

Eliminative Materialism

Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2025 at 1:59 PM

For those who might be lurking, what we're talking about (at least in part) is discussed in O'Keefe's "Epicurus on Freedom," which includes:

Quote

6.3.2. Those Who Think Like David Sedley

Members of another family of interpretation, the 'anti-reductionist' interpretation, agree with the 'traditional' interpretation that Epicurus is dealing with the 'traditional' problem of free will and determinism, and that Epicurus finds this problem vexing because of his Democritean inheritance. 16 However, they think that Epicurus' main concern is to combat the unacceptable consequences of Democritus' reductionist atomism - his contention that, in truth, only atoms and void exist. Epicurus denies that the mind and its powers can be exhaustively explained in terms of the motions of atoms, because doing so would lead to rejecting the reality of emergent psychological properties like volitions. (This supposedly parallels Epicurus' response to Democritus' skepticism: Democritus denies the reality of emergent qualities like colors, which leads him to doubt that the senses can be a source of knowledge, whereas Epicurus affirms their reality.) The remains of On Nature 25 that discuss psychological development provide the main textual support for anti-reductionist interpretations. This anti-reductionism is related to Epicurus' denial of determinism in various ways by different advocates of anti-reductionism. The most influential is David Sedley's thesis that for Epicurus the self is an emergent phenomenon that acquires a power of volition that transcends the laws that bind atomic motion and can even 'reach down' and cause changes at the atomic level. (As Sedley puts it, the self is radically emergent. For this reason, I label Sedley's view the 'radical emergence' interpretation.) Okeefe P 17 Proponents of anti-reductionist interpretations include David Sedley (Sedley (1983) and (1988 a); Long and Sedley (1987) section 20); Julia Annas (Annas (1992) chapter 7 and (1993)); and Philip Mitsis (Mitsis (1988) chapter 4).

And in turn there, O'keefe is talking about Sedley's article "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," in which Sedley expands on an argument he first developed in "The Hellenistic Philosophers, and which he expanded to include this on page 34, which is at the heart of what Okeefe is objecting to:

Quote

Epicurus' response to this is perhaps the least appreciated aspect of his thought. It was to reject reductionist atomism. Almost uniquely among Greek philosophers he arrived at what is nowadays the unreflective assumption of almost anyone with a smattering of science, that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter; but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth. (The truth that sugar is sweet is not straightforwardly reducible to the truth that it has such and

such a molecular structure, even though the latter truth may be required in order to explain the former). By establishing that cognitive scepticism, the direct outcome of reductionist atomism, is self-refuting and untenable in practice, Epicurus justifies his non-reductionist alternative, according to which sensations are true and there are therefore bona fide truths at the phenomenal level accessible through them. The same will apply to the pathē, which Epicurus also held to be veridical. Pleasure, for example, is a direct datum of experience. It is commonly assumed that Epicurus must have equated pleasure with such and such a kind of movement of soul atoms; but although he will have taken it to have some explanation at the atomic level, I know of no evidence that he, any more than most moral philosophers or psychologists, would have held that an adequate analysis of it could be found at that level. Physics are strikingly absent from Epicurus' ethical writings, and it is curious that interpreters are so much readier to import them there than they are when it comes to the moral philosophy of Plato or Aristotle.

Sedley's article was published in 1983.

The O'Keefe article Bryan is referring to was published 2001.

O'Keefe's Epicurus on Freedom book was published in 2005.