

Episode Twenty-Five - The Swerve Part II - As the Basis of Human Agency

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Welcome to Episode Twenty-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 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, beginning at approximate line 250 of the Latin edition:

[\(For an Outline of where we have been so far in past discussions, click here.\)](#)

[Daniel Browne:](#)

Besides, were all motion of the seeds uniform, and in a straight line, did one succeed another in an exact and regular order, did not the seeds, by their declining, occasion certain motions, as a sort of principle, to break the bonds of fate, and prevent a necessity of acting, and exclude a fixed an eternal succession of causes, which destroy all liberty, whence comes that free will, whence comes it, I say, so sensibly observed in all creatures of the world who act as they please, wholly rescued from the power of fate and necessity? That will by which we are moved which way soever our inclination leads us? We likewise forbear to move, not at any particular time, nor at any certain place, but when and where our mind pleases; and without doubt, the will is the principle that determines these motions, and from whence all motion is conveyed to the limbs. Don't you observe, when the barriers of the lists are thrown open of a sudden, the eager desire of the horses cannot start to the race with that celerity as their mind requires? Because the spirits, or particles of matter that maintain the course, must be got together from all parts of the body, and stirred through every limb, and fitly united, that they may readily follow the eager desire of the mind. You see then the beginning of motion rises in the heart, proceeds then by means of the will, and is thence diffused through every limb over the whole body.

But the case is otherwise, when we act as we are compelled by force by the prevailing power and the great violence of another, for then we feel plainly that the whole weight of our body moves, and is urged on against our consent, 'til our will restrains the motion through all our limbs. Don't you see now that though an outward force drives us on, and often compels us to proceed against our will, and hurries us headlong, yet there is something in the heart that resists and strives against that compulsion, at whose command the spirits or particles of matter are forced through the nerves into the several limbs and members, and are curbed likewise by the same nerves, and obliged to retire backwards.

Wherefore you must needs confess there is something else beside stroke and weight which is the cause of those motions from whence this innate power of our will proceeds. We see nothing can arise from nothing, for weight, which is natural to bodies, hinders us to conclude that all things are moved by stroke or outward force, and lest the mind should seem to act by some necessary impulse within itself (this is, by motion that proceeds from weight) and overpowered, be compelled, as it were, to bear and suffer, this is occasioned by ever so little a declination of the seeds, which however is done at no certain or determinate time or place.

Nor was the mass of matter ever more close or more loose, nor did the number of seeds ever increase or diminish, and therefore the same course in which the seeds move now, the same motion they had for the time past, and they will be carried on hereafter in the very same manner, and the things that have been hitherto produced shall be formed again in the same way; they shall come into being, grow, and arrive at perfection, as far as the laws of their respective natures will admit. For this universe of things no force can change, neither is there any place into which the least particle of matter may fly off from the whole mass, nor is there a place from whence any new seeds may break in upon this All, and so change the nature of

things and disorder their motions.

There is nothing wonderful in this, that when all the principles of things are in continual motion the whole should at the same time seem to be at perfect rest, though every particular body has a sort of motion peculiar to itself, for the nature of first seeds is so subtle that they lie far beyond the reach of our sense. And therefore, since you cannot perceive them by the eye, their motions are much less to be discerned, especially, as we observe many things are discovered to us by our sight whose motions we cannot perceive, by being placed at a remote distance from us. For often the woolly flock upon a hill wander about, and crop the tender grass, wherever the sweet herbs crowned with pearly dew invite. The lambs, their bellies full, wantonly play and try their tender horns. All this to us standing far off appears confused, and like a steady white spread over the green. And this a mighty army fills the plain, and moves about, and acts a real fight - the horse scour over the field and wheel at once, and in the center charge, and shake the ground with mighty force. The blaze of arms darts up to heaven, all the earth around glitters with brazen shields, and groans beneath the feet of men engaged. The neighboring hills, struck with the noise, rebound it to the skies. Yet place yourself upon a mountain-top to view this wild confusion, and you'd think it was a fixed and steady light that filled the plain.

Munro:

Again if all motion is ever linked together and a new motion ever springs from another in a fixed order and first-beginnings do not by swerving make some commencement of motion to break through the decrees of fate, that cause follow not cause from everlasting, whence have all living creatures here on earth, whence, I ask, has been wrested from the fates the power by which we go forward whither the will leads each, by which likewise we change the direction of our motions neither at a fixed time nor fixed place, but when and where the mind itself has prompted? For beyond a doubt, in these things his own will makes for each a beginning and from this beginning motions are welled through the limbs. See you not too, when the barriers are thrown open at a given moment, that yet the eager powers of the horses cannot start forward so instantaneously as the mind itself desires? The whole store of matter through the whole body must be sought out, in order that stirred up through all the frame it may follow with undivided effort the bent of the mind; so that you see the beginning of motion is born from the heart, and the action first commences in the will of the mind and next is transmitted through the whole body and frame.

Quite different is the case when we move on propelled by a stroke inflicted by the strong might and strong compulsion of another; for then it is quite clear that all the matter of the whole body moves and is hurried on against our inclination, until the will has reined it in throughout the limbs. Do you see then in this case that, though an outward force often pushes men on and compels them frequently to advance against their will and to be hurried headlong on, there yet

is something in our breast sufficient to struggle against and resist it? And when ,too, this something chooses, the store of matter is compelled sometimes to change its course through the limbs and frame, and after it has been forced forward, is reined in and settles back into its place.

Wherefore in seeds too you must admit the same, admit that besides blows and weights there is a cause of motions, from which this power of free action has been begotten in us, since we see that nothing can come from nothing. For weight forbids that all things be done by blows through as it were an outward force; but that the mind itself does not feel an internal necessity in all its actions and is not as it were overmastered and compelled to bear and put up with this, is caused by a minute swerving of first beginnings at no fixed part of space and no fixed time.

Nor was the store of matter ever more closely massed nor held apart by larger spaces between; for nothing is either added to its bulk or lost to it. Wherefore the bodies of the first-beginnings in time gone by moved in the same way in which now they move, and will ever hereafter be borne along in like manner, and the things which have been wont to be begotten will be begotten after the same law and will be and will grow and will wax in strength so far as is given to each by the decrees of nature. And no force can change the sum of things; for there is nothing outside, either into which any kind of matter can escape out of the universe or out of which a new supply can arise and burst into the universe and change all the nature of things and alter their motions.

And herein you need not wonder at this, that though the first-beginnings of things are all in motion, yet the sum is seen to rest in supreme repose, unless where a thing exhibits motions with its individual body. For all the nature of first things lies far away from our senses beneath their ken; and therefore since they are themselves beyond what you can see, they must withdraw from sight their motion as well; and the more so that the things which we can see, do yet often conceal their motions when a great distance off. Thus often the woolly flocks as they crop the glad pastures on a hill, creep on whither the grass jeweled with fresh dew summons and invites each, and the lambs fed to the full gambol and playfully butt; all which objects appear to us from a distance to be blended together and to rest like a white spot on a green hill. Again when mighty legions fill with their movements all parts of the plains waging the mimicry of war, the glitter then lifts itself up to the sky, and the whole earth round gleams with brass and beneath a noise is raised by the mighty trampling of men and the mountains stricken by the shouting reecho the voices to the stars of heaven, and horsemen fly about and suddenly wheeling scour across the middle of the plains, shaking them with the vehemence of their charge. And yet there is some spot on the high hills, seen from which they appear to stand still and to rest on the plains as a bright spot.

Bailey:

Once again, if every motion is always linked on, and the new always arises from the old in order determined, nor by swerving do the first-beginnings make a certain start of movement to break through the decrees of fate, so that cause may not follow cause from infinite time; whence comes this free will for living things all over the earth, whence, I ask, is it wrested from fate, this will whereby we move forward, where pleasure leads each one of us, and swerve likewise in our motions neither at determined times nor in a determined direction of place, but just where our mind has carried us? For without doubt it is his own will which gives to each one a start for this movement, and from the will the motions pass flooding through the limbs. Do you not see too how, when the barriers are flung open, yet for an instant of time the eager might of the horses cannot burst out so suddenly as their mind itself desires? For the whole store of matter throughout the whole body must be roused to movement, that then aroused through every limb it may strain and follow the eager longing of the mind; so that you see a start of movement is brought to pass from the heart, and comes forth first of all from the will of the mind, and then afterwards is spread through all the body and limbs.

Nor is it the same as when we move forward impelled by a blow from the strong might and strong constraint of another. For then it is clear to see that all the matter of the body moves and is hurried on against our will, until the will has reined it back throughout the limbs. Do you not then now see that, albeit a force outside pushes many men and constrains them often to go forward against their will and to be hurried away headlong, yet there is something in our breast, which can fight against it and withstand it? And at its bidding too the store of matter is constrained now and then to turn throughout the limbs and members, and, when pushed forward, is reined back and comes to rest again. Wherefore in the seeds too you must needs allow likewise that there is another cause of motion besides blows and weights, whence comes this power born in us, since we see that nothing can come to pass from nothing. For weight prevents all things coming to pass by blows, as by some force without. But that the very mind feels not some necessity within in doing all things, and is not constrained like a conquered thing to bear and suffer, this is brought about by the tiny swerve of the first-beginnings in no determined direction of place and at no determined time.

Nor was the store of matter ever more closely packed nor again set at larger distances apart. For neither does anything come to increase it nor pass away from it. Wherefore the bodies of the first-beginnings in the ages past moved with the same motion as now, and hereafter will be borne on for ever in the same way; such things as have been wont to come to being will be brought to birth under the same law, will exist and grow and be strong and lusty, inasmuch as is granted to each by the ordinances of nature. Nor can any force change the sum of things; for neither is there anything outside, into which any kind of matter may escape from the universe, nor whence new forces can arise and burst into the universe and change the whole nature of things and alter its motions.

Herein we need not wonder why it is that, when all the first-beginnings of things are in motion, yet the whole seems to stand wholly at rest, except when anything starts moving with its entire body. For all the nature of the first-bodies lies far away from our senses, below their purview;

wherefore, since you cannot reach to look upon them, they must needs steal away their motions from you too; above all, since such things as we can look upon, yet often hide their motions, when withdrawn from us on some distant spot. For often the fleecy flocks cropping the glad pasture on a hill creep on whither each is called and tempted by the grass bejewelled with fresh dew, and the lambs fed full gambol and butt playfully; yet all this seems blurred to us from afar, and to lie like a white mass on a green hill. Moreover, when mighty legions fill the spaces of the plains with their chargings, awaking a mimic warfare, a sheen rises there to heaven and all the earth around gleams with bronze, and beneath a noise is roused by the mighty mass of men as they march, and the hills smitten by their shouts turn back the cries to the stars of the firmament, and the cavalry wheel round and suddenly shake the middle of the plains with their forceful onset, as they scour across them. And yet there is a certain spot on the high hills, whence all seems to be at rest and to lie like a glimmering mass upon the plains.

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