

The main bulk of BOOK I is devoted to explaining the principles of “atomistic philosophy”. The author begins by stating and defending the FIRST principle of his atomistic philosophy, that is, nothing comes from nothing.

The first stage of this study will have this rule as its basis: nothing ever 150
springs miraculously out of nothing. The fact is that all mortals are in the
grip of fear, because they observe many things happening on earth and in
the sky and, being at a complete loss for an explanation of their cause,
suppose that a supernatural power is responsible for them. Therefore, as
soon as we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing, we shall
have a clearer view of the object of our search, namely the explanation of
the source of all created things and of the way in which all things happen
independently of the gods.

If things could be created out of nothing, any kind of thing could be 160
produced from any source; nothing would need a seed. In the first place,
human beings could spring from the sea, squamous fish from the ground,
and birds could be hatched from the sky; cattle and other farm animals
and every kind of wild beast would bear young of unpredictable species,

18. **131:** The bulk of Book 3 is devoted to demonstration of the corporeal and mortal nature of the mind (*animus*) and spirit (*anima*), the rational and irrational parts of the soul.

19. **132–133:** The reference is to the filmy “images” discharged from the surfaces of objects. Their existence and nature are demonstrated in Book 4. See pp. xxvii xxviii.

20. **139:** Lucr. mentions this difficulty again at 832 and 3.260.

21. **140–145:** On the significance of these important lines, see p. xiii.

22. **146–148:** Repeated at 2.59 61, 3.91–93, 6.39 41.

and would make their home in cultivated and barren parts without discrimination. Moreover, the same fruits would not invariably grow on the same trees, but would change: any tree could bear any fruit. Seeing that there would be no elements with the capacity to generate each kind of thing, how could creatures constantly have a fixed mother? But as it is,
 170 because all are formed from fixed seeds, each is born and issues out into the shores of light only from a source where the right matter and the right ultimate particles exist. And this explains why all things cannot be produced from all things: any given thing possesses a distinct creative capacity.

A second point: why do we see the rose bursting out in spring, the corn in scorching summer, the vine at autumn's coaxing, if it is not because, only when the fixed seeds of things have streamed together at their appropriate time, is any created thing uncovered, while the attendant seasons assist the prolific earth to deliver the frail objects into the shores
 180 of light in safety? But if they were produced from nothing, they would suddenly spring up at unpredictable intervals and at unfavorable times of the year, for there would be no ultimate particles that could be debarred by the unpropitious season from entering into creative union. Moreover, so far as growth is concerned, the lapse of time required for the confluence of seed would be unnecessary, if things could arise out of nothing. Children, too young to talk, in an instant would become young adults, and trees would suddenly bound up out of the ground. But it is evident that none of these things happens, since in every case growth is a
 190 gradual process, as one would expect, from a fixed seed and, as things grow, they preserve their specific character; so you may be sure that each thing increases its bulk and derives its sustenance from its own special substance.

23. 196–198: Lucr. is fond of this illustration: see 823–829, 907–914, 2.688–699, 1013–1022. Conveniently, the Latin word *elementa* can mean “letters of the alphabet” as well as “elements.”

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To start with, the first rule
is that nothing can come from nothing, not even by will
of the gods.

Mortal men are afraid as they look about them and see
the many things that happen on earth and up in the sky,
and they cannot tell why or how and therefore think that
gods

must bring them about by fiat. But if our axiom holds
and nothing can come of nothing, then we are obliged to
look further

to learn what we want to know—how each thing was
created

and how, without the gods, all things have come to be.

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Consider the contrary case—that being could come from
non-being

and that anything could arise from anything or from
 nothing,
 without even a seed. Men could emerge from sea-foam,
 scaly creatures could come swarming up from the earth,
 and birds could burst forth from the sky. In meadowlands
 or deserts
 cattle and wild beasts could simply appear at random,
 and trees could bear any fruit haphazardly, for all
 would be able to bring forth all, interchangeably. No
 bodies would produce their own kind: the idea
 of motherhood and fatherhood would give way. But it
 is not 150
 so, and we know how each kind comes from its seed, in
 a fixed,
 unvarying manner, and everything that is born and makes
 its way
 to the light has its material source in whatever came
 before it. It cannot happen that things can arise and be
 begotten from anything else: in each is a unique nature
 and individual power that sets it apart and defines it.
 Why do we always see roses bloom in the early spring
 or grain grow in the summer's heat, or grapes on their
 vines
 ripen in season in autumn, except that these life forms
 know
 from the code that was there in their seeds what to do and
 when 160
 so that the teeming earth brings forth in safety its fragile
 beings that grow in the sunlight? Suppose that they just
 appeared,

popping up out of nowhere at unpredictable moments,
would they not come out of season at hostile times of the
year
without some initial prompting, with neither restraint nor
order
of generation that offers nature's many protections?
And speaking of generation, what would be the need
of time for maturation? Why would there be any wait
for infants to grow into youth or seedlings to turn into
trees?
But as we know well, one step must follow another
as seeds
sprout to become plants, preserving their own kind,
and they grow in their proper seasons nourished by what
is ordained.

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HERE IS THE ORIGINAL LATIN YEXT

Principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet,
nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus umquam. 150
quippe ita formido mortalis continet omnis,
quod multa in terris fieri caeloque tuentur,
quorum operum causas nulla ratione videre
possunt ac fieri divino numine rentur.
quas ob res ubi viderimus nil posse creari 156
de nihilo, tum quod sequimur iam rectius inde
perspiciemus, et unde queat res quaeque creari
et quo quaeque modo fiant opera sine divom. 155

Nam si de nihilo fierent, ex omnibus rebus 159
omne genus nasci posset, nil semine egeret.
e mare primum homines, e terra posset oriri
squamigerum genus et volucres erumpere caelo;
armenta atque aliae pecudes, genus omne ferarum,
incerto partu culta ac deserta tenerent.
nec fructus idem arboribus constare solerent, 165
sed mutarentur, ferre omnes omnia possent.
quippe ubi non essent genitalia corpora cuique,
qui posset mater rebus consistere certa?
at nunc seminibus quia certis quaeque creantur,
inde enascitur atque oras in luminis exit, 170
materies ubi inest cuiusque et corpora prima;
atque hac re nequeunt ex omnibus omnia gigni,
quod certis in rebus inest secreta facultas.

Praeterea cur vere rosam, frumenta calore, 175
vites autumnu fundi suadente videmus,
si non, certa suo quia tempore semina rerum
cum confluxerunt, patefit quod cumque creatur,
dum tempestates adsunt et vivida tellus
tuto res teneras effert in luminis oras?
quod si de nihilo fierent, subito exorerentur 180
incerto spatio atque alienis partibus anni,
quippe ubi nulla forent primordia, quae genitali
concilio possent arceri tempore iniquo.

Nec porro augendis rebus spatio foret usus
seminis ad coitum, si e nilo crescere possent; 185
nam fierent iuvenes subito ex infantibus parvis
e terraque exorta repente arbusta salirent.
quorum nil fieri manifestum est, omnia quando
paulatim crescunt, ut par est semine certo,
crescentesque genus servant; ut noscere possis 190
quicque sua de materia grandescere alique.