

Episode Seventeen - All Things Are Not Made of Fire, And Heraclitus Was A Fool

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Welcome to Episode Seventeen of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who lived in the age of Julius Caesar and wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

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. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. 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.

Before we start with today's episode let me remind you of our three ground rules.

First: Our aim is to go back to the original text to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, not simply repeat for you what modern commentators teach about it today.

Second: We won't be talking about modern political issues in this podcast. Epicurean philosophy is very different from Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, and Marxism - it must be understood on its own, not in terms of any conventional modern morality.

Third: The physics presented by Lucretius is the essential base of Epicurean philosophy. When you study this, you will see that Epicurus taught neither luxury nor minimalism, but that feeling - pleasure and pain - are the guides that Nature gave us to live by rather than supernatural gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. More than anything else, Epicurus taught that there is nothing supernatural whatsoever, and that means there's no life after death, and any happiness we will ever have must come in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Remember that our home page is LucretiusToday.com, and there you can find [a free copy of the versions of the poem we are reading](#).

In this Episode 17, we will discuss how **All things are not made of a single element, such as fire, contrary to what some philosophers asserted** - such as Heraclitus, who held all things are made of fire.

Now let's join the discussion with Elayne reading today's text.

Note: In previous episodes we have discussed:

- (1) **Venus / Pleasure As Guide of Life:** That Pleasure, using the allegory of Venus, is the driving force of all life; That the way to rid ourselves of pain is to replace pain with pleasure, using the allegory of Venus entertaining Mars, the god of war;
- (2) **The Achievement of Epicurus:** That Epicurus was the great philosophic leader who stood up to supernatural religion, opened the gates to a proper understanding of nature, and thereby showed us how we too can emulate the life of gods;
- (3-4) **So Great Is The Power of Religion To Inspire Evil Deeds!** That it is not Epicurean philosophy, but supernatural religion, which is truly unholy and prompts men to commit evil deeds;
- (5) **On Resisting The Threats of Priests And Poets:** That false priests and philosophers will try to scare you away from Epicurean philosophy with threats of punishment after death, which is why you must understand that those threats cannot be true; That the key to freeing yourself from false religion and false philosophy is found in the study of nature;
- (6-7) **Step One: Nothing Comes From Nothing.** The first major observation which underlies all the rest of Epicurean philosophy is that we observe that **nothing is ever generated from nothing.**
- (8) **Step Two: Nothing Goes To Nothing.** The second major observation is that **nothing is ever destroyed completely to nothing.**
- (9) **The Evidence That Atoms Exist, Even Though They Are Unseen.** The next observation is that we know elemental particles exist, even though we cannot see them just like we know that wind and other things exist by observing their effects.
- (10-11) **The Void And Its Nature.** We also know that the void exists, because things must have space in which to move, as we see they do move.
- (12) **Everything We Experience Is Composed Of A Combination of Matter And Void.** Everything around us that we experience is a natural combination of atoms and void.
- (13) **The Things We Experience Are Properties and Qualities Of Atoms And Void And Cease To Exist When Their Atoms Disperse.** All things we experience around us are either (1) the **properties** (essential conjuncts; essential and unchanging) or **qualities** (events; inessential and changing depending on context) of bodies. All these arise from the nature, movement, and combinations of the atoms, and cease to exist when the atoms which compose the bodies disperse. Therefore it is incorrect to think that ideas or stories such as that of the Trojan war have any permanent existence.
- (14-15) **Atoms Are Solid And Indestructible, And Therefore Eternal.** The argument that atoms are solid and indestructible and therefore eternal.
- (16) **The Atoms Are Never Destroyed,** they Provide Continuity To All Nature, and there is a strict limit on Divisibility of All Things.

Here is the text that will be covered in Episode Sixteen. The Latin version of Book One has this as beginning at approximately line 625 of the [Daniel Brown Edition](#) and of the [Munro Latin Edition here](#).

There are a total of about 1115 lines in book one, so we approximately halfway through.

Daniel Brown 1743 Edition:

[621] Lastly, if nature, parent of things, had not compelled all things that perish then to be resolved into least parts, she could from them repair nothing that dies; for bodies that are formed of various parts can never be endued with properties, which the first seeds of things ought to possess, as union, weight, and force, agreement, motion, by which all things act.

[627] And yet, suppose that nature had allowed no end to bodies being divided, yet some bodies from eternity must have been, which by no force could ever be subdued. But bodies that are formed of brittle seeds, and to be broken, could not have remained for ages infinite, vexed as they have been with endless blows, but must have been dissolved.

[635] Wherefore, those sages who have thought that fire is the first principle of things, and from that alone the whole is formed, do greatly err from the true rule of reason. The champion of these, Heraclitus, enters first the lists, more famed for dark expression among empty Greeks than with the wise, who search for truth; for none but fools admire, and love what they see couched in words abstruse; and that they take for truth which quaintly moves the ear, and painted over effects by witty jingling of the sound.

[646] For how such various beings could arise, I ask, if formed from pure and real fire? To say, that the hot fire is now condensed, and sometimes rarified, would nought avail; the several parts must still retain the nature of fire, the same which the fire had when whole; the heat would be more fierce, the parts condensed, more languid when divided and made rare. There's nothing more than this you can derive from causes such as these; much less so great variety of things can be produced from fire or flame, condensed or made rare.

[656] Indeed, would they admit in things a void, fire then might be condensed or rarified; but this, because it contradicts their other schemes, they murmur at, and will allow in things no empty space: So, while they fear to grant this difficult truth, they lose the way that's right, nor do they see, by not allowing there is in things a void, all bodies would be dense, and out of all one only would be made, which could by force emit nothing without itself, as the hot fire emits both light and heat, which shews it is not composed of crowded parts, without a void.

[666] But if they think that a fire in all its parts may be extinguished, and so its body change; if they insist that this may once be done, then the whole fire must be resolved to nothing, and things new-form from nothing must arise; for whatsoever is changed, and breaks the bounds of

its first nature, dies, and is no more what must still remain whole and unhurt, lest things to nothing should perfectly return; and then revive, and should again from nothing be restored.

[676] But now, since there remain some certain seeds that keep their nature still the same, whose absence or their presence, and their change of order change the nature of compound bodies, you must not think that these first seeds are fiery; if they were, what would it signify what seeds are absent, or what retire, what others take their place, how others may their rank and order change, since all would still be in their nature fire, and beings formed from them must wholly be of fire? But, as I think, the case is thus: some certain seeds there are by whose concussion, motion, order, site, and figure, fire is formed; and when their order is changed, they change the nature of this fire; but these first seeds have nothing fiery in themselves, nor of such a nature are they as to send forth bodies to be perceived by sense, or be the object of our touch.

[691] And now to say that every thing is fire, and no true thing in nature does exist but fire, as this man does, is madness all; he contradicts his senses by his sense, and overthrows those tests of truth by which all things are known: for 'tis by them we know what thing which he calls fire, and this sense concludes, it truly knows the nature of this fire; but then all other things it will deny, which equally are true. This is to me a vain and foolish way to judge; for to what shall we apply? And what can be more sure than our senses to us, by which we fully know falsehood and truth?

[702] Besides, why any one should all things else disclaim, and only fire allow, or say there's no such thing as fire, and all things else allow, either of this is in vain, and equal madness to believe.

[706] Wherefore, those sages who contend that fire is the first principle, and that of fire all things consist, and those who make the air the first seeds of bodies, and such who lay the water is the sole cause of beings, or that the Earth all things creates, and can infuse itself into the nature of all things, do strangely err, and wander wide from the truth.

Munro:

[621] Once more, if nature, creatress of things, had been wont to compel all things to be broken up into least parts, then too she would be unable to reproduce anything out of those parts, because those things which are enriched with no parts cannot have the properties which begetting matter ought to have, I mean the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by means of which things severally go on.

[635] For which reasons they who have held fire to be the matter of things and the sum to be formed out of fire alone, are seen to have strayed most widely from true reason. At the head of whom enters Heraclitus to do battle, famous for obscurity more among the frivolous than the earnest Greeks who seek the truth. For fools admire and like all things the more which they perceive to be concealed under involved language, and determine things to be true which can prettily tickle the ears and are varnished over with finely sounding phrase.

[646] For I want to know how things can be so various, if they are formed out of fire one and unmixed: it would avail nothing for hot fire to be condensed or rarefied, if the same nature which the whole fire has belonged to the parts of fire as well. The heat would be more intense by compression of parts, more faint by their severance and dispersion. More than this you cannot think it in the power of such causes to effect, far less could so great a diversity of things come from mere density and rarity of fires.

[656] Observe also, if they suppose void to be mixed up in things, fire may then be condensed and left rare; but because they see many things rise up in contradiction to them and shrink from leaving unmixed void in things, fearing the steep, they lose the true road, and do not perceive on the other hand that if void is taken from things, all things are condensed and, out of all things is formed one single body, which cannot briskly radiate anything from it, in the way heat-giving fire emits light and warmth, letting you see that it is not of closely compressed parts.

[666] But if they haply think that in some other way fires maybe quenched in the union and change their body, you are to know that if they shall scruple on no side to do this, all heat sure enough will be utterly brought to nothing, and all things that are produced will be formed out of nothing. For whenever a thing changes and quits its proper limits, at once this change of state is the death of that which was before.

[676] Therefore something or other must needs be left to those fires of theirs undestroyed, that you may not have all things absolutely returning to nothing, and the whole store of things born anew and flourishing out of nothing. Since then in fact there are some most unquestionable bodies which always preserve the same nature, on whose going or coming and change of order things change their nature and bodies are transformed, you are to know that these first bodies of things are not of fire. For it would matter nothing that some should withdraw and go away and others should be added on and some should have their order changed, if one and all they yet retained the nature of heat; for whatever they produced would be altogether fire. But thus methinks it is: there are certain bodies whose clashing, motions, order, position, and shapes produce fires, and which by a change of, order change the nature of the things and do not resemble fire nor anything else which has the power of sending bodies to our senses and touching by its contact our sense of touch.

[691] Again to say that all things are fire and that no real thing except fire exists in the number of things, as this same man does, appears to be sheer dotage. For he himself takes his stand on the side of the senses to fight against the senses and shakes their authority, on which rests all our belief, ay from which this fire as he calls it is known to himself; for he believes that the senses can truly perceive fire, he does not believe they can perceive all other things which are not a whit less clear. Now this appears to me to be as false as it is foolish; for to what shall we appeal? What surer test can we have than the senses, whereby to note truth and falsehood?

[702] Again why should any one rather abolish all things and choose to leave the single nature of heat, than deny that fires exist, while he allows any thing else to be? It seems to be equal

madness to affirm either this or that.

[706] For these reasons they who have held that fire is the matter of things and that the sum can be formed out of fire, and they who have determined air to be the first-beginning in begetting things, and all who have held that water by itself alone forms things, or that earth produces all things and changes into all the different natures of things, appear to have strayed exceedingly wide of the truth;

Bailey:

[621] And again, if nature, the creatress, had been used to constrain all things to be dissolved into their least parts, then she could not again renew aught of them, for the reason that things which are not enlarged by any parts, have not those powers which must belong to creative matter, the diverse fastenings, weights, blows, meetings, movements, by which all things are carried on.

[635] Wherefore those who have thought that fire is the substance of things, and that the whole sum is composed of fire alone, are seen to fall very far from true reasoning. Heraclitus is their leader who first enters the fray, of bright fame for his dark sayings, yet rather among the empty-headed than among the Greeks of weight, who seek after the truth. For fools laud and love all things more which they can descry hidden beneath twisted sayings, and they set up for true what can tickle the ear with a pretty sound and is tricked out with a smart ring.

[646] For I am eager to know how things could be so diverse, if they are created of fire alone and unmixed. For it would be of no avail that hot fire should condense or grow rare, if the parts of fire had the same nature which the whole sum of fire has as well. For fiercer would be the flame, if the parts were drawn together, and weaker again, were they sundered and scattered. But further than this there is nothing which you can think might come to pass from such a cause, far less might the great diversity of things come from fires condensed and rare.

[656] This too there is: if they were to hold that void is mingled in things, the fires will be able to condense or be left rare. But because they see many things to thwart them, they hold their peace and shrink from allowing void unmixed among things; while they fear the heights, they lose the true track, nor again do they perceive that, if void be removed from things, all things must condense and be made one body out of many, such as could not send out anything from it in hot haste; even as fire that brings warmth casts abroad light and heat, so that you may see that it has not parts close-packed.

[666] But if perchance they believe that in some other way fires may be quenched in union and alter their substance, in very truth if they do not spare to do this at any point, then, we may be sure, all heat will perish utterly to nothing, and all things created will come to be out of nothing. For whenever a thing changes and passes out of its own limits, straightway this is the death of that which was before. Indeed something must needs be left untouched to those fires, lest you find all things returning utterly to nothing, and the store of things born again and growing strong out of nothing.

[676] As it is then, since there are certain bodies most determined which keep nature safe ever the same, through whose coming and going and shifting order things change their nature and bodies are altered, you can be sure that these first-bodies of things are not of fire. For it would be no matter that some should give place and pass away, and others be added, and some changed in order, if despite this all retained the nature of heat; for whatever they might create would be in every way fire. But, I trow, the truth is this; there are certain bodies, whose meetings, movements, order, position, and shapes make fires, and when their order changes, they change their nature, and they are not made like to fire nor to any other thing either, which is able to send off bodies to our senses and touch by collision our sense of touch.

[691] Moreover, to say that fire is all things, and that there is no other real thing in the whole count of things, but only fire, as this same Heraclitus does, seems to be raving frenzy. For on behalf of the senses he fights himself against the senses, and undermines those on which all that he believes must hang, whereby he himself has come to know that which he names fire. For he believes that the senses can know fire aright, but not all other things, which are no whit less bright to see. And this seems to me alike idle and frenzied. For to what shall we appeal? What can be surer for us than the senses themselves, whereby we may mark off things true and false?

[702] Besides, why should any one rather annul all things, and wish to leave only the nature of heat, than deny that fire exists, and grant in its stead that another nature exists? For it seems equal madness to say the one or the other.

[706] Wherefore those who have thought that fire is the substance of things, and that the whole sum may be built of fire, and those who have set up air as the first-beginning for the begetting of things, or again all who have thought that moisture fashions things alone by itself, or that earth creates all and passes into all the natures of things, seem to have strayed very far away from the truth.