

Key Citations - Nothing Is Immortal Except the Atoms - No Immortal Soul

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Lucretius Book Three:

[B-3:417] Come now, that you may be able to learn that the minds and the light souls of living things have birth and death, I will hasten to set forth verses long sought out and found with glad effort, worthy to guide your life. Be it yours to link both of these in a single name, and when, to choose a case, I continue to speak of the soul, proving that it is mortal, suppose that I speak of mind as well, inasmuch as they are at one each with the other and compose a single thing.

[B-3:425] First of all, since I have shown that it is finely made of tiny bodies and of first-beginnings far smaller than the liquid moisture of water or cloud or smoke—for it far surpasses them in speed of motion, and is more prone to move when smitten by some slender cause; for indeed it is moved by images of smoke and cloud: even as when slumbering in sleep we see altars breathing steam on high, and sending up their smoke; for beyond all doubt these are idols that are borne to us:—now therefore, since, when vessels are shattered, you behold the water flowing away on every side, and the liquid parting this way and that, and since cloud and smoke part asunder into air, you must believe that the soul too is scattered and passes away far more swiftly, and is dissolved more quickly into its first-bodies, when once it is withdrawn from a man’s limbs, and has departed. For indeed, since the body, which was, as it were, the vessel of the soul, cannot hold it together, when by some chance it is shattered and made rare, since the blood is withdrawn from the veins, how could you believe that the soul could be held together by any air, which is more rare than our body \[B-3:and can contain it less\]?

[B-3:445] Moreover, we feel that the understanding is begotten along with the body, and grows together with it, and along with it comes to old age. For as children totter with feeble and tender body, so a weak judgment of mind goes with it. Then when their years are ripe and their strength hardened, greater is their sense and increased their force of mind. Afterward, when now the body is shattered by the stern strength of time, and the frame has sunk with its force dulled, then the reason is maimed, the tongue raves, the mind stumbles, all things give way and fail at once. And so it is natural that all the nature of the mind should also be dissolved, even as is smoke, into the high breezes of the air; inasmuch as we see that it is born with the body, grows with it, and, as I have shown, at the same time becomes weary and worn with age.

[B-3:459] Then follows this that we see that, just as the body itself suffers wasting diseases and poignant pain, so the mind too has its biting cares and grief and fear; wherefore it is natural that it should also share in death. Nay more, during the diseases of the body the mind often

wanders astray; for it loses its reason and speaks raving words, and sometimes in a heavy lethargy is carried off into a deep unending sleep, when eyes and head fall nodding, in which it hears not voices, nor can know the faces of those who stand round, summoning it back to life, bedewing face and cheeks with their tears. Therefore you must needs admit that the mind too is dissolved, inasmuch as the contagion of disease pierces into it. For both pain and disease are alike fashioners of death, as we have been taught ere now by many a man's decease.

[B-3:476] Again, when the stinging strength of wine has entered into a man, and its heat has spread abroad throughout his veins, why is it that there follows a heaviness in the limbs, his legs are entangled as he staggers, his tongue is sluggish, and his mind heavy, his eyes swim, shouting, sobbing, quarrelling grows apace, and then all the other signs of this sort that go along with them; why does this come to pass, except that the mastering might of the wine is wont to confound the soul even within the body? But whenever things can be so confounded and entangled, they testify that, if a cause a whit stronger shall have made its way within, they must needs perish, robbed of any further life.

[B-3:487] Nay more, some man, often before our very eyes, seized suddenly by violent disease, falls, as though by a lightning-stroke, and foams at the mouth; he groans and shivers throughout his frame, he loses his wits, his muscles grow taut, he writhes, he breathes in gasps, and tossing to and fro wearies his limbs. Because, you may be sure, his soul rent asunder by the violence of disease throughout his frame, is confounded, and gathers foam, as on the salt sea the waters boil beneath the stern strength of the winds. Further, the groaning is wrung from him, because his limbs are racked with pain, and more than all because the particles of voice are driven out, and are carried crowding forth from his mouth, along the way they are wont, where is their paved path. Loss of wits comes to pass, because the force of mind and soul is confounded, and, as I have shown, is torn apart and tossed to and fro, rent asunder by that same poison. Thereafter, when by now the cause of malady has ebbed, and the biting humours of the distempered body return to their hiding-places, then, as it were staggering, he first rises, and little by little returns to all his senses, and regains his soul. When mind and soul then even within the body are tossed by such great maladies, and in wretched plight are rent asunder and distressed, why do you believe that without the body in the open air they can continue life amid the warring winds?

[B-3:510] And since we perceive that the mind is cured, just like the sick body, and we see that it can be changed by medicine, this too forewarns us that the mind has a mortal life. For whosoever attempts and essays to alter the mind, or seeks to change any other nature, must indeed add parts to it or transfer them from their order, or take away some small whit at least from the whole. But what is immortal does not permit its parts to be transposed, nor that any whit should be added or depart from it. For whenever a thing changes and passes out of its own limits, straightway this is the death of that which was before. And so whether the mind is sick, it gives signs of its mortality, as I have proved, or whether it is changed by medicine. So surely is true fact seen to run counter to false reasoning, and to shut off retreat from him who flees, and with double-edged refutation to prove the falsehood.

[B-3:526] Again, we often behold a man pass away little by little and limb by limb lose the sensation of life; first of all the toes and nails on his feet grow livid, then the feet and legs die, thereafter through the rest of his frame, step by step, pass the traces of chill death. Since this nature of the soul is severed nor does it come forth all intact at one moment, it must be counted mortal. But if by chance you think that it could of its own power draw itself inwards through the frame, and contract its parts into one place, and so withdraw sensation from all the limbs, yet nevertheless that place, to which so great abundance of soul is gathered together, must needs be seen possessed of greater sensation; but since such place is nowhere found, you may be sure, as we said before, it is rent in pieces and scattered abroad, and so perishes.

Nay more, if it were our wish to grant what is false, and allow that the soul could be massed together in the body of those, who as they die leave the light of day part by part, still you must needs confess that the soul is mortal, nor does it matter whether it passes away scattered through the air, or is drawn into one out of all its various parts and grows sottish, since sense more and more in every part fails the whole man, and in every part less and less of life remains.

[B-3:548] And since the mind is one part of man, which abides rooted in a place determined, just as are ears and eyes and all the other organs of sense which guide the helm of life; and, just as hand and eye or nostrils, sundered apart from us, cannot feel nor be, but in fact are in a short time melted in corruption, so the mind cannot exist by itself without the body and the very man, who seems to be, as it were, the vessel of the mind, or aught else you like to picture more closely bound to it, inasmuch as the body clings to it with binding ties.

[B-3:558] Again, the living powers of body and mind prevail by union, one with the other, and so enjoy life; for neither without body can the nature of mind by itself alone produce the motions of life, nor yet bereft of soul can body last on and feel sensation. We must know that just as the eye by itself, if torn out by the roots, cannot discern anything apart from the whole body, so, it is clear, soul and mind by themselves have no power. Doubtless because in close mingling throughout veins and flesh, throughout sinews and bones, their first-beginnings are held close by all the body, nor can they freely leap asunder with great spaces between; and so shut in they make those sense-giving motions, which outside the body cast out into the breezes of air after death they cannot make, because they are not in the same way held together. For indeed air will be body, yea a living thing, if the soul can hold itself together, and confine itself to those motions, which before it made in the sinews and right within the body. Wherefore, again and again, when the whole protection of the body is undone and the breath of life is driven without, you must needs admit that the sensations of the mind and the soul are dissolved, since the cause of life in soul and body is closely linked.

[B-3:580] Again, since the body cannot endure the severing of the soul, but that it decays with a foul stench, why do you doubt that the force of the soul has gathered together from deep down within, and has trickled out, scattering abroad like smoke, and that the body has changed and fallen crumbling in such great ruin, because its foundations have been utterly moved from their seat, as the soul trickles forth through the limbs, and through all the winding ways, which are in the body, and all the pores? So that in many ways you may learn that the nature of the

soul issued through the frame sundered in parts, and that even within the body it was rent in pieces in itself, before it slipped forth and swam out into the breezes of air.

[B-3:592] Nay more, while it moves still within the limits of life, yet often from some cause the soul seems to be shaken and to move, and to wish to be released from the whole body; the face seems to grow flaccid, as at the hour of death, and all the limbs to fall limp on the bloodless trunk. Even so it is, when, as men say, the heart has had a shock, or the heart has failed; when all is alarm, and one and all struggle to clutch at the last link to life. For then the mind is shaken through and through, and all the power of the soul, and both fall in ruin with the body too; so that a cause a whit stronger might bring dissolution. Why do you doubt after all this but that the soul, if driven outside the body, frail as it is, without in the open air, robbed of its shelter, would not only be unable to last on through all time, but could not hold together even for a moment?

[B-3:607] For it is clear that no one, as he dies, feels his soul going forth whole from all his body, nor coming up first to the throat and the gullet up above, but rather failing in its place in a quarter determined; just as he knows that the other senses are dissolved each in their own place. But if our mind were immortal, it would not at its death so much lament that it was dissolved, but rather that it went forth and left its slough, as does a snake.

[B-3:615] Again, why is the understanding and judgment of the mind never begotten in head or feet or hands, but is fixed for all men in one abode in a quarter determined, except that places determined are assigned to each thing for its birth, and in which each several thing can abide when it is created, that so it may have its manifold parts arranged that never can the order of its limbs be seen reversed? So surely does one thing follow on another, nor is flame wont to be born of flowing streams, nor cold to be conceived in fire.

[B-3:624] Moreover, if the nature of the soul is immortal and can feel when sundered from our body, we must, I trow, suppose it endowed with five senses. Nor in any other way can we picture to ourselves the souls wandering in the lower world of Acheron. And so painters and the former generations of writers have brought before us souls thus endowed with senses. Yet neither eyes nor nose nor even hand can exist for the soul apart from body, nor again tongue apart or ears; the souls cannot therefore feel by themselves or even exist.

[B-3:634] And since we feel that the sensation of life is present in the whole body, and we see that the whole is a living thing, if some force suddenly hew it in the middle with swift blow, so that it severs each half apart, beyond all doubt the force of the soul too will be cleft in twain, torn asunder and riven together with the body. But what is cleft and separates into any parts, disclaims, assuredly, that its nature is everlasting.

[B-3:642] They tell how often scythe-bearing chariots, glowing in the mellay of slaughter, so suddenly lop off limbs, that the part which falls lopped off from the frame is seen to shiver on the ground, while in spite of all the mind and spirit of the man cannot feel the pain, through the suddenness of the stroke, and at the same time, because his mind is swallowed up in the fervour of the fight; with the body that is left him he makes for the fight and the slaughter, and

often knows not that his left arm with its shield is gone, carried away by the wheels among the horses and the ravening scythes; and another sees not that his right arm has dropped, while he climbs up and presses onward. Then another struggles to rise when his leg is lost, while at his side on the ground his dying foot twitches its toes. And the head lopped off from the warm living trunk keeps on the ground the look of life and the wide-open eyes, until it has yielded up all the last vestiges of soul.

[B-3:657] Nay more, if you should choose to chop into many parts with an axe the body of a snake with quivering tongue, angry tail, and long body, you will then perceive all the hewn parts severally writhing under the fresh blow, and scattering the ground with gore, and the fore part making open-mouthed for its own hinder part, in order that, smitten by the burning pain of the wound, it may quench it with its bite. Shall we say then that there is a whole soul in all those little parts? But by that reasoning it will follow that one living creature had many souls in its body. And so that soul which was one together with the body has been severed; wherefore both body and soul must be thought mortal, since each alike is cleft into many parts.

[B-3:670] Moreover, if the nature of the soul is immortal, and it enters into the body at our birth, why can we not remember also the part of our life already gone, why do we not preserve traces of things done before? For if the power of the mind is so much changed that all remembrance of things past is lost to it, that state is not, I trow, a far step from death; wherefore you must needs admit that the soul, which was before, has passed away, and that that which now is, has now been created.

[B-3:679] Moreover, if when our body is already formed the living power of the mind is wont to be put in just when we are born, and when we are crossing the threshold into life, it would not then be natural that it should be seen to grow with the body, yea, together with the limbs in the very blood, but 'tis natural that it should live all alone by itself as in a den, yet so that the whole body nevertheless is rich in sensation. Wherefore, again and again, we must not think that souls are without a birth, or released from the law of death. For neither can we think that they could be so closely linked to our bodies if they were grafted in them from without—but that all this is so, plain fact on the other hand declares: for the soul is so interlaced through veins, flesh, sinews, and bones that the teeth, too, have their share in sensation; as toothache shows and the twinge of cold water, and the biting on a sharp stone if it be hid in a piece of bread—nor, when they are so interwoven, can they, it is clear, issue forth entire, and unravel themselves intact from all the sinews and bones and joints.

[B-3:698] But if by chance you think that the soul is wont to be grafted in us from without, and then permeate through our limbs, all the more will it perish as it fuses with the body. For that which permeates dissolves, and so passes away. For even as food parcelled out among all the pores of the body, when it is sent about into all the limbs and members, perishes and furnishes a new nature out of itself, so soul and mind, however whole they may pass into the fresh-made body, still are dissolved as they permeate, while through all the pores there are sent abroad into the limbs the particles, whereof this nature of the mind is formed, which now holds sway in our body, born from that which then perished, parcelled out among the limbs. Wherefore it is

seen that the nature of the soul is neither without a birthday nor exempt from death.

[B-3:713] Moreover, are seeds of soul left or not in the lifeless body? For if they are left and are still there, it will follow that it cannot rightly be held immortal, since it has left the body maimed by the loss of some parts. But if it has been removed and fled from the limbs while still entire, so that it has left no part of itself in the body, how is it that corpses, when the flesh is now putrid, teem with worms, and how does so great a store of living creatures, boneless and bloodless, swarm over the heaving frame? But if by chance you believe that the souls are grafted in the worms from without, and can pass severally into their bodies, and do not consider why many thousands of souls should gather together, whence one only has departed, yet there is this that seems worth asking and putting to the test, whether after all those souls go hunting for all the seeds of the little worms, and themselves build up a home to live in, or whether they are, as it were, grafted in bodies already quite formed. But there is no ready reason why they should make the bodies themselves, why they should be at such pains. For indeed, when they are without a body, they do not flit about harassed by disease and cold and hunger. For the body is more prone to suffer by these maladies, and 'tis through contact with the body that the mind suffers many ills. But still grant that it be ever so profitable for them to fashion a body wherein to enter; yet there seems to be no way whereby they could. Souls then do not fashion for themselves bodies and frames. Nor yet can it be that they are grafted in bodies already made; for neither will they be able to be closely interwoven, nor will contact be made by a sharing of sensation.

[B-3:741] Again, why does fiery passion go along with the grim brood of lions and cunning with foxes; why is the habit of flight handed on to deer from their sires, so that their father's fear spurs their limbs? And indeed all other habits of this sort, why are they always implanted in the limbs and temper from the first moment of life, if it be not because a power of mind determined by its own seed and breed grows along with the body of each animal? But if the soul were immortal and were wont to change its bodies, then living creatures would have characters intermingled; the dog of Hyrcanian seed would often flee the onset of the horned hart, and the hawk would fly fearful through the breezes of air at the coming of the dove; men would be witless, and wise the fierce tribes of wild beasts.

[B-3:754] For it is argued on false reasoning, when men say that an immortal soul is altered, when it changes its body: for what is changed, is dissolved, and so passes away. For the parts are transferred and shift from their order; wherefore they must be able to be dissolved too throughout the limbs, so that at last they may all pass away together with the body.

[B-3:760] But if they say that the souls of men always pass into human bodies, still I will ask why a soul can become foolish after being wise, why no child has reason, why the mare's foal is not as well trained as the bold strength of a horse. We may be sure they will be driven to say that in a weak body the mind too is weak. But if that indeed comes to pass, you must needs admit that the soul is mortal, since it changes so much throughout the frame, and loses its former life and sense.

[B-3:769] Or in what manner will the force of mind be able along with each several body to wax strong and attain the coveted bloom of life, unless it be partner too with the body at its earliest birth? Or why does it desire to issue forth abroad from the aged limbs? does it fear to remain shut up in a decaying body, lest its home, worn out with the long spell of years, fall on it? But an immortal thing knows no dangers.

[B-3:776] Again, that the souls should be present at the wedlock of Venus and the birth of wild beasts, seems to be but laughable; that immortal souls should stand waiting for mortal limbs in numbers numberless, and should wrangle one with another in hot haste, which first before the others may find an entrance; unless by chance the souls have a compact sealed, that whichever arrives first on its wings, shall first have entrance, so that they strive not forcibly at all with one another.

[B-3:784] Again, a tree cannot exist in the sky, nor clouds in the deep waters, nor can fishes live in the fields, nor blood be present in wood, nor sap in stones. It is determined and ordained where each thing can grow and have its place. So the nature of the mind cannot come to birth alone without body, nor exist far apart from sinews and blood. But if this could be, far sooner might the force of mind itself exist in head or shoulders, or right down in the heels, and be wont to be born in any part you will, but at least remain in the same man or the same vessel. But since even within our body it is determined and seen to be ordained where soul and mind can dwell apart and grow, all the more must we deny that it could continue or be begotten outside the whole body. Wherefore, when the body has perished, you must needs confess that the soul too has passed away, rent asunder in the whole body.

[B-3:800] Nay, indeed, to link the mortal with the everlasting, and to think that they can feel together and act one upon the other, is but foolishness. For what can be pictured more at variance, more estranged within itself and inharmonious, than that what is mortal should be linked in union with the immortal and everlasting to brave raging storms?

[B-3:806] 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 throughout 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, as it were, 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 scatter, nor are there bodies which might fall upon them and break them up with stout blow.

[B-3:819] But if by chance the soul is rather to be held immortal for this reason, because it is fortified and protected from things fatal to life, or because things harmful to its life come not at all, or because such as come in some way depart defeated before we can feel what harm they do us \[B-3:clear facts show us that this is not so\]. For besides that it falls sick along with the diseases of the body, there comes to it that which often torments it about things that are to be, and makes it ill at ease with fear, and wears it out with care; and when its evil deeds are past

and gone, yet sin brings remorse. There is too the peculiar frenzy of the mind and forgetfulness of the past, yes, and it is plunged into the dark waters of lethargy.