

Episode Thirty-Five - More Reasons Why The Atoms Cannot Possess The Faculty of Sense

Post by "Cassius" of August 30, 2020 at 9:27 PM

Welcome to Episode Thirty-Five 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 944-1047](#)

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

944-962: a living creature receives a blow which its nature cannot endure: the senses of body and soul are stunned; the connection of the two is broken, and the soul escapes through the apertures of the body: a blow can do no more than break up and scatter the several elements. Again the remaining vital motions can often get the better of a less severe blow, bring each

thing back to its proper channel, and rekindle the senses: in this way only is the thing recalled to life.

963-972: there is pain when the elements are disordered in their seats, pleasure when they return to their place; therefore first-beginnings themselves can feel neither pleasure nor pain, since they are not formed of other first-beginnings, whose motions can be disturbed so as to give them pain, or rearranged so as to give them pleasure.

973-990: if sense must be given to the elements of living things in order that these things may have sense, then must their elements have the same feelings and reasoning powers which men have; they will thus have to consist of other elements, and these again of others on to infinity: if all this is absurd, and you cannot conceive laughing or thinking atoms, why not allow generally things that have sense to come from elements without sense?

991-1022: nay we men, as well as beasts and the fruits of the earth, may be said to have our birth from heaven as father, and earth who as mother gives us food and therefore life: death too is but the going back of our elements to heaven and earth respectively: then in a moment all forms and colors and senses perish, which depend on the motions arrangements etc. of first-beginnings ; even as in this our poem a few letters produce by different arrangements, etc. quite different verses.— The first part of this passage is a literal translation of a fragment from the Chrysippus of Anaxagoras' scholar Euripides.

1023-1047: listen now to a question of vast moment. But nothing is so easy that it may not at first seem difficult; nothing so wondrous but people cease in the end to admire it. Look at the sky with sun moon and stars: what more marvelously beautiful? yet the world weary of the sight cares not now to give it a glance. Fear not therefore the novelty of the thing, but hear what I have to say; and if it be true, surrender; if false, gird yourself to the combat : the mind would fain comprehend that immensity into which it looks and in which it freely expatiates.

Browne:

Besides, a blow falling upon any animal, heavier than its nature can endure, immediately torments it, and confounds all its senses both of body and mind; for the connection of the seeds is dissolved, and the vital motions are wholly obstructed, till the force of the blow being agitated violently through the limbs dissolves the vital ties of the soul from the body, and compels her, scattered and broken to pieces, to fly out through every pore. For what can we conceive to be the effect of such a stroke but to separate and dissolve the seeds that were united before? And then it happens, when the blow falls with less violence, that the remains of vital motion often get the better, they recover and calm the great disorders of the blow, and recall everything again into its proper channel. They rescue the body, as it were, from the jaws of death, and give new life to the senses that were almost destroyed; else why should creatures rather return to life from the very gates of death with new spirits, than when they were just entering in, proceed on, and utterly perish?

Further, since we feel pain when the seeds are shaken from their natural state and situation within, and are disordered through all the bowels and limbs by any outward force, and when they return again into their proper place, a quiet pleasure immediately succeeds, you may conclude that simple seeds cannot be tormented with pain, nor of themselves be affected with pleasure; because they do not consist of principles or other seeds by whose violent motions they may be disturbed, or be delighted with any pleasure they can give; and therefore they cannot possibly be endued with any sense at all.

Again, if in order to produce creatures with sense, sense must be imputed to the seeds from which they are formed, of what principles, I pray, is the human race properly composed? Of such, no doubt, as laugh, and shake their little sides, such as bedew their face and cheeks with flowing tears, such as can widely talk how things are mixed, and such as search of what first principles themselves are formed; For all things that enjoy the faculties of perfect animals must consist of other seeds like them, and these must arise from others, and thus the progression would be infinite. I urge further, whatever you observe to speak, to laugh, to be wise, must proceed from other seeds that can perform the same; but if this be ridiculous and downright madness, and things that can laugh can spring from seeds that never smile, and the wise, that learnedly dispute, are produced from foolish seeds and stupid, what hinders that sensible things may not as well be formed from seeds without any matter of sense at all?

Lastly, we all spring from ethereal seed; we have all one common parent, when the kind Earth, our mother, receives the quickening drops of moisture from above, she conceives us and brings forth shining fruits, and pleasant trees, the human race, and all the race of beasts, she yields them proper food on which they feed, and lead a pleasant life, and propagate their kind, and therefore has she justly gained the name of mother. The parts that first from Earth arose return to Earth again; what descended from the sky, those parts brought back again that heavens receive; nor does death so put an end to beings as to destroy the very seeds of them, but only disunites them, then makes new combinations, and is the cause that all things vary their forms, and change their colors, become sensible, and in a moment lose all their sense again. You may know from hence of what importance it is, with what the first seeds of things are united, and in what position they are contained, and what are the several motions they give and take among themselves. And from hence you may conclude that these first seed are not the less eternal, because you perceive them floating, as it were, upon the surface of bodies, and subject to be born, and die. It is of like concern with what the several letters are joined in these verses of mine, and in what order each of them is disposed; for the same letters make up the words to signify the heaven, the sea, the Earth, the rivers, the sun; the same express the fruits, the trees, the creatures; if they are not all, yet by much the greater part are alike, but they differ in their situation. So, likewise, in bodies, when the intervals of the seeds, their courses, connections, weights, strokes, union, motions, order, position, figure; when these things are changed, the things themselves must be changed likewise.

Now apply your mind closely to the documents of true reason, for a new scheme of philosophy presses earnestly for your attention, a new scene of things displays itself before you. Yet there is nothing so obvious but may at first view seem difficult to be believed, and there is nothing so

prodigious and wonderful at first that men do not by degrees cease to admire. For see the bright and pure color of the sky, possessed on every side by wandering stars, and the Moon's splendor, and the Sun's glorious light; these, if they now first shown to mortal eyes, and suddenly presented to our view, what could more wonderful appear than these? And what before could men less presume to expect? Nothing surely, so surprising would be the sight have been. But now, quite tired and cloyed with the prospect, none of us vouchsafes so much as to cast our eyes up towards the bright temples of the sky. Therefore do not be frightened, and conceive an aversion to an opinion because of its novelty; but search it rather with a more piercing judgment. If it appears true to you, embrace it; if false, set yourself against it.

Munro:

Again a blow more severe than its nature can endure, prostrates at once any living thing and goes on to stun all the senses of body and mind. For the positions of the first-beginnings are broken up and the vital motions entirely stopped, until the matter, disordered by the shock through the whole frame, unties from the body the vital fastenings of the soul and scatters it abroad and forces it out through all the pores. For what more can we suppose the infliction of a blow can do, than shake from their place and break up the union of the several elements? Often too when the blow is inflicted with less violence, the remaining vital motions are wont to prevail, ay, prevail and still the huge disorders caused by the blow and recall each part into its proper channels and shake off the motion of death now reigning as it were paramount in the body and kindle afresh the almost lost senses. For in what other way should the thing be able to gather together its powers of mind and come back to life from the very threshold of death, rather than pass on to the goal to which it had almost run and so pass away?

Again since there is pain when the bodies of matter are disordered by any force throughout the living flesh and frame and quake in their seats within, and as when they travel back into their place, a soothing pleasure ensues, you are to know that first-beginnings can be assailed by no pain and can derive no pleasure from themselves; since they are not formed of any bodies of first-beginnings, so as to be distressed by any novelty in their motion or derive from it any fruit of fostering delight; and therefore they must not be possessed of any sense.

Again if in order that living creatures may severally have sense, sense is to be assigned to their first-beginnings as well, what are we to say of those of which mankind is specifically made? Sure enough they burst into fits of shaking laughter and sprinkle with dewy tears face and cheeks and have the cunning to say much about the composition of things and to inquire next what their own first-beginnings are; since like in their natures to the entire mortals they must in their turn be formed out of other elements, then those others out of others, so that you can venture nowhere to come to a stop: yes, whatever you shall say speaks and laughs and thinks, I will press you with the argument that it is formed of other things performing these same acts. But if we see these notions to be sheer folly and madness, and a man may laugh though not made of laughing things, and think and reason in learned language though not formed of thoughtful and eloquent seeds, why cannot the things which we see to have sense, just as well be made up of a mixture of things altogether devoid of sense?

Again we are all sprung from a heavenly seed, all have that same father, by whom mother earth the giver of increase, when she has taken in from him liquid drops of moisture, conceives and bears goodly crops and joyous trees and the race of man, bears all kinds of brute beasts, in that she supplies food with which all feed their bodies and lead a pleasant life and continue their race; wherefore with good cause she has gotten the name of mother. That also which before was from the earth, passes back into the earth, and that which was sent from the borders of ether, is carried back and taken in again by the quarters of heaven. Death does not extinguish things in such way as to destroy the bodies of matter, but only breaks up the union amongst them, and then joins anew the different elements with others; and thus it comes to pass that all things change their shapes and alter their colors and receive sensations and in a moment yield them up; so that from all this you may know it matters much with what others and in what position the same first-beginnings of things are held in union and what motions they do mutually impart and receive, and you must not suppose that that which we see floating about on the surface of things and now born, then at once perishing, can be a property inherent in everlasting first bodies. Nay in our verses themselves it matters much with what other elements and in what kind of order the several elements are placed. If not all, yet by far the greatest number are alike; but the totals composed of them are made to differ by the position of these elements. Thus in actual things, as well, when the clashing potions, arrangement, position and shapes of matter change about, the things must also change.

Apply now, we entreat, your mind to true reason. For a new question struggles earnestly to gain your ears, a new aspect of things to display itself. But there is nothing so easy as not to be at first more difficult to believe than afterwards; and nothing, too so great, so marvelous, that all do not gradually abate their admiration of it. Look up at the bright and unsullied hue of heaven and the stars which it holds within it, wandering all about, and the moon and the sun's light of dazzling brilliancy: if all these things were now for the first time, if I say they were now suddenly presented to mortals beyond all expectation, what could have been named that would be more marvelous than these things, or that nations beforehand would less venture to believe could be? Nothing, methinks: so wondrous strange had been this sight. Yet how little, you know, wearied as all are to satiety with seeing, any one now cares to look up into heaven's glittering quarters! Cease therefore to be dismayed by the mere novelty and so to reject reason from your mind with loathing: weigh the questions rather with keen judgment and if they seem to you to be true, surrender, or if they are a falsehood, gird yourself to the encounter.

Bailey:

Moreover, a heavier blow than its nature can endure, of a sudden fells any living creature, and hastens to stun all the sensations of its body and mind. For the positions of the first-beginnings are broken up and the vital motions are checked deep within, until the substance, after the shock throughout all the limbs, loosens the vital clusters of the soul from the body, scatters it abroad and drives it out through every pore. For what else are we to think that a blow can do when it meets each thing, but shake it to pieces and break it up? It comes to pass too, that when a blow meets us with less force, the vital motions that remain are often wont to win, yea, to win and to allay the vast disturbances of the blow and summon each part back again into its

proper path, and to shake to pieces the movement of death that now, as it were, holds sway in the body, and to kindle the sensations almost lost. For by what other means could living things gather their wits and turn back to life even from the very threshold of death rather than pass on, whither their race is already almost run, and pass away?

Moreover, since there is pain when the bodies of matter, disturbed by some force throughout the living flesh and limbs, tremble each in their abode within, and when they settle back into their place, comforting pleasure comes to pass, you may know that the first-beginnings cannot be assailed by any pain, and can find no pleasure in themselves: inasmuch as they are not made of any bodies of first-beginnings, through whose newness of movement they may be in pain or find any enjoyment of life-giving delight. They are bound then not to be endowed with any sensation.

Again, if, in order that all living things may be able to feel, we must after all assign sensation to their first-beginnings, what of those whereof the race of men has its peculiar increment? You must think that they are shaken with quivering mirth and laugh aloud and sprinkle face and cheeks with the dew of their tears. And they have the wit to say much about the mingling of things, and they go on to ask what are their first-beginnings; inasmuch as, being made like to whole mortal men, they too must needs be built of other particles in their turn, and those again of others, so that you may never dare to make a stop: nay, I will press hard on you, so that, whatsoever you say speaks and laughs and thinks, shall be composed of other particles which do these same things. But if we perceive this to be but raving madness, and a man can laugh, though he has not the increment of laughing atoms, and can think and give reasons with learned lore, though he be not made of seeds thoughtful and eloquent, why should those things, which, as we see, have feeling, any the less be able to exist, mingled of seeds which lack sense in every way?

And so, we are all sprung from heavenly seed; there is the one father of us all, from whom when live-giving earth, the mother, has taken within her the watery drops of moisture, teeming she brings forth the goodly crops and the glad trees and the race of men; she brings forth too all the tribes of the wild beasts, when she furnishes the food, on which all feed their bodies and pass a pleasant life and propagate their offspring; wherefore rightly has she won the name of mother. Even so, what once sprung from earth, sinks back into the earth, and what was sent down from the coasts of the sky, returns again, and the regions of heaven receive it. Nor does death so destroy things as to put an end to the bodies of matter, but only scatters their union. Then she joins anew one with others, and brings it to pass that all things thus alter their forms, and change their colours, and receive sensations, and in an instant of time yield them up again, so that you may know that it matters with what others the first-beginnings of things are bound up and in what position and what motions they mutually give and receive, and may not think that what we see floating on the surface of things or at times coming to birth, and on a sudden passing away, can abide in the possession of eternal first-bodies. Nay, indeed, even in my verses it is of moment with what others and in what order each letter is placed. For the same letters signify sky, sea, earth, rivers, sun, the same too crops, trees, living creatures; if not all, yet by far the greater part, are alike, but it is by position that things sound different. So in

things themselves likewise when meetings, motions, order, position, shapes are changed, things too are bound to be changed.

Now turn your mind, I pray, to a true reasoning. For a truth wondrously new is struggling to fall upon your ears, and a new face of things to reveal itself. Yet neither is anything so easy, but that at first it is more difficult to believe, and likewise nothing is so great or so marvelous but that little by little all decrease their wonder at it. First of all the bright clear colour of the sky, and all it holds within it, the stars that wander here and there, and the moon and the sheen of the sun with its brilliant light; all these, if now they had come to being for the first time for mortals, if all unforeseen they were in a moment placed before their eyes, what story could be told more marvelous than these things, or what that the nations would less dare to believe beforehand? Nothing, I trow: so worthy of wonder would this sight have been. Yet think how no one now, wearied with satiety of seeing, deigns to gaze up at the shining quarters of the sky! Wherefore cease to spew out reason from your mind, struck with terror at mere newness, but rather with eager judgement weigh things, and, if you see them true, lift your hands and yield, or, if it is false, gird yourself to battle