

# Epicurus On Causation

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 12:09 PM

As indicated I would suggest comparing that excerpt from Cicero to [Chapter 15 of A Few Days In Athens](#).

“But is not the existence of a first or creating cause demonstrated to our senses by all we see, and hear, and feel?”

“The existence of all that we see and hear and feel is demonstrated to our senses; and the belief we yield to this existence is immediate and irresistible, that is, intuitive. —The existence of the creating cause, that you speak of, is not demonstrated to our senses; and therefore the belief in it cannot be immediate and irresistible. I prefer the expression “creating” to “first” cause, because it seems to present a more intelligible meaning. When you shall have examined farther into the phenomena of nature, you will see, that there can be as little a first as a last cause.”

“But there must be always a cause, producing an effect.”

“Certainly; and so your cause, — creating all that we see and hear and feel — must itself have a producing cause, otherwise you are in the same difficulty as before.”

“I suppose it a Being unchangeable and eternal, itself unproduced, and producing all things.”

“Unchangeable it *may* be, — eternal it *must* be — since every thing is eternal.”

“Every thing eternal?”

“Yes; that is, the elements composing all substances are, so far as we know and can reason, eternal, and in their nature unchangeable; and it is apparently only the different disposition of these eternal and unchangeable atoms that produces all the varieties in the substances constituting the great material whole, of which we form a part. Those particles, whose peculiar agglomeration or arrangement, we call a vegetable to-day, pass into, and form part of an animal to-morrow; and that animal again, by the falling asunder of its constituent atoms, and the different approximation and agglomeration of the same, — or, of the same with other atoms, — is transformed into some other substance presenting a new assemblage of qualities. To this simple exposition of the phenomena of nature (which, you will observe, is not *explaining* their wonders, for that is impossible, but only *observing* them,) we are led by the exercise of our senses. In studying the existences which surround us, it is clearly our business to use our eyes, and not our imaginations. To see things as they are, is all we should attempt, and is all that is possible to be done. Unfortunately, we can do but little even here, as our eyes serve us

to see but a very little way. But, were our eyes better — were they so good as to enable us to observe all the arcana of matter, we could never acquire any other knowledge of them, than that they are as they are; — and, in knowing this, that is, in seeing every link in the chain of occurrences, we should know all that even an omniscient being could know. One astronomer traces the course of the sun round the earth, another imagines that of the earth round the sun. Some future improvements in science may enable us to ascertain which conjecture is the true one. We shall then have ascertained a fact, which fact may lead to the discovery of other facts, and so on. Until this plain and simple view of the nature of all science be generally received, all the advances we may make in it are comparatively as nothing. Until we occupy ourselves in examining, observing, and ascertaining, and not in *explaining*, we are idly and childishly employed. — With every truth we may discover we shall mix a thousand errors; and, for one matter of fact, we shall charge our brain with a thousand fancies. To this leading misconception of the real, and only possible object of philosophical inquiry, I incline to attribute all the modes and forms of human superstition. The vague idea that some mysterious cause not merely *precedes* but *produces* the effect we behold, occasions us to wander from the real object in search of an imaginary one. We see the sun rise in the east: instead of confining our curiosity to the discovery of the time and manner of its rising, and of its course in the heavens, we ask also — *why* does it rise? What *makes* it move? The more ignorant immediately conceive some Being spurring it through the heavens, with fiery steeds, on wheels of gold, while the more learned tell us of laws of motion, decreed by an almighty fiat, and sustained by an almighty will. Imagine the truth of both suppositions: in the one case, we should see the application of what we call physical power in the driver and the steeds followed by the motion of the sun, and in the other, an almighty volition followed by the motion of the sun. But, in either case, should we understand *why* the sun moved? — *why* or *how* its motion followed what we call the impulse of the propelling power, or the propelling volition? All that we could *then* know, more than we *now* know, would be, that the occurrence of the motion of the sun was preceded by another occurrence; and if we afterwards frequently observed the same sequence of occurrences, they would become associated in our mind as necessary precedent and consequent — as cause and effect: and we might give to them the appellation of law of nature, or any other appellation; but they would still constitute merely a truth — that is a *fact*, and envelope no other mystery, than that involved in every occurrence and every existence.”

“But, according to this doctrine,” said Theon, “there would be no less reason in attributing the beautiful arrangement of the material world to the motion of a horse, than to the volition of an almighty mind.”

“If I saw the motion of a horse followed by the effect you speak of, I should believe in some relation between them; and if I saw it follow the volition of an almighty mind —the same.”

“But the cause would be inadequate to the effect.”

“It could not be so, if it were the cause. For what constitutes the adequacy of which you speak? Clearly only the contact, or immediate proximity of the two occurrences. If any sequence could in fact be more wonderful than another, it should rather seem to be for the consequent to

impart grandeur to the precedent — the effect to the cause, — than for the cause to impart grandeur to the effect. But in reality all sequences are equally wonderful. That light should follow the appearance of the sun, is just as wonderful, and no more so, as if it were to follow the appearance of any other body — and did light follow the appearance of a black stone it would excite astonishment simply because we never saw light follow such an appearance before. Accustomed, as we now are, to see light when the sun rises, our wonder would be, if we did not see light when he rose : but were light regularly to attend the appearance of any other body, our wonder at such a sequence would, after a time, cease; and we should then say, as we now say, there is a light *because* such a body has risen; and imagine *then*, as we imagine *now*, that we understand why *light is*.”

“In like manner all existences are equally wonderful. An African lion is in himself nothing more extraordinary than a Grecian horse; although the whole people of Athens will assemble to gaze on the lion, and exclaim how wonderful! while no man observes the horse.”

“True — but this is the wondering of ignorance.”

“I reply — true again, but so is all wondering. If, indeed, we should consider it in this and in all other cases as simply an emotion of pleasurable surprise, acknowledging the presence of a novel object, the feeling is perfectly rational; but if it imagine anything more intrinsically marvelous in the novel existence, than in the familiar one, it is then clearly the idle — that is, the unreasoned and unreflecting marveling of ignorance. There is but one real wonder to the thinking mind: it is the existence of all things; that is the existence of matter. And the only rational ground of this one great wonder is, that the existence of matter is the last link in the chain of cause and effect at which we can arrive. You imagine yet another link — the existence of a power creating that matter. — My only objections to this additional link, or superadded cause, are, that it is *imagined*, and that it leaves the wonder as before; unless, indeed, we should say that it has superadded other wonders, since it supposes a power, or rather, an existence possessing a power, of which we never saw an example.”

“How so? Does not even man possess a species of creating power? And do you not suppose, in your inert matter, that very property which others attribute, with more reason it appears to me, to some superior and unknown existence?”

“By no means. No existence, that we know of, possesses creating power, in the sense you suppose. Neither the existence we call a man, nor any other of the existences comprised under the generic names of matter, physical world, nature, &c., possesses the power of calling into being its own constituent elements, nor the constituent elements of any other substance. It can change one substance into another substance, by altering the position of its particles, or intermingling them with others: but it cannot call into being, any more than it can annihilate, those particles themselves. The hand of man causes to approach particles of earth and of water, and, by their approximation produces clay; to which clay it gives a regular form, and, by the application of fire, produces the vessel we call a vase. You may say that the hand of man creates the vase, but it does not create the earth, or the water, or the fire; neither has the admixture of these substances added to, or subtracted from, the sum of their elementary

atoms. Observe, therefore, there is no analogy between the power inherent in matter, of changing its appearance and qualities, by a simple change in the position of its particles, and that which you attribute to some unseen existence, who by a simple volition, should have called into being matter itself, with all its wonderful properties. An existence possessing such a power I have never seen; and though this says nothing against the possibility of such an existence, it says every thing against *my belief* in it. And farther, the power which you attribute to this existence — that of willing every thing out of nothing, — being, not only what I have never seen, but that of which I cannot with any distinctness conceive — it must appear to me the greatest of all improbabilities.”