

Episode Thirty-Four - The Atoms Do Not Possess A Faculty of Sensation

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Welcome to Episode Thirty-Four 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 865-943](#)

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

865 — 885 : all things which have sense come from insensible elements : a visible proof of this you may see in living worms rising from the putrid earth: again grass and water change into cattle, the flesh of cattle into men, men often go to feed beasts and birds : nature turns food into what has life and sense, much as dry wood passes into flame; so much is effected by

transposition and mixture and motions of elements. That the soul, the vital principle and sense were born and died with the body in all creatures, was of course a necessary doctrine of the Epicureans and is passionately asserted by Lucretius.

886-930: the mind tries hard not to believe that sense can come from what has not sense; for stones wood clods can by no mixture produce it: but, mind, it is not every element that can beget sense; only certain atoms with certain shapes and arrangements : yet even these woods and clods may, as we have seen, give birth sometimes to living things. But they who say that sense can only come from what has sense, suppose elements to be soft, as we never see sense united but with what is soft: now suppose such elements eternal; they must have the sense of some part or of the whole living thing: but no part can feel away from the whole thing: well then these elements must be like the whole living thing: if they are living then, they are thereby liable to death; but even if they are not, they would make a mere medley of living things, like the impossible unions of men and brutes : but if they lose their own sense, why then give it only to take it away? nay we have just seen that sense can come from what has no sense.

931-943: If it be said sense comes from what has not sense by a process of change or a sort of birth, I answer, birth and change both imply a previous union : before the creature is begotten, its body cannot have sense, as its matter is dispersed abroad and has not come together in a way to awake any of the senses.—This passage is obscure: he must apparently be alluding to the stoics.

Browne

Now farther, those beings we see indued with sense, you must needs own are produced from insensible seeds; nor is there anything we perceive by common experience, which refutes or opposes this opinion. Everything rather leads us on, and compels us to believe that animals, I say, proceed from principles that are void of sense; for we observe living worms come into being from stinking dung, when the earth, moistened by unseasonable showers, grows putrid and rotten. Besides, beings of all kinds undergo continual changes; the waters, the leaves, and the sweet grass turn themselves into beasts; the beasts convert their nature into human bodies; and the bodies of wild beasts and birds increase and grow strong by these bodies of ours. Nature therefore changes all sorts of food into living bodies; and hence she forms the senses of all creatures, much after the same manner as she quickens dry wood into fire, and sets everything in a blaze. You see now it is of the utmost importance in what order these first seeds are ranged, and, when mingled together, what motions they give, and receive among themselves.

But tell me, what is it that lays a force upon your mind? What moves you? What drives you into another opinion, that you should not believe a thing sensible can be formed from insensible seeds? Perhaps you observe that stones, and wood, and earth, when mingled together, can produce no creature indued with sense; but you will do well to remember, upon this occasion, that I did not say things sensible, or sense, could instantly proceed from all seeds in general, which go to the production of beings, but that it was of great consequence of what size the

seeds are that created a being of sense, with what figures, motions, order, and position they are distinguished. Nothing of which we observe in wood, or clods of Earth. Yet these, when they are made rotten by moisture, produce worms, because the particles of matter, being changed from their former course by some new cause, are so united and disposed, that living creatures are formed, and creep into being.

Besides, those who contend that a sensible being may be raised from sensible seeds, (and this you are taught by some philosophers), must needs allow those seeds to be soft; for all sense is joined to bowels, nerves, and veins, all which, we know, are soft, and consequently liable to change and dissolution. But grant their seeds to be eternal, yet if they are sensible, each seed must be endued with sense, either as a part or a whole, and be like a complete animal of itself; but no single part can perceive or exist of itself, for each part requires a union with the other parts, to make it capable of sense, nor can the hand feel any more, or any other part retain its sense, when separated from the body. These seeds therefore must be perfect animals, and so unite together in a vital sensibility; but how then can be seeds be said to be eternal, and secure from death, when they have the nature of animals, and are one and the same with them in all respects, and therefore are mortal, and must die? But allow these seeds to be sensible and Incorruptible too, yet, by their union and agreement, they can produce nothing but animals and things sensible; that is, mankind, and cattle, and wild beasts, can produce nothing but men, and cattle, and wild beasts. (How then could things insensible, such as trees, metals, have a being?)

If you say these seeds, in mingling together, lose their own proper sense, and assume another, what need you impute any sense at all to them, when they must lose it again? Besides, as we have proved before, since we perceive the eggs of birds are changing into living young, and that worms break out of the earth, when it is made rotten by unseasonable showers, we may conclude, that things sensible may arise from insensible seeds. If anyone will assert here that sense indeed may proceed from insensible seeds, by sort of change made in the seeds, by virtue of the thing that generates, before the animal is formed, it will be sufficient plainly to show him, that no animal can be formed but by a union, first of the seeds, nor can anything be changed but by agreement of the seeds, so that there can be no such thing as sense in any body before the animal is completely formed. And for this reason: because the seeds lie scattered in the air, the water, the earth, the fire, nor have they yet united together, after a proper manner, into any vital motions by which the senses of any animal may be produced, in order to guide and preserve it.

Munro:

To come to another point, whatever things we perceive to have sense, you must yet admit all composed of senseless first-beginnings: manifest tokens which are open to all to apprehend, so far from refuting or contradicting this, do rather themselves take us by the hand and constrain us to believe that, as I say, living things are begotten from senseless things. We may see in fact

living worms spring out of stinking dung, when the soaked earth has gotten putridity after excessive rains; and all things besides change in the same way: rivers leaves and glad pastures change into cattle, cattle change their substance into our bodies, and often out of these the powers of wild beasts and the bodies of the strong of wing are increased. Therefore nature changes all foods into living bodies and engenders out of them all the senses of living creatures, much in the same way as she dissolves dry woods into flames and converts all things into fires.

Now do you see that it is of great moment in what sort of arrangement the first-beginnings of things are severally placed and with what others they are mixed up, when they impart and receive motions? Then again what is that which strikes your mind, affects that mind and constrains it to give utterance to many different thoughts, to save you from believing that the sensible is begotten out of senseless things? Sure enough it is because stones and wood and earth however mixed together are yet unable to produce vital sense. This therefore it will be well to remember herein, that I do not assert that the sensible and sensations are forthwith begotten out of all elements without exception which produce things; but that it is of great moment first how minute the particles are which make up the sensible thing and then what shape they possess and what in short they are in their motions arrangements and positions. None of which conditions we find in woods and clods; and yet even these when they have so to speak become rotten through the rains bring forth worms, because bodies of matter driven from their ancient arrangements by a new condition are combined in the manner needed for the begetting of living creatures.

Next they who hold that the sensible can be produced out of sensible elements, accustomed thus to derive their own sense from elements [which are sensible] in their turn, [do thus render their own seeds mortal,] when they make them soft; for all sense is bound up with flesh, sinews and veins; which in everything ye see to be soft and formed of a mortal body. But even suppose that these things can remain eternal: they must yet I presume either have the sense of some part or else be deemed to possess a sense similar to the entire living creatures. But the parts cannot possibly have sense by themselves alone; for all sense of the different members has reference to something else; nor can the hand when severed from us nor any other part of the body whatever by itself maintain sensation. It remains to assume that they resemble the entire living creatures. In this case it is necessary that they should feel the things which we feel in the same way as we do, in order that they may be able in all points to work in concert with the vital sense. How then can they be called first-beginnings of things and shun the paths of death, seeing that they are living things, and that living things are one and the same with mortal things? Nay, granting they could do this, yet by their meeting and union they will make nothing but a jumble and medley of living things; just you are to know as men cattle and wild beasts would be unable to beget any other thing by all their mixing with one another.

But if haply they lose from their body their own sense and adopt another, what use was it to assign what is again withdrawn? Moreover, the instance to which we had before recourse, inasmuch as we see the eggs of fowls change into living chicks and worms burst forth, when putridity has seized on the earth after excessive rains, you are to know that sensations can be

begotten out of no-sensations. But if haply any one shall say that sense so far may arise from no-sensation by a process of change, or because it is brought forth by a kind of birth, it will be enough to make plain and to prove to him that no birth takes place until a union of elements has first been effected, and that nothing changes without their having been united. Above all senses cannot exist in any body before the nature of the living thing itself has been begotten because sure enough the matter remains scattered about in air, rivers, earth, and things produced from earth, and has not met together and combined in appropriate fashion the vital motions by which the all-discerning senses are kindled into action in each living thing.

Bailey:

It must needs be that you should admit that all things which we see have sense are yet made of insensible first-beginnings. The clear facts, which are known for all to see, neither refute this nor fight against it, but rather themselves lead us by the hand and constrain us to believe that, as I say, living things are begotten of insensible things. Why we may see worms come forth alive from noisome dung, when the soaked earth has gotten muddiness from immeasurable rains; moreover, we may see all things in like manner change themselves. Streams, leaves, and glad pastures change themselves into cattle, cattle change their nature into our bodies, and from our bodies the strength of wild beasts often gains increase, and the bodies of birds strong of wing. And so nature changes all foods into living bodies, and out of food brings to birth all the senses of living things, in no far different way than she unfolds dry logs into flames and turns all things into fires. Do you not then see now that it is of great matter in what order all the first-beginnings of things are placed, and with what others mingled they give and receive motions?

Next then, what is it, that strikes on the very mind, which stirs it and constrains to utter diverse thoughts, that you may not believe that the sensible is begotten of the insensible? We may be sure it is that stones and wood and earth mixed together yet cannot give out vital sense. Herein it will be right to remember this, that I do not say that sensations are begotten at once from all and every of the things which give birth to sensible things, but that it is of great matter, first of what size are these bodies, which create the sensible, and with what form they are endowed, then what they are in their motions, arrangements and positions. And none of these things can we perceive in logs and sods; and yet, when they are, as it were, made muddy through the rains, they give birth to little worms, because the bodies of matter stirred by the newcomer from their old arrangements are brought into union in the way in which living things are bound to be begotten. Next, those who think that the sensible could be created out of sensible bodies which in turn were used to owe their sense to others, [these make the seeds of their own sense mortal], when they make them soft. For all sensation is linked to flesh, sinews and veins, which we see are always soft in nature built up of mortal body.

But still let us grant now that these can abide for ever: still doubtless they must either have the sense proper to a part, or be thought to be of a sense like to that of whole living things. But it must needs be that the parts cannot have sense by themselves; for all sensation in the limbs depends on us, nor severed from us can the hand nor any part of the body at all keep sensation by itself. It remains that they are made like whole living things. Thus it must needs be that they

feel likewise what we feel, so that they may be able to share with us in every place in the vital sensations. How then will they be able to be called the first-beginnings of things and to shun the paths of death, since they are living things, and living things are one and the same with mortal things? Yet grant that they can, still by their meeting and union, they will make nothing besides a crowd and mob of living things, even as, as you may know, men, herds of cattle and wild beasts could not beget anything by coming together with one another. But if by chance they lose their own sense, when inside a body, and receive another, what good was it that that should be assigned to them which is taken away? Then, moreover, as we saw before, inasmuch as we perceive the eggs of birds turn into living chickens, and worms swarm out when mud has seized on the earth owing to immoderate rains, we may know that sensations can be begotten out of that which is not sensation.

But if by chance any one shall say that sensation can in any case arise from not-sensation by change of substance or, as it were, by a kind of birth, by which it is thrust out into being, it will be enough to make clear and prove to him that birth cannot come to be, unless when a union has been formed before, nor is anything changed except after union. First of all, no body at all can have sensation before the nature of the living thing is itself begotten, because, we may be sure, its substance is scattered abroad and is kept in the air, in streams, in earth and things sprung from earth, nor has it come together in appropriate way and combined with one another the vital motions, whereby the all-seeing senses are kindled and see to the safety of each living thing.