

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

Post by “Cassius” of August 30, 2020 at 8:48 AM

Potentially analogous thoughts from other Epicurean sources on animate beings arising from inanimate seeds:

[Frances Wright, A Few Days in Athens, Chapter 15](#)- Discussion between Theon, Metrodorus, and Leontium:

Theon: “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?”

Leontium: “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.”

“Our young friend,” observed Metrodorus, “lately made use of an expression, the error involved in which, seems to be at the root of his difficulty. In speaking of matter,” he continued, turning to Theon, “you employed the epithet inert. What is your meaning? And what matter do you here designate?”

Theon: “All matter surely is, in itself, inert.”

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1673-episode-thirty-four-the-atoms-do-not-possess-a-faculty-of-sensation/?postID=8764#post8764>

“All matter surely is, in itself, as it is,” said Metrodorus with a smile; “and that, I should say, is living and active. Again, what is matter?”

“All that is evident to our senses,” replied Theon, “and which stands opposed to mind.”

Leontium: “All matter then is inert which is devoid of mind. “What then do you understand by mind?”

“I conceive some error in my definition,” said Theon, smiling. “Should I say — *thought* — you would ask if every existence devoid of thought was inert, or if every existence, possessing life, possessed thought.”

Leontium: “I should so have asked. Mind or thought I consider a quality of that matter constituting the existence we call a man, which quality we find in a varying degree in other existences; many, perhaps all animals, possessing it. Life is another quality, or combination of qualities, of matter, inherent in — we know not how many existences. We find it in vegetables; we might perceive it even in stones, could we watch their formation, growth, and decay. We may call that active principle, pervading the elements of all things, which approaches and separates the component particles of the ever-changing, and yet ever-enduring world — life. Until you discover some substance, which undergoes no change, you cannot speak of inert matter: it can only be so, at least, relatively, — that is, as compared with other substances.”

Theon: “The classing of thought and life among the qualities of matter is new to me.”

Leontium: “What is in a substance cannot be separate from it. And is not all matter a compound of qualities? Hardness, extension, form, color, motion, rest — take away all these, and where is matter? To conceive of mind independent of matter, is as if we should conceive of color independent of a substance colored: What is form, if not a body of a particular shape? What is thought, if not something which thinks? Destroy the substance, and you destroy its properties; and so equally — destroy the properties, and you destroy the substance. To suppose the possibility of retaining the one, without the other, is an evident absurdity.”

Theon: “The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum,” returned the youth, “but I never considered the error as extending to mind and life, any more than to vice and virtue.”

“You stopped short with many others,” said Leontium. “It is indeed surprising how many acute minds will apply a logical train of reasoning in one case, and invert the process in another exactly similar.”

### **[Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820: \(Full version at Founders.gov\)](#)**

.... But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It's crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, I was obliged to recur ultimately to

my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.' I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void*, or *nothing*, or *immaterial space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.

I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism* of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.

At what age of the Christian church this heresy of *immaterialism*, this masked atheism, crept in, I do not know. But a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it. He told us indeed that 'God is a spirit,' but he has not defined what a spirit is, nor said that it is not matter. And the ancient fathers generally, if not universally, held it to be matter: light and thin indeed, an ethereal gas; but still matter. Origen says 'Deus reapse corporalis est; sed graviorum tantum corporum ratione, incorporeus.' Tertullian 'quid enim deus nisi corpus?' and again 'quis negabit deum esse corpus? Etsi deus spiritus, spiritus etiam corpus est, sui generis, in sua effigie.' St. Justin Martyr '{to Theion phamen einai asomaton oyk oti asomaton—epeide de to me krateisthai ypo tinos, toy krateisthai timioteron esti, dia toyto kaloymen ayton asomaton.}' And St. Macarius, speaking of angels says 'quamvis enim subtilia sint, tamen in substantia, forma et figura, secundum tenuitatem naturae eorum, corpora sunt tenuia.' And St. Austin, St. Basil, Lactantius, Tatian, Athenagoras and others, with whose writings I pretend not a familiarity, are said by those who are, to deliver the same doctrine. Turn to your Ocellus d'Argens 97. 105. and to his Timaeus 17. for these quotations. In England these Immaterialists might have been burnt until the 29. Car. 2. when the writ de haeretico comburendo was abolished: and here until the revolution, that statute not having extended to us. All heresies being now done away with us, these schismatists are merely atheists, differing from the material Atheist only in their belief that 'nothing made something,' and from the material deist who believes that matter alone can operate on matter.

Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind. A single sense may indeed be sometimes deceived, but rarely: and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. They evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms. **I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which**

**are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.** I am sure that I really know many, many, things, and none more surely than that I love you with all my heart, and pray for the continuance of your life until you shall be tired of it yourself.