

NOTES FROM: *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius

SUMMARY: *On the Nature of Things* is a poem by the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius, written in 50 B.C. Because it was written so long ago, modern audiences may have some difficulty deciphering it, but it's *completely and totally worth it*, for all sorts of reasons.

Lucretius noticed so many things that we've since explained through modern science but that completely mystified him while he was alive. What's especially fascinating about the book, though, is how intensely and devotedly he's committed to *finding out*.

Sure, he gets lots of things wrong: he thought that images of things were sent out from bodies, and that's why we can see reflections in mirrors and other surfaces; he thought the sun was a lot closer than it actually is; he thought that every sound was corporeal because they acted upon the senses. Clearly he didn't know about sound waves - what a dummy! (Just kidding).

But there's so much that he *does* know, and that he *does* guess correctly(ish), or somewhat accurately describe: he talks about how we can store up images of two things and from them create a *third* image in our minds of something that doesn't actually exist; he observed that passionate love lasts for a short time before being succeeded by "chill care." And even though he didn't have words for it, Lucretius recognized the role of genetics and mentions "primal germs and seeds" that allow for features to be passed on from parents and grandparents.

Through all this, like I mentioned, there's his intense desire to *know*, to figure out the universe and understand what's really going on. He doesn't know why the stars move (although he recognizes that light travels faster than sound), but he was still curious, and he *desperately* wanted to find out. He never heard about evolution or the unconscious, but he hints at those things as well, the latter when he wonders why images appear in the mind and at the behest of whom.

Lucretius was a deist who didn't believe that "the gods" need us or get involved in our affairs, but that didn't preclude a *deep* reverence for the universe and its mysteries, feelings and emotions that survived his death and can be experienced by reading his wonderful book.

“Thus Nature ever by unseen bodies works.”

“Were there not a minimum, the smallest bodies would have infinities, since then a half of half could still be halved, with limitless division less and less.”

“For whither shall we make appeal? For what more certain than our senses can there be whereby to mark asunder error and truth?”

“But naught there is more goodly than to hold the high serene plateaus, well fortified by the wise, whence thou may'st look below on other men and see them everywhere wandering, all dispersed in their lone seeking for the road of life; rivals in genius, or emulous in rank, pressing through days and nights with hugest toil for summits of power and mastery of the world. O wretched minds of men! O blinded hearts! In how great perils, in what darks of life are spent the human years, however brief!”

"Needing not us, they are not touched by wrath, they are not taken by service or by gift."

"These wounds of life are in no mean part kept festering and open by this fright of death."

“Those vestiges of natures left behind which reason cannot quite expel from us are still so slight that naught prevents a man from living a life even worthy of the gods.”

"Of truth, the life of fools is Acheron on earth."

"But whilst the thing we long for is lacking, that seems good above all else. Thereafter, when we've touched it, something else we long for."

"Nor by prolonging life take we the least away from death's own time, nor can we pluck one moment off, whereby to diminish the eons of our state of death."

“Therefore, O man, by living on, fulfill as many generations as thou may: eternal death shall there be waiting still; And he who died with light of yesterday shall be no briefer time in Death's no more than he who perished months or years before.”

“Since shape examined by our hands within the dark is known to be the same as that by eyes perceived within the light and lustrous day, both touch and sight must be by one like cause aroused.”

“If one suppose that naught is known, he knows not whether this itself is able to be known.”

"So it is that we conjecture from small signs things wide and weighty, and involve ourselves in snarls of self-deceit."

“Yet to decide which one of them it be is not the least the business of a man advancing step by cautious step, as I.”

“And whether the journeying moon illuminate the regions round with bastard beams, or throw from off her proper body her own light, whichever it be, she journeys with a form naught larger than the form doth seem to be which we with eyes of ours perceive.”

“And let the weary sweat their lifeblood out all to no end, battling in hate along the narrow path of man's ambition; since all their wisdom is from others' lips, and all they seek is known from what they've heard and less from what they've thought.”