning fever has seized and subdued the limbs, then the smell of wine is like a slaughtering blow. Do you not see, too, sulphur produced in the very earth and pitch harden into crusts of a noisome scent? and again, when men are following up the veins of gold and silver, probing with the pick deep into the hidden parts of earth, what stench Scaptensula breathes out underground? And what poison gold mines may exhale! how strange they make men's faces, how they change their colour! Have you not seen or heard how they are wont to die in a short time and how the powers of life fail those, whom the strong force of necessity imprisons in such work? All these effluences then earth sends steaming forth, and breathes them out into the open and the clear spaces of heaven.