

Epicurus On Images

Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2021 at 9:19 AM

Images are significant in Epicurean philosophy for the light they shed on Epicurus' theory of how we receive information about the outside world. There is a long discussion in Book 4 of Lucretius on this topic. Although our understanding of light and hearing and other sensations is much different today, the discussion of images shows that Epicurus understood the nature of illusions and other distortions in the information we perceive about the outside world, and therefore the necessity of adjusting for those distortions.

Text references:

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2021 at 8:23 AM

Epicurus in his letter to Herodotus (Bailey) very clearly states: **"The movement of elementary material through space leads to images which, when received by our senses, are our means of knowledge."**

And as follows:

Quote

The movement of elementary material through space leads to images which, when received by our senses, are our means of knowledge.

Moreover, there are images like in shape to the solid bodies, far surpassing perceptible things in their subtlety of texture.

For it is not impossible that such emanations should be formed in that which surrounds the objects, nor that there should be opportunities for the formation of such hollow and thin frames, nor that there should be effluences which preserve the respective position and order which they had before in the solid bodies: these images we call idols.

Next, nothing among perceptible things contradicts the belief that the images have unsurpassable fineness of texture.

And for this reason they have also unsurpassable speed of motion, since the movement of all their atoms is uniform, and besides nothing or very few things hinder their

emission by collisions, whereas a body composed of many or infinite atoms is at once hindered by collisions.

Besides this, nothing contradicts the belief that the creation of the idols takes place as quick as thought.

For the flow of atoms from the surface of bodies is continuous, yet it cannot be detected by any lessening in the size of the object because of the constant filling up of what is lost.

The flow of images preserves for a long time the position and order of the atoms in the solid body, though it is occasionally confused.

Moreover, compound idols are quickly formed in the air around, because it is not necessary for their substance to be filled in deep inside: and besides there are certain other methods in which existences of this sort are produced.

For not one of these beliefs is contradicted by our sensations, if one looks to see in what way sensation will bring us the clear visions from external objects, and in what way again the corresponding sequences of qualities and movements.

Now we must suppose too that it is when something enters us from external objects that we not only see but think of their shapes.

For external objects could not make on us an impression of the nature of their own colour and shape by means of the air which lies between us and them, nor again by means of the rays or effluences of any sort which pass from us to them — nearly so well as if models, similar in color and shape, leave the objects and enter according to their respective size either into our sight or into our mind; moving along swiftly, and so by this means reproducing the image of a single continuous thing and preserving the corresponding sequence of qualities and movements from the original object as the result of their uniform contact with us, kept up by the vibration of the atoms deep in the interior of the concrete body.

And every image which we obtain by an act of apprehension on the part of the mind or of the sense-organs, whether of shape or of properties, this image is the shape or the properties of the concrete object, and is produced by the constant repetition of the image or the impression it has left.

Now falsehood and error always lie in the addition of opinion with regard to what is waiting to be confirmed or not contradicted, and then is not confirmed or is contradicted.

For the similarity between the things which exist, which we call real and the images received as a likeness of things and produced either in sleep or through some other acts of apprehension on the part of the mind or the other instruments of judgment,

could never be, unless there were some effluences of this nature actually brought into contact with our senses.

And error would not exist unless another kind of movement too were produced inside ourselves, closely linked to the apprehension of images, but differing from it; and it is owing to this, supposing it is not confirmed, or is contradicted, that falsehood arises; but if it is confirmed or not contradicted, it is true.

Therefore we must do our best to keep this doctrine in mind, in order that on the one hand the standards of judgment dependent on the clear visions may not be undermined, and on the other error may not be as firmly established as truth and so throw all into confusion.

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