

On The Nature of Things

...As They Seem

A Didactic Poem in Stichic Form
Composed of Joined Elegiac Quatrains

And inspired by the Great First-Century-BC Roman
Didactic Poem of Epicureanism, *De rerum natura*
("On the Nature of Things," in 7,400 Dactylic Hexameters
Divided into Six Untitled Books [and Probably Unfinished])
by Titus Lucretius Carus (c. 99-c. 55 BCE)

*Though More Fundamentally Driven by the Underlying
Realities Revealed by Embodied Cognitive Science*

Desire drives the way our world's made
By us from out those crucial bits our nerves
Evolved to read—a narrative, portrayed
Electrochemically in flesh, that serves
To steer us through the cloud of facts out there
In which priorities of sustenance
And safety are obscured, lest we impair
Our chance to pass on genes toward subsequence.
The antecedent of this mortal force,
Before the workings of biology
Emerged from properties at physics' source,
In *some* sense, is attraction—gravity
And magnetism and the like—out there
Throughout our universe, suggestive of
This recent earthly process we declare
For higher organisms, known as "love."
Lucretius sang a version of this song
A couple thousand years ago but failed
To make it quite cohere, since he was wrong

(Like Epicurus, whom he had unveiled)
About reality—*as are we all*
By sheer necessity. For, how could he,
Or anyone, back then or now, not fall
For the *illusion* of reality,
Which is constructed, not out there as shown?
Yes, nervous systems studied have revealed
That what's outside our skull cannot be *known*
Within but only *guessed at*—our best yield
With what weak instruments we've been bequeathed
By evolution's strict priorities,
Through which we're shaped by needs of our own niche
As ecological economies.
This is to say that sugar is not sweet
To anything but brains evolved to find
It so. And colors are but how we greet
Specific wavelengths (when not color *blind*)
Because our species has developed three
(Or, rarely, four) such cone cells to detect
Those lengths of radiation waves most key
To *our* survival—*not* to mean "correct"
Though, as is shown with other species' eyes,
Which see things differently with more or less
Of these same types of cells. And this applies
To every sense a species might possess,
Such as magnetic fields or heat, or tastes
Of acid, gas, or other signals shown.

These differences reveal how things are *traced*
And *not* how they exist out on their own.
In simpler words that have been said before
So often (yet so rarely understood):
We all experience these things explored
Not as they are but as *we* are. Why should
The fact that two observers will agree
On what they'd just observed mean *both* are right
When all the while neither can but see
Past their endowment, which just *seems* keen sight?
This strange delusion of *sufficient* range
Of vision confidently felt by each,
Despite their flagrant lack, is just what brains
Do best: pretend their models *have* no breach
Among their inputs, so to best maintain
A user interface from out this wealth
Of data, simplified enough to frame
A unified identity called "self."
This feel of unity belies the fact
The cells we're made of die and are replaced
(At varied rates) continually, and that
Today we are composed of stuff that's based
In its design on former stuff now gone,
Like all those planks of wood that over time
Were substituted with their like out on
That ship of Theseus, maintained as shrine
Across the centuries, until it came

To seem a paradox to thinkers who
Now pondered if it should be called the same
Ship that our long-dead hero really knew.
For, by replacing its components, one
By one, until there were not any now
Original (once all was said and done),
What *was* it in this vessel, from its prow
To stern, that could be reasonably thought
“The same”—aside, perhaps, from its design,
Which would then leave it just a copy wrought
Of something spent, and we now *deem* aligned.
But anyway, such strict concurrence rings
Convincing on the scientific ear,
Though *neither* viewer had observed those things
An sich, external to what trifling clues
Of such existence might appear within
Their ken, which had itself evolved to meet
Quite different needs back when some fen had been
Their habitat instead of poured concrete.
All this is just to show that it’s desire,
Not causality *per se*, that draws
Reality’s ontology, inspiring
Life from out of information’s laws.
Its impetus pervades the fabric of
That causal chain predicting how things work,
Though not events themselves, which are the stuff
Of cause and what control our will exerts.

[To be continued]

—David Borodin, October 24 through December 16, 2024

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