

Episode Thirty-Three - More on The Implications of the Colorless Atoms

Post by "Cassius" of August 21, 2020 at 5:07 PM

Welcome to Episode Thirty-Three 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. 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, here are three ground rules.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, which may or may not agree with what you here about Epicurus at other places today.

Second: We aren't talking about Lucretius with the goal of promoting any modern political perspective. Epicurus must be understood on his own, and not in terms of competitive schools which may seem similar to Epicurus, but are fundamentally different and incompatible, such as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, and Marxism.

Third: The essential base of Epicurean philosophy is a fundamental view of the nature of the universe. When you read the words of Lucretius you will find that Epicurus did not teach the pursuit of virtue or of luxury or of simple living. or science, as ends in themselves, but rather the pursuit of pleasure. From this perspective it is **feeling** which is the guide to life, and not supernatural gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. And as important as anything else, Epicurus taught that there is no life after death, and that any happiness we will ever have must come in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Now let's join the discussion with today's text:

Latin text location: Approximately [lines 788-864](#)

Munro Summary: [Notes on the text](#)

788-794: We are tempted to give to atoms colour, not knowing how colour otherwise can come: but we have seen that white can come from what is not white; and surely white can arise more easily from no colour, than for instance from black : this reason then falls to the ground.

795-816: Again colours cannot exist without light, atoms never come into the light, therefore atoms have no colour: what colour can there be in darkness, when we see that the same thing continually changes its colour in different lights ? as therefore it is such and such stroke of light which produces such and such colour, without that stroke they cannot exist: as too one stroke produces white, another black, and as a stroke is a touch, and as it is shape, not colour, which affects touch, atoms need, not colour, but different shapes to give different touches.

817-825: Again if atoms have colour, it will not be said that this or that colour belongs only to this or that shape of atom : why then should not things formed out of coloured atoms vary their colours also? Why should not crows be sometimes white, swans black or green?

826-833: Again the smaller the shreds into which a thing is divided, the more its colour vanishes: be sure that all colour is gone before a thing comes to its first elements.

834-841 : you do not assign sound or smell to things which give forth no sound nor smell : why then attribute colour to all things? The mind can perceive things without colour as well as things without smell.

842-864: But atoms are likewise without heat or cold, without sound flavour or smell. As in preparing a perfume you seek out a quite scentless oil, that it may not infect the perfume with its own scent; thus first-beginnings must possess neither heat nor cold, smell sound nor flavour; these qualities are all frail and mortal, and must therefore be wanting to immortal elements unless things are to pass away to nothing.

Daniel Brown:

And since the eye receives within itself one sort of stroke with when it is said to perceive a white Color, and another contrary one, when it views an object of a black or any other color, and since it is of no moment by what color any thing you touch is distinguished, but rather of what peculiar shape and figure it is, you may conclude there is no manner of occasion that seeds should be stained with any colors, but that they should cause that variety of touch by the various figures with which they are imbued.

Besides, since there are no certain colors peculiar to certain figures, and since seeds of any figure may be of any color, whence is it that bodies that consist of such seeds are not in their several kinds imbued with all sorts of colors? It would be common to see crows, as they fly about, cast a white color from their white feathers, and black swans might be produced from black seeds, or be of any other one or more colors, as there seeds chance to be distinguished.

Further, the more any body is broken into small parts, the more you may perceive its color languishes by degrees, and dies away. This is the case of gold, when it is divided into thin shavings, its luster is extinguished, and the purple guy, by much the richest, when it is drawn out thread by thread, is quite lost. Hence you may infer that the particles of bodies discharge themselves of all color before they come to be as small as seeds.

Again, since you allow that all bodies do not emit sound and smell, and not attribute sound and smell to every body; so, since we cannot discover every thing by our eyes, you may conclude there are some bodies as much void of color, as there are others without smell or sound; and a judicious mind can properly form a notion of such bodies void of color, as it can of others that are without smell or sound, or any other qualities whatsoever.

But lest you should conceive the first seeds are void only of color, you must know that they are without warmth, are altogether free from cold or heat, they emit no sound, are without moisture, nor do they send out any smell from their several bodies; so when you propose to compound a pleasant ointment of sweet marjoram, myrrh, and flowers of spikenard, that send out the richest odor up to the nose, the first thing you are to do is to choose, as far as it lies in your power, an oil that has no smell, that it may, as little as possible, infect and corrupt those few sweet ingredients, being mixed and digested with them, with its native rankness.

Lastly, the seeds do not bestow any smell upon the bodies they produce, nor any sound, for they can exhale nothing from themselves; and, for the same reason, they can communicate no taste, nor cold, nor any vapor hot or warm. You must separate all qualities from the seeds that render them liable to dissolution, such as viscous, brittle, hollow, which proceeded from qualities that are soft, putrid, and rare, the seeds must have nothing of these properties if you would fix them upon an eternal foundation, upon which alone depends the security of beings, lest all things should fall to nothing, and perish beyond recovery.

Munro

And since the pupil receives into it a kind of blow, when it is said to perceive a white color, and then another, when it perceives black or any, and since it is of no moment with what color the things which you touch are provided, but rather with what sort of shape they are furnished, you are to know that first-beginnings have no need of colors, but give forth sensations of touch varying according to their various shapes.

Moreover since no particular kind of color is assigned to particular shapes and every configuration of first-beginnings can exist in any color, why on a 'like principle are not the things which are formed out of them in every kind overlaid with colors of every kind? For then it were natural that crows too in flying should often display a white color from white wings and that swans should come to be black from a black seed, or of any other different color you please.

Again the more minute the parts are into which anything is rent, the more you may perceive the color fade away by little and little and become extinct; as for instance if a piece of purple is torn into small shreds: when it has been plucked into separate threads, the purple, and the scarlet far the most brilliant of colors, are quite effaced; from which you may infer that the shreds part with all their color before they come back to the seeds of things.

Lastly, since you admit that all bodies do not utter a voice nor emit a smell, for this reason you do not assign sounds and smells to all.

So also since we cannot perceive all things with the eyes, you are to know that some things are as much denuded of color as others are without smell and devoid of sound, and that the keen discerning mind can just as well apprehend these things as it can take note of things which are destitute of other qualities. But lest haply you suppose that first bodies remain stripped of color alone, they are also wholly devoid of warmth and cold and violent heat, and are judged to be barren of sound and drained of moisture, and emit from their body no scent of their own.

Just as when you set about preparing the balmy liquid of sweet marjoram and myrrh and the flower of spikenard which gives forth to the nostrils a scent like nectar, before all you should seek, so far as you may and can find it, the substance of scentless oil, such as gives out no perfume to the nostrils, that it may as little as possible meddle with and destroy by its own pungency the odors mixed in its body and boiled up with it; for the same reason the first-beginnings of things must not bring to the begetting of things a smell or sound of their own, since they cannot discharge anything from themselves, and for the same reason no taste either nor cold nor any heat moderate or violent, and the like. For as these things, be they what they may, are still such as to be liable to death, whether pliant with a soft, brittle with a crumbling, or hollow with a porous body, they must all be withdrawn from the first beginnings, if we wish to assign to things imperishable foundations for the whole sum of existence to rest upon: that you may not have things returning altogether to nothing.

Bailey

And since the pupil of the eye receives in itself a certain kind of blow, when it is said to perceive white colour, and another again, when it perceives black and the rest, nor does it matter with what colour things you touch may choose to be endowed, but rather with what sort of shape they are fitted, you may know that the first-beginnings have no need of colours, but by their diverse forms produce diverse kinds of touch.

Moreover, since no fixed nature of colour belongs to fixed shapes, and all conformations of first-beginnings may exist in any hue you will, why on like grounds are not those things which are made out of them steeped with every kind of colour in every kind? For it were natural that often flying crows too should throw off white colour from white wings, and that black swans should be made of black seeds or of any other colour you will, simple or diverse.

Nay again, the more each thing is pulled asunder into tiny parts, the more can you perceive colour little by little fading away and being quenched: as comes to pass when purple is plucked apart into small pieces: when it has been unravelled thread by thread, the dark purple or the scarlet, by far the brightest of colours, is utterly destroyed; so that you can know from this that the tiny shreds dissipate all their colour before they are sundered into the seeds of things.

Lastly, since you do not allow that all bodies send out sound or smell, it comes to pass, therefore, that you do not assign sound and smell to them.

Even so, since we cannot with the eyes descry all things, you may know that some things are made bereft of colour, just as some are without any smell and far parted from sound, yet that the keen mind can come to know them no less than it can mark those devoid of other things. But lest by chance you think that the first-bodies abide bereft only of colour, they are also sundered altogether from warmth and cold, and fiery heat, and are carried along barren of sound and devoid of taste, nor do they give off any scent of their own from their body.

Even as when you set about to make the delicious liquid of marjoram or myrrh, or scent of nard, which breathes nectar to the nostrils, first of all it is right to seek, in so far as you may and can find it, the nature of scentless oil, which may send off no breath of perfume to the nostrils, so that it may as little as possible taint and ruin with its own strong smell the scents mingled in its body and boiled along with it. Therefore after all the first-beginnings of things are bound not to bring to the begetting of things their own scent or sound, since they cannot give anything off from themselves, nor in the same way acquire any taste at all, nor cold, nor once more warm and fiery heat . . . and the rest: yet since they are such as to be created mortal, the pliant of soft body, the brittle of crumbling body, the hollow of rare, they must needs all be kept apart from the first-beginnings, if we wish to place immortal foundations beneath things, on which the sum of life may rest; lest you see all things pass away utterly into nothing.