

Searching for Answers: Lucretius's Atomic Soul

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In his *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius strives to scientifically explain several aspects of the natural world. In fact, he focuses so heavily on science that the text often reads more like an ancient scientific textbook than a philosophical work. Given the considerable attention paid to science, and given the modern practice of science as the basis for all further intellectual exploration, one may assume that scientific phenomena make up the essential building blocks that define Epicurean philosophy. However, several descriptions in *De Rerum Natura* seem like leaps not fully supported by science that are added in order to explain a pre-constructed Epicurean principle. While Lucretius includes more than one problematic scientific account, I will focus on his handling of the soul. His description of the soul is unsatisfactory in several ways, and the inconsistencies that arise from it call into question the assumption that science shapes Epicurean principles. In fact, his explanation for the soul only makes sense if one assumes that Epicurean principles precede Epicurean science. Given this new understanding, Lucretius's scientific description of the soul becomes a product of a preconceived idea rather than the foundation from which the nature of the soul arises.

The Epicurean approach to science has previously been met with skepticism. Cicero challenges the scientific method of Epicureanism on more than one point. He argues that Epicurus created the swerve of atoms to disprove the notion that humans lack free will: "When Epicurus saw that, if the atoms moved by their own weight straight down, nothing would be in our power, since the atoms' movement would be certain and necessitated, he found a way to avoid necessity... he says that an atom... swerves a little bit."¹ *Velut Epicurus cum videret, si atomi ferrentur in locum inferiorem suoapte pondere, nihil fore in nostra potestate, quod esset earum motus certus et necessarius, invenit quo modo necessitate effugeret... ait atomum... declinare paululum.* In questioning the reasoning for the atomic swerve, Cicero identifies the problem with Epicurean science. The belief in the existence of free will preceded, and therefore influenced, Epicurus's description of atoms, leading to a contrived account that would not have existed had an understanding of science come before the formation of philosophical principles.

He also criticizes Epicurus's description of the gods. Epicurus claims that the gods are immortal, and therefore, according to his own atomic teaching, his gods cannot be made up of atoms. Cicero points to the problem with this description of the gods, mocking Epicurus's argument. Cicero explains that "while trying to avoid saying that [the gods are] a dense compound of atoms, so that he will not have to admit that they perish and dissipate, he says that gods do not have a body, but only a quasi-body, and that they do not have blood, but only quasi-blood."² *Dum individuorum corporum concretionem fugit ne interitus et dissipation consequatur, negat esse corpus deorum sed tamquam corpus, nec sangiunem sed tamquam sanguinem.* This account of the gods similarly exasperates Cicero. Epicurus conceives of the gods as immortal before attempting to explain their makeup, and therefore runs into trouble, since science does not allow for the gods as he understands them. The swerve of atoms is not scientifically necessary, but it is necessary if we are to have free will. Likewise, because the Epicurean gods are said to be immortal, some scientific explanation for this fact must be created. In both of these attacks, Cicero's comments bring to light a critical characteristic of Epicurean science. His critiques

1 Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 54. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Book 1, Section 69.

2 Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 55. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Book 1, Section 71.

suggest that Epicurean science comes out of Epicurean philosophy; Epicurus fabricates and manipulates scientific principles to fit with predetermined Epicurean ideas.

While Cicero does not explicitly make the argument that Epicurean teachings have formed in this reversed order, his doubts call into question the validity of Epicurean science and pave the way for further probing into the Epicurean approach to scientific understanding. Inspired by Cicero's criticisms of Epicurus, I will focus on Lucretius's handling of the soul in *De Rerum Natura*. I will point out the lack of evidence for Lucretius's description of the soul and study the purpose of science within Epicureanism. Given this puzzling description, I will demonstrate that the justification for Lucretius's handling of the soul becomes clear only if his idea of the nature of the soul came before any attempt to scientifically explain it – Epicurean principles form Epicurean science, rather than the other way around.

By comparing Lucretius's method of describing easily perceptible features of nature with his explanation for the soul, one can identify the predicament that arises from his reasoning. In explaining heat, cold, sound, and smell, for example, he points out that while we cannot see them, they must be made up of atoms because we are able to detect them. He argues, "We are neither able to see heat, nor to seize cold with our eyes, nor can we discern voices; nevertheless, they all must consist of bodies since they are able to act upon our senses. For nothing can be touched or touch except body."³ *Nec calidos aestus tuimur nec frigora quimus usurpare oculis nec voces cernere suemus. Quae tamen omnia corporea constare necessest natura, quoniam sensus inpellere possunt. Tangere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, potest res.* Each phenomenon affects our senses, and consequently our senses prove their existence as corporeal compounds. Epicurus regards the senses as the surest means of validation; he writes, "it is also necessary to observe all things in accordance with one's sense-perceptions."⁴ Therefore, the impact of heat, cold, sound and smell on our senses definitively confirms their existence. Based on observation via the senses, not only does the claim that these are atomic seem logical, but Epicureanism also explains how these atoms affect our senses. Sound reaches the ear through atoms that have scattered from the object making noise, smell atoms disperse from objects and enter the nose, and hot and cold objects' atoms similarly disperse and make an impact on the body.⁵ Lucretius's description is convincing; something must interact with our senses to allow us to perceive these phenomena, and heat, cold, sound, and smell are combinations of atoms that we know to exist through the processes of perception that Epicureanism explains.

Lucretius uses a similar rationale to describe the soul, though inevitably this proves a more difficult feat. He first argues that the soul must be physical, much like smell, since "when fleeing it carries no weight away."⁶ *Quoniam fugiens nihil ponderis aufert.* He separates the soul into four components, and explains the first three according to detectable observations, much like he does for heat, cold, sound, and smell. He explains that heat, the first component of the soul, is perceived in physical warmth and anger. Wind, the second component, emerges in physical

3 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 1, 298-304.

4 Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 6. Diogenes Laertius, *Letter to Herodotus*, Book 10, Section 38.

5 Elizabeth Asmis, *Epicurus' Scientific Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 105.

6 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 3, 230.

shaking, coldness, and fear. The third, air, he says is seen in rest and tranquility.⁷ *Est etiam calor ille animo, quem sumit, in ira cum fervescit et ex oculis micat acrius ardor; est et frigida multa, comes formidinis, aura, quae ciet horrorem membris et concitat artus; est etiam quoque pacati status aeris ille, pectore tranquillo fit qui voltuque sereno.* By relating these components of the soul to easily observable phenomena such as light, Lucretius makes a convincing argument for the makeup of the soul. Moreover, each component exists separate from the body, further solidifying the case that they are formed from atoms. His argument is so far consistent with Epicurus's claim that "one must see, by making reference to our sense-perceptions and feelings..., that the soul is a body [made up of] fine parts distributed throughout the entire aggregate."⁸ While observations like shaking and warmth are no longer associated with the soul, Lucretius does provide logical evidence for his claims. These components are detectible and therefore fit in with the Epicurean understanding of the world.

However, the first three components, though confirmed through sense-perception, do not explain sentience. If the soul were made up of only these three parts, it would act like light or smell; it would be lifeless because heat, wind, and air all plainly lack sentience. His description so far, then, makes sense scientifically, but does not match observation. To solve this problem, he adds a fourth component, the "spirit of spirit."⁹ *Animae quasi totius ipsa propiorst anima.* Lucretius describes it vaguely, not truly addressing how it works and creates sentient beings. According to Lucretius, its atoms are smaller and smoother than any others, as only these could account for the speed of thought. It controls sensation, movement, and thought.¹⁰ With the insertion of this "nameless entity" Lucretius provides himself with the perfect resolution.¹¹ *Nominis haec expers vis.* Or at least he tries to. In fact, several problems arise from Lucretius's attempt to explain sentience in this way.

Unlike the first three components of the soul, there is no perceptible evidence for the existence of this fourth component. RW Sharples points this out in *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics*: "these [fourth component] atoms are unique in that they cannot be related, even indirectly, to any substance or stuff in our experience."¹² The lack of signs for the fourth component troubles Sharples in two ways. First, the fourth component's atoms must be present elsewhere in the world, as its atoms disperse at death, and atoms cannot be destroyed. Yet it is only stated to exist within the soul. Lucretius does not acknowledge or seek to remedy this inconsistency. Second, within the soul the fourth component's existence is not perceptible in the way the other components are, which makes the argument for its corporeality difficult to believe.¹³ On both points, I agree with Sharples. Lucretius's explanation clearly lacks sustenance because nothing suggests that the soul is corporeal. While something clearly allows for human

7 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 3, 288-293.

8 Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 6. Diogenes Laertius, Letter to Herodotus, Book 10, Section 63.

9 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 3, 281.

10 John Masson, *The Atomic Theory of Lucretius* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 113.

11 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 3, 279.

12 R.W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 62.

13 *Ibid.*

sentience and distinguishes the fourth component from the others, it is not clear that this feature must be constructed of atoms because it lacks the tangibility of heat, wind, and air. So while the Epicurean argument that atoms are proven through perception holds for the first three parts of the soul, it does not explain the fourth.

O’Keefe analyzes Lucretius’s argument for the corporeality of the whole spirit. He explains that Lucretius considers: if the soul moves the body and only bodies can move bodies, then the soul must be a body.¹⁴ O’Keefe agrees with the first point; ostensibly, the spirit does move the body. The second point, that the soul must be physical because it acts on other bodies and because only the void is incorporeal, gives him pause. He describes this claim as “a bit more contentious;” however, he does not elaborate what about this claim troubles him.¹⁵ In my opinion, the fault in this argument lies in the lack of proof that only bodies can move bodies, and therefore also that only the void is incorporeal. Unlike the observable aspects of the soul, the fourth component does not show itself in any way, so it is not impossible that it exists without atoms. Without proof of a physical fourth component, how can it be known that the soul is not incorporeal? It seems to be a mysterious factor that must exist, and yet which is nearly impossible to pinpoint.

Christopher Gill explores the relationship between the soul and its effect on the body. Though he does not address it, his account of the relationship between the soul and body in Epicureanism offers another problematic feature of the Epicurean soul. Gill points out that the soul can physically affect the body, even in uncontrollable ways such as sweating due to intense fear. Lucretius gives this as evidence that the soul itself must be bodily.¹⁶ This “evidence” for an atomic soul further undermines Lucretius’s description. The soul can physically affect the body, and in such an instance, the soul’s atoms would presumably act on the body’s atoms. However, it does not *always* affect the body. One’s soul may feel emotions without any ostensible bodily reaction. In this scenario, it is unclear where the soul’s atoms, which must be moving because of its changing emotions, would proceed.

Evidently, Lucretius’s description of the soul runs into several obstacles. The inconsistencies emerging from his description raise the question: why bother trying to explain the fourth component as atomic, then? Why not accept a mysterious, incorporeal component that allows for sentience? One must remember Lucretius’s mission in writing *De Rerum Natura*. He is writing as an Epicurean, and *De Rerum Natura* is a means of sharing Epicurean philosophy. As he expresses, he hopes “to explain [his] doctrine, and touch it with with the honey of the Muses, so that his poetry may hold his readers’ minds, while they try to understand the nature of the world.”¹⁷ *Rationem exponere nostram et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle, si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere versibus in nostris possem, dum perspicias omnem naturam rerum.* His mission in his writing is to spread Epicureanism and convince his readers of its truths; *De Rerum Natura* is a persuasive philosophical text, not an impartial account of the world. Therefore, even in his descriptions of science he is attempting to convince the reader of Epicureanism’s broader principles. The topic of the soul plays a central role in the Epicurean idea that the fear of death is

14 Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), 63.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Christopher Gill, “Psychology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131.

17 T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura: The Latin Text of Lucretius* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), Book 1, 946-950.

irrational. The argument goes that death should not be feared because the soul is mortal, and therefore nothing comes after death.

Within Epicureanism, such scientific descriptions as the one Lucretius forms concerning the soul are only needed in order to remove anxiety, which is the ultimate goal of Epicureanism. As Epicurus explains “If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us, and, moreover, if not knowing the limits of pains and desires did not trouble us, then we would have no need of natural science.”¹⁸ Science within Epicureanism acts only as a tool to achieve freedom from anxiety. If the soul is atomic, it must eventually dissipate, soundly disproving any theory suggesting it lives on after the body perishes. A scientific description of the soul’s physicality is therefore essential to its mortality, and further to the idea that death should not be feared. Lucretius’s reason for adding the fourth component becomes clear if the principle that human beings should not fear death preceded the idea that the soul is made entirely of atoms.

Given the principle that the fear of death is irrational, Lucretius must have had to describe the soul as entirely physical while also accounting for its sentience. We see that the body is irretrievable after death. However, because it does not possess the same tangible nature, the fate of the soul remains unknown, and therefore provides a platform for theories about the afterlife. For example, many Greeks believed in the underworld, in which shadows of human beings live out eternity, and Plato and the Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation.¹⁹ The possibility of an immortal soul allows for various pictures of what comes after the body perishes. Lucretius, believing that fearing death is irrational because nothing comes after death, would therefore have a deep interest in proving the mortality, via proving the corporeality, of the soul. The soul must be wholly corporeal because it is claimed to be mortal, and an atomic soul entails the soul’s eventual dissipation. Therefore, assuming the principle that fearing death is irrational came before the scientific examination of the soul, the motivation for including this fourth component becomes apparent. Lucretius must describe an atomic soul, no matter how complicating this becomes, in order to satisfy the principle that nothing comes after death. While this understanding sheds light on Lucretius’s motivation for his troublesome description of the soul, I cannot help but consider, if one must go to great lengths to describe an atomic basis for the soul and still cannot come up with a satisfactory account, is it wrong to wonder about its nature? Rather, it seems logical to generate endless possibilities about life and the afterlife given the difficulty of accounting for the soul and its sentience.

18 Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994). Diogenes Laertius, *The Principle Doctrines*, Doctrine 12.

19 Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), 64.

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