

Episode Thirty-One - Continuation of Episode Thirty / Polyaenus

Post by “Cassius” of August 1, 2020 at 1:02 PM

Welcome to Episode Thirty-One of Lucretius Today.

Episode 31 of the Lucretius Today podcast is now available. This week we have only two of our regular four panelists, so rather than read a new section of text we went back to pay further attention to the issues raised in Episode 30. We read several reader comments from the Epicureanfriends . com forum (Don and Godfrey) which bear on the same issue: the example of Polyaenus, who was reputed to have been a great mathematician but allegedly gave up (or reduced) his science focus when he became an Epicurean. Many aspects of that story are questionable but we will do the best we can to untangle the issue of "who needs a philosophy." As always let us know if you have any comments or questions either in the thread below or at Epicureanfriends . com. Thanks for listening!

#Polyaenus

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2020 at 8:58 AM

Reference: [A Few Days In Athens Chapter 15:](#)

“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?”

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

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

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

“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.”

“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.”

Post by “Don” of August 9, 2020 at 10:09 AM

That highlighted section sounds very reminiscent of Buddhism. That's not a criticism, just an observation.

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2020 at 10:33 AM

Yes It could well sound similar - not sure. But I think the significance and direction in Epicurean philosophy ends up to a large extent in going against Aristotle's "essences." My no doubt too overbroad thumbnail view is that Plato put his ideal forms in some otherworldly dimension, and while Aristotle rejected the otherworldly dimension, he did not really reject the "ideal forms" - he just mutated them into "essences" which he then theorized existed within particular things. The effect of the two ends up being much the same error, because it leads to absolutist thinking, with the only difference being the residence address of the absolute ideal form.

By emphasizing that the atoms have no color Epicurus is illustrating that there are in fact no contextless absolutes, either in heaven or inside an object. The statement that "Yellow does not exist apart from things that are yellow" has profound extensions far beyond the purely scientific question of how an atom might look under a microscope to most people most of the time. By drawing out the importance of the means and conditions of the observation, and the nature of our eyes and how they operate, the lighting, and all the other factors that may go into how we see color at a particular time, it should be much easier for most people to understand that there isn't a single "absolutely correct" answer to what color a thing "is." And if they understand that, then the path is open to seeing that virtue likewise is not a contextless absolute. And if they make that step, they are at the very threshold of seeing that feeling (pleasure) is what makes the living world go round.

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2020 at 10:35 AM

Don I have good news and bad news:

(1) The bad news is that we were down TWO panelists today, so we have deferred talking about the color of the atoms until next week.

(2) The good news is that Martin and I decided to devote a lot of attention to your and Godfrey's post on the "Polyaenus question" so you should enjoy listening to that!

Post by “Don” of August 9, 2020 at 11:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

By emphasizing that the atoms have no color Epicurus is illustrating that there are in fact no contextless absolutes, either in heaven or inside an object. The statement that "Yellow does not exist apart from things that are yellow" has profound extensions far beyond the purely scientific question of how an atom might look under a microscope to most people most of the time.

In this I see reflections of the Buddhist concepts of dependent arising, no-self, and related ideas. The Buddha is said to have taught:

Quote

When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.

That sounds a lot to me like "When I exist, death does not; When death is, I am not."

There's also the Epicurean doctrine of "The only thing that exists is atoms and void." I would add "... At the most fundamental level." This does NOT negate the everyday existence of planets, rocks, trees, and me! But qualities like color, size, shape, etc., arise from the coming together of various arrangements of atoms in the void. Those characteristics do not exist apart from those atomic arrangements, from the most subtle (consciousness) to the most physical

(Mt. Everest).

Now, Buddha and Epicurus put those realizations to work in different ways! But it seems to me both were thinking along parallel paths at least part of the way.

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2020 at 1:05 PM

Episode 31 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available:

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/40250453>

Thanks for listening!

Post by “Don” of August 10, 2020 at 7:13 PM

BINGO! *Explicit vs implicit!* Those were the words and concepts I was thinking of. You articulated it much better than I did. Thank you!! That was an interesting discussion, gentlemen!

I must admit, however, that it was a little odd to hear my posts read out loud. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2020 at 9:36 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I must admit, however, that it was a little odd to hear my posts read out loud.

But I tried to read them with feeling! 😊

As to explicit / implicit, was that a reference to a particular statement? Do you remember the context? Might be good to put a sentence here to explain the context in case someone doesn't listen to the full podcast.

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2020 at 9:45 PM

Now I remember - I relistened - Martin says that we either hold a philosophy explicitly, or we hold it implicitly, with the implication that we are either conscious of it (holding it explicitly) or unconsciously (implicitly). Yes Martin was excellent on that!