

## After Plato II

## Epicurus, Atoms and Sceptics

According to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE writer Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus was inspired by aspects of Pyrrho's teaching. The same Pyrrho had brought home from the East a style of critiquing philosophical dogma on the basis that sense perception is immediate and infallible, while the judgments that we make about the world on their basis are more fragile. Epicurus is not a sceptic, but does suggest that the way we construct our story about the world, should be based on what is available to our senses – an early form of what in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was called 'positivism'. So he is sceptical about elaborate explanatory superstructures, which imply things inaccessible to our gaze. Nevertheless, inspired by Democritus' theory of atoms, and by that part of the philosophical tradition that 'explains' the universe without reference to gods, or providence or purpose in nature, he develops an atomic theory of the universe, and humanity's place in it, which provides the frame for an ethical philosophy that rivals the Stoics. Humans caught helplessly in the blind drift of atoms can only find happiness by seeking escape from the battering and stress they bring, in moments of gladness and pleasure that offer 'ataraxia': freedom from distress. His philosophy, often presented as based on the 'pleasure principle' critiqued by Plato and the Stoics, is more properly based on the 'escape from pain' principle – which is not a million miles from the world of the first of the four noble truths of Buddhism (all is suffering). Diogenes preserves three letters of Epicurus, explaining his doctrine, and the Latin poet Lucretius, from the first century BCE writes a whole 'epic' account of Epicurean beliefs. This is how Lucretius presents Epicurus:

### **Lucretius** *De Rerum Natura* I 62-69: In praise of Epicurus

When human life lay before the eyes, despicable, crushed  
to the earth beneath the burden of religion,  
which reared its head in the regions of the sky  
looming over mortals, hideous to behold,  
it was a man from Greece who first dared to raise his eyes  
and dared first to confront it.  
No talk of gods, no thunderbolts, no threatening murmur  
of the heavens held him back – indeed it spurred on  
the fierce strength of his spirit all the more, made him long  
to break through the narrow confines of nature's gateways.  
And thus the vital strength of his soul prevailed and he journeyed  
far beyond the flaming walls of this world  
he visited the immeasurable whole in mind and spirit,  
and returning victorious he brings us the truth about what can come to be  
what cannot, the final limits of possibility for each single thing,  
the structure by which its end lies deep within it.  
And now religion lies thrown at our feet  
to be trampled in turn, while our victory exalts us to the heavens.

### **Epicurus' first principle: nothing can come of nothing [LS 4A]**

Firstly, nothing comes to be out of what is not. Otherwise everything would come into being out of everything, with no need for any seeds. And if things that perish passed into non-being, then everything would have ended up being annihilated, without the persistence of those things into which they were dissolved. Accordingly, the universe was always such as it now is, and always shall be such. For there is nothing else into which it can be transformed. For there is nothing apart from this All, into which it could make the transformation.

### **Atoms and the void [LS 5A] [LS 8A]**

Now the All consists of bodies and the void. For sense experience itself testifies in every case that bodies exist, and we must then draw our logical conclusions in conformity with this, as I said earlier. And if there were no place that we call 'void' and 'space' and 'intangible nature', the bodies would have nowhere to exist or through which to move in the way that they can be seen moving. And apart from these there is nothing more that can be envisaged, either conceptually, or by analogy with what is conceivable, taking things as whole natural entities, rather than as their incidental or phenomenal properties.

Now some of the bodies are compounds and some are the things of which the compounds are made. These things are the atoms [the indivisibles] that cannot transform – as long as we do not want everything to be annihilated in not-being, and do want it to persist and endure when the compounds are dissolved. They are voluminous in nature and will not be dissolved into anything or in any way. Thus the principles are necessarily individual bodily natures.

### **One proof of the infinity of space in Lucretius [LS 10B(3)]**

Moreover, if the entirety of space is established finite,  
Then if someone rushes to the end, to its furthest shores and hurls a flying spear,  
would you have it that it travels where it is sent, hurled with powerful force, flying into the distance? Or do you judge there is something prevents it and that it can be at rest, blocked? You must choose and admit one of these two. But each of them bars your escape and forces you to grant that the whole lies open, without any boundary. For whether there is something that tests it and ensures that it does not reach the goal to which it was flung or whether it is carried beyond, its starting point cannot have been the limit. I'll pursue you with this logic: and wherever you set the furthest shores I shall ask what happens in the end to the spear.

### **Atoms in the Void (Epicurus) [LS 11A]**

The atoms are in continuous movement all the time... some at a great distance from each other, and others oscillating in the same place, when they find themselves closed in a complex, or surrounded by what binds them. The nature of the void that separates each one makes this possible, and is unable to create any support for them; but the solidity that

is in them when they clash causes them to spring apart, as far as the complex that binds them allows them to be apart from the point of contact. And these things have no beginning, since the atoms and the void are eternal.

### **The Swerve and the generation of worlds (Lucretius) [LS 11H]**

At this point, we want you to understand this, that as the bodies move straight downwards through the void, under their own weight, at an indeterminate time and in indeterminate places, they deviate a little. Only what you could call the trace of a change in movement. For if they were unable to swerve, then everything would fall downwards, like drops of rain through the depths of the void, there would be no collision, no blow would be created by the atoms [no region]; nature would never have created anything.

### **The Soul (Epicurus) [LS 14A]**

After that, we must grasp – referring to the sensations and bodily experiences (for this provides the most reliable testimony) – that the soul is a body made of fine particles scattered throughout the whole complex [of the body], most similar to breath with an admixture of heat, and sometimes it is more like the one, sometimes more like the other. But in the fineness of its particles, this part is very different even from these, but is rather in sympathy with this and with the rest of the bodily complex. The powers of the soul reveal all this, the feelings, spontaneous movements, thoughts – and all the things which when we lose them, we die. Now we must bear in mind that the soul is the main cause of sensation; nevertheless, it would not have acquired this role unless in some way it was contained within the rest of the bodily complex. The rest of the bodily complex having prepared the way for the soul to cause the sensation, itself participates in this change of state that befalls it, though it doesn't participate in everything that the soul possesses.

That is why when the soul is removed, the rest of the body has no sensation. It does not have that power within itself, but made that possible for something else that came into being with it. That thing (the soul) thanks to a physical movement, creates a perception event, as its power to perceive is activated, and distributes it, as I said, to itself and to the relevant parts of the body through confluence and sympathy. Thus when the soul is present in it, whatever other part of the body you remove, the body will never be without sensation. But whatever part of the soul is lost when the containing body dissolves either wholly or in part, if the soul itself persists, it will have perception. But if the rest of the body persists in whole or in part, it has no perception when that part of it is absent which is the mass of atoms directed towards the nature of the soul.

And in fact when the whole bodily complex is dissolved the soul is scattered and no longer has the same powers and no longer moves, so it can have no perception. For it is impossible to conceive it perceiving otherwise than in this physical structure and employing just these movements, when the things that contain it and surround it are no longer the same as those in which it currently exists and enjoys this mobility. We can go further, consider this: 'without body' in the most common use of the term refers to what is self-evidently so; and

there is no self-evident understanding of 'without body' other than 'a void'. But the void cannot act or experience - it simply allows the possibility of motion to the bodies that pass through it. Thus, those who say the soul is 'without body' talk nonsense. If it were like that, it would be able to do nothing and to experience nothing. But we clearly observe both these phenomena in the context of the soul.

### **Lucretius: The human condition**

*(Against the argument from design DRN V 195 - 227)*

Even if I did not know the primary elements of the world, I would dare to prove from the laws of heaven themselves – as well as from so many other things – it cannot be the case that this natural order was prepared so for us by the gods: too much is at fault. First, of all that heaven covers with its mighty sweep, the greater part is occupied by mountains and the forests of beasts, it is owned by cliff-faces and immense marshes and a sea that separates afar the shores of land. And then mortals are robbed of two parts almost by the searing heat and unending snowfall. The ploughland that remains, nature of its own forces would cover with briars, did not human power fight back to stay alive, grown used to urging on the powerful ox and splitting the earth with the plough's thrust. If we did not turn the fertile clods with the ploughshare, and tame the earth's soil goading it to growth, they could not of themselves rise in the flowing air; and yet sometimes, the crops sought with such great labour, when they are leafing throughout the land and all is flowering, the sun's aether scorches with excessive heat, or sudden rains sweep them away, and freezing frosts, and the blast of winds distresses them with its violent onrush. Then why does nature nurture and increase the terrifying race of beasts, hateful to the human race, on land and sea? Why do the seasons of the year bring sickness? Why does untimely death stalk the land? Then consider the child, like a mariner thrown ashore by the savage waves, it lies naked on the ground, speechless, devoid of everything it needs for life, and at the first moment when nature pours him from the womb, from his mother's struggles onto the shores of light, he fills the place with his cry of lament. And rightly so. So many are the ills of life that wait, that he must yet pass through.

*The meaning of death (DRN III 830-869)*

And so death is nothing to us, is irrelevant to us, once we realise that the soul's nature is mortal. It is as in the ages before us. We felt no pain, when the Carthaginians poured in on all sides for war, when everything shuddered in terror, shattered by the awful tumult of war under the lofty boundaries of the sky; when all was doubtful, under which empire on sea and land would all humankind finally fall? So too, when we are no longer there, when the separation has taken place between body and spirit, out of which we are composed as a unity, naturally nothing could happen to us, who shall then no longer be, nor stir our senses, not if the earth should blend with sea, and the sea with the heavens.

And if there is still some awareness of the body, after the nature of the mind has been withdrawn and the power of the soul, this is nothing to us, whose identity is comprised in the binding and the joining of body and soul made fast in unity. And if, after our death, time should gather our materials and restore them once more as they are now arrayed, and the

lights of life should be given to us again, even this act would mean nothing to us once our power of remembering ourselves is interrupted.

As it is nothing reaches us about ourselves of what we were before, no anguish from those others can touch us now. For when you consider the whole past expanse of measureless time, how manifold are matter's motions, you could easily credit that these same seeds of reality have often been placed in the same positions as they are now, out of which we now exist. But we cannot grasp that with our memory, for life has halted in between, and the motions have continued on all sides, without direction and without awareness. If there shall be some future wretchedness and pain, he must himself exist in that very time if the ill is to happen to him. But since death removes this – and to claim otherwise is to be able to reconcile contradictions – we may be sure that death should hold no fear for us, and the one who no longer is cannot be unhappy, nor is it any different from never having been born, once immortal death has removed this mortal life.

### **Epicurus on the Meaning of life [LS 21B]**

We must reason that some pleasures are physical and some are empty. Of the physical, some are necessary, and some simply physical. Of the necessary, some are necessary for happiness, some for the well-being of the body, and some for simply staying alive. A steadfast gaze on these things knows that every choice and flight comes down to the health of the body and the peace of the soul, since this is the goal of living a blessed life. It is for this reason that we do all we do, that we may feel no pain and no fear. And when once this happens to us, the whole storm within our soul is calmed, and the animal does not need to move to satisfy some need or to seek any other thing to fulfil the good of soul and body.