

Must All Things That Have A Beginning Have An End?

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2025 at 9:48 AM

This subject comes up in Episode 278 of the Lucretius Today podcast, but I know it has been mentioned here before so I will look for and link any previous threads I can find. (This may also be covered in discussions about the god.) The issue is the proposition, which the Epicureans (at least Lucretius) apparently endorsed: "All things which have a beginning must also have an end." Related questions are "Must all living things die?" and "Does anything exist eternally the same except atoms and void?"

It does not strike me as completely clear that Epicurus endorsed as a general rule of physics that "all things which come into being must also pass out of being," but closely related concepts seem to appear in Lucretius.

Here is how it comes up in "Tusculan Disputations" Part 1 section 32:

Quote

M. You take it right; that is the very thing: shall we give, therefore, any credit to Panætius, when he dissents from his master, Plato? whom he everywhere calls divine, the wisest, the holiest of men, the Homer of philosophers; and whom he opposes in nothing except this single opinion of the soul's immortality: for he maintains what nobody denies, that everything which has been generated will perish; and that even souls are generated, which he thinks appears from their resemblance to those of the men who begot them; for that likeness is as apparent in the turn of their minds as in their bodies. But he brings another reason; that there is nothing which is sensible of pain which is not also liable to disease; but whatever is liable to disease must be liable to death; the soul is sensible of pain, therefore it is liable to perish.

Here's a passage from Book One of Lucretius:

[Quote from Munro Version](#)

1-511 : Again since there is void in things begotten, solid matter must exist about this void, and no thing can be proved by true reason to conceal in its body and have within it void, unless you choose to allow that that which holds it in is solid. Again that can be nothing but a union of matter which can keep in the void of things. Matter therefore, which consists of a solid body, may be everlasting, though all things else are dissolved.

And from book five:

[Quote from Bailey](#)

5-235: First of all, since the body of earth and moisture, and the light breath of the winds and burning heat, of which this sum of things is seen to be made up, are all created of a body that has birth and death, of such, too, must we think that the whole nature of the world is fashioned. For verily things whose parts and limbs we see to be of a body that has birth and of mortal shapes, themselves too we perceive always to have death and birth likewise. Wherefore, when we see the mighty members and parts of the world consumed away and brought to birth again, we may know that sky too likewise and earth had some time of first-beginning, and will suffer destruction.

I am not able to find an exact equivalent in Herodotus, though I may be overlooking it.

So the question comes down to: How close does Epicurus come to taking the position that "All things which have a beginning must have an end."

Is that some kind of natural law? Is it an Epicurean position?

Post by "Don" of May 1, 2025 at 10:21 AM

Letter to Herodotus: "Furthermore, the atoms, which have no void in them--out of which composite bodies arise and *into which they are dissolved*--vary indefinitely in their shapes ..."

For every quality changes, but the atoms do not change, since, *when the composite bodies are dissolved*, there must needs be a permanent something, solid and indissoluble, left behind, which makes change possible...

For all these, whether small or great, have been separated off from special conglomerations of atoms ; and *all things are again dissolved*, some faster, some slower, some through the action of one set of causes, others through the action of another. [It is clear, then, that he also makes the worlds perishable, as their parts are subject to change. Elsewhere he says the earth is supported on the air.]

Post by “Bryan” of May 1, 2025 at 10:39 AM

Great question. I cannot find a good quote for this.

(We do have the scholion 10.73c "it is clear [Epicurus] states that the cosmoi are also perishable because their parts are transforming")

Impermanence is certainly part of the discussion of whole natures vs. qualities -- with only the necessary qualities of whole natures existing as permanent (*starting at 39c*).

[Don, I accidently posted just after you, but I see we jumped on the same section!]

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 1, 2025 at 10:48 AM

The caveat here is that anything that is capable of being generated, or destroyed can neither be an uncuttable particle, nor void nature. Otherwise, everything else is fair game.

Give that "Particles" + "Void = "The All", I might avoid using "all things", if we are to suppose the plethora of particles and the boundless void to be things among "all things".

Post by “Bryan” of May 1, 2025 at 10:55 AM

Also, he would have been very aware that the idea of "separating" is at the center of the word he uses for "compound."

<p>ἡ κρίσις αἱ κρίσεις</p>	<p>separating</p>	<p>ΚΡΙΣΙΣ <i>dividing</i></p>
<p>ἡ διάκρισις αἱ διακρίσεις</p>	<p>separating apart</p>	<p>ΔΙΑΚΡΙΣΙΣ <i>dividing apart</i></p>
<p>ἡ σύγκρισις αἱ συγκρίσεις</p>	<p>compound</p>	<p>ΣΥΓΚΡΙΣΙΣ <i>dividing together</i></p>
<p>τὸ κριτήριον τὰ κριτήρια</p>	<p>a standard ["<i>crit</i>erion"]</p>	<p>ΚΡΙΤΗΡΙΟΝ <i>instrument of</i> <i>dividing</i></p>

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2025 at 10:58 AM

Thanks for those responses. I can see from a logical point of view that change implies that what was there before is no longer the same, but I am not sure that the quotes we have are saying that there "must" be an end to a compound thing that has come into being.

For example what Don has quoted which says "out of which composite bodies arise and *into which they are dissolved*" --- as to the part about things arising from the atoms, we deduce that the things we see "must" have arisen from the atoms because of the arguments that Lucretius goes through about the existence of atoms being required to explain the starting point of each thing (from the eternal atoms).

But I am not sure that we have the same degree of argument that the thing which has arisen "must" eventually be broken up - or do we?

I seem to remember that there is a section in Lucretius about disruption being caused from blows from outside, but I don't recall a statement that says that at some point the blows from outside - which are sufficiently overcome while the being is growing or in good health - cannot be warded off indefinitely.

In this current episode of the podcast we are seeing Cicero say in regard to the stoics that their position on the soul surviving death is lacking because the Stoics admit that the soul does survive death for at least a period of time, and as Cicero said, the main hurdle is getting to the point where the soul can survive for any length of time outside the body, and the question of "how long" it can survive is secondary.

Here, the "how long" question is front and center, and we know that some bodies survive for much longer periods of time than others do. So the real question is whether there is a "force of necessity" that requires that a thing that has come into being "must" be destroyed over some length of time in the future.

I see a difference in saying "all things must arise from atoms" (which I think is sufficiently proven by the logical argument) and "all things must be destroyed back into their constituent atoms" (which I don't think is clearly stated or necessitated by the atomic theory as best I can tell).

And let me be clear that I'm not accusing Epicurus or Lucretius of inconsistency - I am looking into whether we are reading into Epicurus a Platonic-like rule of necessity that Cicero thinks makes sense, but which is not inherently part of the atomic theory.

As anecdotal input, I don't recall that either DeWitt or Diskin Clay considered "all things that come together must break apart" as one of the core ideas in physics when they assembled their speculative list of twelve most important physics ideas. (I'll check back on Clay's version).

Edit: As to Clay's version, these are his ten primary compiled from comparing Herodotus to Lucretius:

1. Nothing comes into being out of nothing. 38.8—39.1 I 145-150, 159-160 ~
2. Nothing is reduced to nothing. _ 39.1-2 I 215-218, 237
3. The universe always was as it is and always will be. 39.2—5 II 294-307; V 359--363
4. The universe is made up of bodies and void. 39.6-40.2 I 418-428
5. Bodies are atoms and their compounds.40.7—9 I 488-486
6. The universe is infinite. 41.6—10 I 958-964, 1001
- '7. Atoms are infinite in number and space extends without limit. 41.11—42.4 I 1008-1020
8. Atoms of similar shape are infinite in number, but the variety of their shapes is indefinite, not infinite. 42.10—43.4 II 522-527
9. Atomic motion is constant and of two kinds. 43.5-44.1 II 95-102 (I 952)

10. Atoms share only three of the characteristics of sensible things: shape, weight, mass.
54.3—6 II 748-752

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2025 at 11:09 AM

Here's a [quote from Lucretius](#) which says that the ordinances of nature control "being brought to birth under the same law, will exist and grow and be strong and lusty....." where I might have expected him to complete the cycle by adding "and die" if the "and die" were part of the "ordinances of nature" :

Quote

2-294 - 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.

That was Bailey - this is Munro:

Quote

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.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2025 at 11:15 AM

This is more closely on point:

5-235

First of all, since the body of earth and moisture, and the light breath of the winds and burning heat, of which this sum of things is seen to be made up, are all created of a body that has birth and death, of such, too, must we think that the whole nature of the world is fashioned. For verily things whose parts and limbs we see to be of a body that has birth and of mortal shapes, themselves too we perceive always to have death and birth likewise. Wherefore, when we see the mighty members and parts of the world consumed away and brought to birth again, we may know that sky too likewise and earth had some time of first-beginning, and will suffer destruction.

...

5-306

Again, do you not behold stones too vanquished by time, high towers falling in ruins, and rocks crumbling away, shrines and images of the gods growing weary and worn, while the sacred presence cannot prolong the boundaries of fate nor struggle against the laws of nature? Again, do we not see the monuments of men fallen to bits, and inquiring moreover whether you believe that they grow old? And stones torn up from high mountains rushing headlong, unable to brook or bear the stern strength of a limited time? For indeed they would not be suddenly torn up and fall headlong, if from time everlasting they had held out against all the siege of age without breaking.

5-318

Now once again gaze on this sky, which above and all around holds the whole earth in its embrace: if it begets all things out of itself, as some tell, and receives them again when they perish, it is made altogether of a body that has birth and death. For whatsoever increases and nourishes other things out of itself, must needs be lessened, and replenished when it receives things back.

...

5-351

Moreover, if ever things abide for everlasting, it must needs be either that, because they are of solid body, they beat back assaults, nor suffer anything to come within them, which might

unloose the close-locked parts within, such as are the bodies of matter, whose nature we have declared before; or that they are able to continue through all time, because they are exempt from blows, as is the void, which abides untouched nor suffers a whit from assault; or else because there is no supply of room all around, into which things might part asunder and be broken up—even as the sum of sums is eternal—nor is there any room without into which they may leap apart, nor are there bodies which might fall upon them and break them up with stout blow. But neither, as I have shown, is the nature of the world endowed with solid body, since there is void mingled in things; nor yet is it as the void, nor indeed are bodies lacking, which might by chance gather together out of infinite space and overwhelm this sum of things with headstrong hurricane, or bear down on it some other form of dangerous destruction; nor again is there nature of room or space in the deep wanting, into which the walls of the world might be scattered forth; or else they may be pounded and perish by any other force you will. The gate of death then is not shut on sky or sun or earth or the deep waters of the sea, but it stands open facing them with huge vast gaping maw. Wherefore, again, you must needs confess that these same things have a birth; for indeed, things that are of mortal body could not from limitless time up till now have been able to set at defiance the stern strength of immeasurable age.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2025 at 11:43 AM

Ok so now I remember why I connect this back to DeWitt's discussion of the gods having to act to maintain their own deathlessness.

it is logically deducible from experience that given the way the universe generally operates, components which have come together will at some point be broken apart. Our earth does not have an unlimited life-span.

However it is not logically deducible as an overriding rule **when** that breaking apart will occur, except by looking at local circumstances. There's no necessity that could not theoretically be defeated through technology to enforce any limit to how long humanity or a single person can live. Even the destruction of the earth or our solar system or galaxy could be outlived by going somewhere else if technology is available to do so. The universe itself is immortal for reasons stated in 5-351 (there's no place outside it), so there's no necessity to perish with any part of the universe **if** you have the capacity to move from destroyed place to stable place.

As for practical application of this, while it **might** be appropriate to say that all men up to today's technology must die, there's no necessary limit as to "when" that must take place, other than the local circumstances of the people involved. People who have the ability to move so as to remain in safe environments, and who have better technology to control aging, will live

longer, with no theoretical limit if their ability to move and improve their technology keeps pace with the dangers.

It would seem likely that something like this is where the "intermundia" theory came from.

Post by “Bryan” of May 2, 2025 at 10:31 AM

Plutarch, in his *Reply* (at 1116c) says this -- and then ends with a helpful quote from Colotes:

But I should like to ask the very man (Epicurus), who brings this indictment, if his school does not see this distinction in their own system, whereby some objects are enduring and unchanging in their being, just as atoms too in their doctrine are forever the same because they are too hard to be affected, while all aggregates of atoms are subject to flux and change and come into being and pass out of it, as innumerable films leave them in a constant stream, and innumerable good others, it is inferred, flow in from the surroundings and replenish the mass -- which is varied by this interchange and altered in its composition, since in fact even the atoms in the interior of the aggregate can never cease moving or vibrating against one another, as the Epicureans say themselves.

"It is true" you (Colotes) say "that this sort of difference in ways of being is found in the actual world. But Epicurus shows himself a better philosopher than Plato in applying 'being' to all alike -- to the intangible void and resistant body and to the elements and their aggregates, holding that a common and single way of being is found in both the eternal and the generated, both the indestructible and the destructible, both the unaffected and enduring and changeless realities that can never be expelled from their being and those whose being lies in the fact that they are acted upon and changed and which never for an instant remain as they were."

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 10:46 AM

VERY helpful Bryan!

As for that second paragraph I agree that's helpful too. I don't think I recall seeing that lately if ever.

Is this by Colotes a commentary on canonicus? In other words on first glance I would read this discussion of "being" to be a canonical statement that as saying that we should consider to be "real" all that our senses reveal to us, and not worry about whether those things are eternal or

not. Which is a huge point on its own, right? That we through out the argument that we can know nothing because everything is changing, based on the response that what is changing is just as real as what is not changing?