

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 blur of useless facts
In which priorities of sustenance
And safety are obscured, lest they detract
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,
Is, basically, ATTRACTION—gravity,
Electromagnetism, and so on—
Found everywhere but most suggestive of
This recent earthly process we seen drawn
Between two sentient beings, long called "love."
Lucretius sang a version of this song
Two thousand and some years ago but failed
To make it quite cohere, since he was wrong

(As was this Epicurus he 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 unifying agency called "self."
Now, this unlikely, though convincing, sense
Of unity we feel, somehow, amidst
The chaos of diversities immense
At work beneath the hood is how we're fixed
Neuronally to better navigate
This world that is our simulacrum's hold.
For, networks of robotics long innate
To our embodied brains help keep foretold
To higher functions what to ascertain

From our environment that might upset
The equilibrium we need maintain
And chose alternatives of lesser threat.
And in this act of choosing, we carve out
Our few degrees of freedom from what's *thought*
Should be determined strict as fate about
Us, as determinism's mostly taught.
Yes, these same experts say we have no will
That's free because to pick an option turns
Upon all prior happenings fulfilled
For which the picker has no claim discerned.
In other words, said author of an act
Herself depends upon such things realized
That made *her* action possible, in fact,
And that she couldn't have done otherwise.
But choice between two options that may each
Themselves be found within causation's chain
Does *not* entail some necessary breach
Of laws through which all nature is constrained.
Determinism, after all, is *not*
The same as *predetermining* a fate.
It is compatible with one's best shot
At how a certain system's future state
Derives directly from its current one
Without an intervention *from outside*,
Which doesn't rule out alternates that run
Within said system, *causally* supplied.

The difference has to do with *meaning*—that
Which *information* on these future states
Invites comparison of options at
The fork which possibility creates.
In other words, although we cannot cause
Or pause the wind itself, we *can* control
The way its course effects our own with laws
That help us trim our sails toward our best goal.
That said, this *feel* of unity belies
The fact our cells all die and are replaced,
At varied rates, non-stop. And this implies
That we're composed today 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 some copy wrought

Of something spent that we now redefine.
But anyway, such strict concurrence rings
Convincing on the scientific ear,
Though *neither* viewer had observed those things
An sich (external to how they appear
Portrayed in fleshly means); no, just 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.
Yet note: This will cannot be *truly* "free"—
Especially in that ghostly sense Descartes
Had spooked us with, wherein the very key
To how our bodies move is in the cards
Played seance-like *beyond* what physics moves,
Like cats or rats, whom he would grant no soul.
And he was right: They don't, *which further proves*
The same for us, their cousins in this whole
Descent we've made from out those very first
Prokaryotes on earth three billion-some

Odd years ago. Of course, to those more versed
In nitpicking, we should concede the dumb
But valid point that “soul” can also mean
Another thing as well, like character
Or personality, when we are keen
On it, in someone. But we must demur
When told these traits will then ascend from out
The body that created and conserved
It, just to flourish in thin air, no doubt,
Where nothing feeds such circuitries of nerves
That are the stuff of which all thought is made.
And given this, we see our every thought
Is *physical* and leaves a proven change
Upon the brain in which it had been wrought,
Which means, of course, these products of the mind—
Which is the process of a working brain
And nothing more—cannot be reassigned
To different flesh, or what thin air contains.

[To be continued]

—David Borodin, October 24, 2024 through February 6, 2025

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