

Episode Eighteen - All Things Are Not Made of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2020 at 9:15 PM

Welcome to Episode Eighteen 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 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 passes for conventional wisdom about Epicurus today.

Second: We won't be talking about Epicurus from the point of view of modern political perspectives. 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: We will be approaching Lucretius exactly as he intended, with the goal of understanding the fundamental nature of the universe as the essential base of Epicurean philosophy. From this perspective you will see that Epicurus taught neither the pursuit of luxury nor the pursuit of simple living, but the pursuit of pleasure, using feeling as the guide to life, and not supernatural gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. 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.

Remember that our podcast home page is LucretiusToday.com, where you can download a free copy of the versions of the poem we are reading, and our home for discussion of Lucretius and all other aspects of Epicurean philosophy is Epicureanfriends.com

Now for today in this Episode 18, we will discuss how just as things are not formed of a single element such as fire, divine or otherwise, all things are also not simply formed from the four classical elements (earth, air, fire, and water).

Now let's join the discussion with Martin 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.
- (17) **All things are not made of a single element, such as fire, as some philosophers assert** - such as Heraclitus, who asserted all things are made of fire.

Here is the text that will be covered in Episode Eighteen. The Latin version of Book One has this as beginning at approximately line 713 of the [Daniel Brown Edition](#) and of the [Munro Latin Edition here](#).

[Daniel Brown 1743 Edition:](#)

[713] And so do those who doubt the first elements of things, and to produce all beings, join the air to fire, the earth to water, or believe that from all four all beings are produced, and spring from air, and water, earth and fire. The chief of these we rank Empedocles of Agrigentum, born in Sicily, the island famed for its three promontories, whose sides the Ionian sea flows all around, with mighty windings, from whose coast the sea, by a narrow Frith, divides the bounds of Italy. Here is the fierce Charybdis, here Aetna roars, and threatens loud to suck in flames of vengeance, with greater force to belch them out again, burst from his jaws, and throw the flashing fire high as the sky. This island, though renowned by men for many things, and worth their sight, rich in the best advantages of life, by mighty men defended, yet produced nothing more glorious than this one great man, nothing more venerable, admired, and dear. Besides his verse, that from his soul divine flows sweetly, so clearly proves, and so explains the noble secrets he has found, he seems scarce born of human race, but from the gods.

[735] Yet he, with others inferior note we named before, remarkably, by great degrees, and much below him, though these have succeeded well in their search, and many things have found as if inspired, and have pronounced their oracles (from the most close recesses of their souls) much more divine, and founded more on reason than Pythia, sacred prophetess, from Tripod, or from Apollo's laurel ever spoke. Yet they have made sad havoc, when they search into the principles of things and fell with this great man's mistakes together with him.

[743] And first, because, denying there is void in bodies, they admit of motion, and allow that things are soft or rare; as the air, the sun, the fire, the earth, the creatures, fruits, and yet will mix no empty space in the contexture of bodies that are formed.

[747] And then they set no bounds to bodies being divided, nor will admit an end to blows that break their frame; nor will they grant that such a thing as least is found in bodies, when we plainly see that every being has a part, a point that utmost lies, and obvious to our sense, which is the least of all; and thence conclude, that utmost point is that same least in things too small to be discovered by the sight.

[754] Besides, these men make their principles of things consist in soft seeds, which we see are born, and altogether mortal in their frame; if so, the whole of things must have returned to nothing, and be again from thence restored; how distant both from truth you have heard before. And then such seeds are many times at war among themselves, and poison to each other, and so will perish in the attack, or fly scattered, as in a tempest we observe the thunder, and the showers and wind disperse.

[764] Lastly, if all things from four elements are formed, and into them are finally dissolved, why should they rather the first principles of things be called, than things the principles of them? For they are produced alternately, are ever changing their form and their whole nature mutually into each other; but if by chance you think the body of the fire and earth is joined, that air is joined to water, and this united, each element preserves its nature still entire; nothing from seeds like these could have been formed, not men, nor things inanimate, as trees: for every element in this various heap of matter, ever changing, would display its proper nature still; you'd see air mixed with the earth, and fire and water joined. But the first principles whence things are formed should be in nature close and undiscerned, that nothing might appear which should oppose or jar, and thus prevent the compound body from being uniform, and make it consist of parts dissimilar, confused and void.

[782] Besides, philosophers like these derive their transmutation from celestial fire; and first, they make this fire change to air, from air is water formed, the earth from water; and then again, from earth these elements return, first water, then the air, then last the fire. Nor do these constant changes ever cease among themselves, but still proceed from heaven to earth, from earth to stars, that light the world. But the first seeds of things must by no means be thus disposed; for something immutable must needs remain, lest things should utterly to nothing be reduced: For whatsoever suffers change, by passing over the bounds of its first nature, dies, and is no more what it first was. Those elements therefore, which, as we said above, admit of change, must needs consist of other seeds which never can change at all, lest things should utterly to nothing be reduced: Then rather say, there are some certain principles in nature which are the seeds of fire, suppose, and some of these being taken away, or else by adding more, by changing of their order or their motion, they compose the air, and so all other beings may be produced by changes such as these.

[803] But you say, that common fact does clearly show that all things grow and rise into the air and are supported by the earth; and unless the season, in happy time, indulges rain, and shakes the trees with driving showers, unless the sun, on his part, cherishes and gives his heat, nor fruits, nor trees, nor creatures could increase. 'Tis true, but these are not first seeds; and we likewise, unless dry food and kindly juice preserve our bodies, they must perish, and every spark of life, out of our nerves and bones, must be extinct. We are upheld, no doubt, and nourished by certain means; and other things are staid by certain others; for many common principles of many things are mixed in each. And therefore, the various kinds of things we find supported in a different manner; but yet it much concerns with what, and in what order, these

first seeds unite, and what motion they give and take among themselves; for the same seeds compose heaven, earth, the sea, the rivers, and the sun, the same compose the creatures, fruits, and trees, they differ only as they are moved by others, and as their mixture differs in themselves.

[823] So, in these lines of mine, the many letters you see are common to the make and form of many words; and yet, you must confess, the verses and the words are much unlike in sense and sound: Such is the force of letters, by change of order only. But the first seeds of things being more, must needs admit of changes more different; from whence proceeds that great variety of things we see produced.

Munro:

[713] As well as they who make the first-beginnings of things twofold coupling air with fire and earth with water, and they who believe that all things grow out of four things, fire earth and air and water. Chief of whom is Agrigentine Empedocles: him within the three-cornered shores of its lands that island bore, about which the Ionian sea flows in large crankings, and splashes up brine from its green waves. Here the sea racing in its straitened froth divides by its waters the shores of Italia's lands from the other's coasts; here is wasteful Charybdis and here the rumblings of Aetna threaten anew to gather up such fury of flames, as again with force to belch forth the fires bursting from its throat and carry up to heaven once more the lightnings of flame. Now though this great country is seen to deserve in many ways the wonder of mankind and is held to be well worth visiting, rich in all good things, guarded by large force of men, yet seems it to have held within it nothing more glorious than this man, nothing more holy marvelous and dear. The verses too of his godlike genius cry with a loud voice and set forth in such wise his glorious discoveries that he hardly seems born of a mortal stock.

[735] Yet he and those whom we have mentioned above immeasurably inferior and far beneath him, although the authors of many excellent and godlike discoveries, they have given responses from so to say their hearts' holy of holies with more sanctity and on much more grounds than the Pythia who speaks out from the tripod and laurel of Phoebus, have yet gone to ruin in the first-beginnings of things: it is there they have fallen, and, great themselves, great and heavy has been that fall;

[743] first because they have banished void from things and yet assign to them motions, and allow things soft and rare, air sun fire earth, living things and corn, and yet mix not up void in their body;

[747] next because they suppose that there is no limit to the division of bodies and no stop set to their breaking and that there exists no least at all in things; though we see that that is the bounding point of any thing which seems to be least to our senses, so that from this you may infer that because the things which you do not see have a bounding point, there is a least in

them.

[754] Moreover since they assign soft first-beginnings of things, which we see to have birth and to be of a body altogether mortal, the sum of things must in that case revert to nothing and the store of things be born anew and flourish out of nothing: how wide now of the truth both these doctrines are you will already comprehend.

[760] In the next place these bodies are in many ways mutually hostile and poisonous; and therefore they will either perish when they have met, or will fly asunder just as we see, when a storm has gathered, lightnings and rains and winds fly asunder.

[764] Again if all things are produced from four things and all again broken up into those things, how can they be called first-beginnings of things any more than things be called their first-beginnings, the supposition being reversed? For they are begotten time about and interchange color and their whole nature without ceasing. But if haply you suppose that the body of fire and of earth and air and the moisture of water meet in such a way that none of them in the union changes its nature, no thing I tell you can be then produced out of them, neither living thing nor thing with inanimate body, as a tree; in fact each thing amid the medley of this discordant mass will display its own nature and air will be seen to be mixed up with earth and heat to remain in union with moisture. But first-beginnings ought in begetting things to bring with them a latent and unseen nature in order that no thing stand out, to be in the way and prevent whatever is produced from having its own proper being.

[782] Moreover they go back to heaven and its fires for a beginning, and first suppose that fire changes into air, next that from air water is begotten and earth is produced out of water, and that all in reverse order come back from earth, water first, next air, then heat, and that these cease not to interchange, to pass from heaven to earth, from earth to the stars of ether. All which first-beginnings must on no account do; since something unchangeable must needs remain over, that things may not utterly be brought back to 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. Wherefore since those things which we have mentioned a little before pass into a state of change, they must be formed out of others which cannot in any case be transformed, that you may not have things returning altogether to nothing. Why not rather hold that there are certain bodies possessed of such a nature, that, if they have haply produced fire, the same may, after a few have been taken away and a few added on and the order and motion changed, produce air; and that all other things may in the same way interchange with one another?

[803] "But plain matter of fact clearly proves" you say "that all things grow up into the air and are fed out of the earth; and unless the season at the propitious period send such abundant showers that the trees reel beneath the soaking storms of rain, and unless the sun on its part foster them and supply heat, corn, trees and living things could not grow." Quite true, and unless solid food and soft water should recruit us, our substance would waste away and life break wholly up out of all the sinews and bones; for we beyond doubt are recruited and fed by

certain things, this and that other thing by certain other things. Because many first-beginnings common to many things in many ways are mixed up in things, therefore sure enough different things are fed by different things. And it often makes a great difference with what things and in what position the same first beginnings are held in union and what motions they mutually impart and receive; for the same make up heaven sea lands rivers sun, the same make up corn trees and living things; but they are mixed up with different things and in different ways as they move.

[823] Nay you see throughout even in these verses of ours many elements common to many words, though you must needs admit that the lines and words differ one from the other both in meaning and in sound wherewith they sound. So much can elements effect by a mere change of order; but those elements which are the first-beginnings of things can bring with them more combinations out of which different things can severally be produced.

Bailey:

[713] Add to them too those who make the first-beginnings of things twofold, linking air to fire or earth to water, and those who think that all can grow up out of four things, fire, earth, wind, and rain.

[716] Of them in the forefront comes Empedocles of Acragas; him that island bore within the three-cornered coasts of its lands, around which flows the Ionian ocean, with many a winding inlet, splashing salt foam from its green waves, while with narrow strait a tearing sea sunders with its waves the coasts of Italy's lands from the island-borders. Here is devastating Charybdis, and here the rumblings of Aetna threaten to gather once more the flames of its wrath, that again in its might it may belch forth the fires bursting from its throat, and once more dash to the sky its flashing flames. And though this mighty country seems in many ways marvelous to the tribes of men, and is said to deserve seeing, rich in goodly things, and strengthened with a mighty wealth of men, yet it is seen to have held nothing in it more glorious than this man, nothing more holy, more marvelous and loved. Nay, the songs of his godlike heart lift up their voice and set forth his glorious discoveries, so that he seems scarce born of human stock.

[735] Yet he and those whom I named before, weaker than he by exceeding many degrees, and far beneath him, though they discovered much in good, nay godlike fashion, and gave answers as from the shrine of their hearts in more holy wise and with reasoning far more sure than the Pythian priestess who speaks out from the tripod and laurel of Phoebus, yet in the first-beginnings of things they came to grief: great were they, and great and heavy their fall therein.

[743] First because they take away the void from things, but suppose movement, and leave things soft and rare, air, sunlight, fire, earth, beasts, and crops, and yet mingle no void in their body.

[747] Then because they hold that there is no limit at all to the cutting of bodies, that no halting-place is set to their breaking, nor again is there any least among things. And that when

we see that there is that extreme point in each thing, which is seen to be the least to our senses, so that you can infer from this that the extreme point in things which you cannot see is the least in them.

[754] Then follows this that, since they suppose the first-beginnings of things soft, things which we see come to birth and endowed throughout with a mortal body, the whole sum of things must then return to naught, and the store of things be born again, and grow strong out of nothing. And how far both this and that are from the truth, you will know by now.

[760] Then again, these things are in many ways hostile, nay poison, the one to the other; therefore either when they meet they will pass away, or they will so fly apart, as when a storm gathers we see the thunderbolts and rain and wind fly asunder.

[764] Again, if from four things all are created and all again are dissolved into those things, how can they be called the first-beginnings of things any more than things the first-beginnings of them, with our thought reversed? For they are begotten turn by turn, and change their colour and all their nature one with the other from all time onward. But if perchance you think that the body of fire and the body of earth and the breezes of the air and the dewy moisture so unite, that in union no one of them changes its nature, you will see that nothing can be created out of them, no, not a living thing, nor one with lifeless body, like a tree. Indeed in the mingling of this diverse mass each thing will reveal its own nature, and air will be seen to be mixed together with earth, and heat to cleave to moisture. But first-beginnings ought in the begetting of things to bring to bear a secret and unseen nature, that nothing may stand out which might bar and thwart whatever is created from existing with its own true being.

[782] But indeed they trace it back to heaven and heaven's fires, and hold that fire first turns itself into the breezes of the sky, that thence is begotten rain, and of rain is created earth, and then all things pass back again from earth, first moisture, next air, then heat, and that these things never cease their mutual changes, in their path from heaven to earth, from earth to the stars of the firmament. But the first-beginnings ought in no wise to do this. For it must needs be that something abides unchangeable, that all things be not altogether brought to naught. For whenever a thing changes and passes out of its own limits, straightway this is the death of that which was before. Wherefore since the things we have named a little before pass into a state of interchange, they must needs be made of other things, which cannot in any case be altered, lest you find all things returning altogether to naught. Why not rather suppose that there are certain bodies endowed with such a nature, and that, if by chance they have created fire, they can too, when a few are removed and a few added, and their order and movement is changed, make the breezes of the sky, and that thus all things are changed one into another?

[803] 'But,' you say, 'the facts show clearly that all things are nourished and grow from the earth up into the breezes of the sky; and unless the season at a propitious time fosters them with rain, so that the trees rock beneath the outpouring of the storm-clouds, and the sun for its part cherishes them, and bestows its heat on them, crops, trees, living creatures, none could

grow.' Yes, in very truth, unless we too were nurtured by dry food and soft moisture, we should lose our flesh, and all the life too would be loosened from all our sinews and bones. For beyond all doubt we are nurtured and nourished upon things determined, and other things again, each in their turn, on things determined. Yea, we may be sure, it is because many first-beginnings common in many ways to many things are mingled among things, that so diverse things are nourished on diverse food. And often it is of great matter with what others those first-beginnings are bound up, and in what position, and what movements they mutually give and receive; for the same build up sky, sea, earth, rivers, sun, the same too crops, trees, living creatures, but only when mingled with different things and moving in different ways.

[823] Indeed scattered abroad in my verses you see many letters common to many words, and yet you must needs grant that verses and words are unlike both in sense and in the ring of their sound. So great is the power of letters by a mere change of order. But the first-beginnings of things can bring more means to bear, by which all diverse things may be created.

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2020 at 1:53 PM

Episode 18 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/27507079>

Post by “Godfrey” of May 17, 2020 at 8:28 PM

There's a pertinent discussion of Empedocles in The Greeks on Pleasure, 1.2.1-1.2.8.

He's presented as a link between the didactic and physiological traditions, and apparently considered pleasure as a perception (aisthesis; there's some discussion of the meaning of the Greek). He's also believed to have thought of the "urge toward pleasure... (as) the natural instinct of the organism to seek its own best state."

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2020 at 8:09 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1552-episode-eighteen-all-things-are-not-made-of-earth-air-fire-and-water/>

Thank you Godfrey. Sounds like you are making some progress in TGOP. That book has a ton of good detail and I don't think it gets the prominence it deserves. Very hard to find even in libraries.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 18, 2020 at 2:02 PM

So far it's really good. I'm not enthusiastic about the amount devoted to Plato, but based on the first couple of chapters I'm assuming that it will be worth the effort. I bit the bullet and got a used copy from Amazon and so far I'm glad I did.