On the Nature of the Universe: Book 4

Reader Response 2

Summary:

In Book 4 Lucretius embarks to demonstrate by and by that the universe is made just out of physical bits of matter of molecules and that Almighty did not make the universe nor do they intercede in human undertakings. Be that as it may, disregarding this conviction he frequently slips in a little prayer or song to the divine beings in case. Perhaps Lucretius is quite recently restricted to divine beings who are gutless gods. Maybe he just wants to set our minds at ease concerning eternal punishment after death. Whatever it is, in the fourth book Lucretius obviously steps far from his ordinary logical point of view.

Reaction:

Lucretius needs to defend his theory that everything that exists is composed of atoms. All his explanations somehow rest on this hypothesis. Therefore, he says, material objects are constantly giving off “flimsy tissues” and these tissues are being emitted in every direction. That’s why mirrors pick up those images instantly, no matter where you’re standing. Clever, but not very convincing. And flat out wrong too.

However, even though it may not be convincing, it’s still logical. Things could be that way. There really might be flimsy tissues floating around out there. But the important point is his attempt to give an objective analysis of the way things are without resorting to the gods. It’s when he delves into human concerns that Lucretius begins to lose his objectivity.

There’s nothing wrong with Lucretius wanting to help us live better lives. Many scientists want the same thing. It’s just odd the way he mixes up the poetic and the scientific. We’re not used to that in the modern world. We like our poetry on one side and our science on the other. They dwell in different spheres. A good example is his attempt to explain what love is: “This is the origin of the thing called love – that drop of Venus’ honey that first drips into our heart, to be followed by icy heartache.” It seems odd to me that someone trying to have a scientific outlook would refer to love as a “drop of Venus’ honey”. It also seems out of place for a scientist to warn readers that the initial drop of honey would be followed by icy heartache.

Questions:

* Why does Lucretius mix poetry and science the way he does?
* Does Lucretius really believe in God or not and if not, why has he praised them in the book?
* Does God exist?