

# Eliminative Materialism

Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2025 at 6:43 PM

## [Quote from Don](#)

Sorry, I'll admit I don't understand to what you're referring with that maxim here.  
[Comment from post #5 above.]

What I think I am trying to get at is that I see Dr Sedley's statement of the general situation as a very reasonable and understandable description of the issue. The problem Epicurus faced and we face too is that we need to honor both of the two levels of apparent truth. We have to reconcile both (1) that the only thing of eternal unchanging nature is atoms, void, and the universe as a whole, with (2) that the things the senses reveal to us are also "true," even though they are not eternally unchanging. It seems to me that's the whole motivating force behind the "[all sensations are true](#)" canonical approach that Epicurus developed.

If normal people are going to find a way to resist supernaturalism, they have to have a graspable method of reasoning that explains to them in a sufficient way how the universe operates naturally. I think Sedley's perspective is essentially decoding for us today exactly what Epicurus was up to, and I think he's right that this is something that is very underappreciated about Epicurus. It explains not only his physics approach, but it also puts into context the justification for his reasoning in ethics, in taking such positions as "there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain" which is the keystone of the entire pleasure / pain analysis. It's easy for opponents from Cicero to today to argue that this either/or approach is gross oversimplification, but it's very similar to the logic-based reasoning by which we categorize everything as either matter or void. Just like Sedley is saying, that the theory has to be able to explain what we see, but not every minute step along the way, we don't have to worry about the details of atoms forming brains any more than we need to worry about the details of fitting every experience of life into the pleasure/pain framework. We can be confident that no matter what the development of science eventually tells us the detailed mechanism actually is, the detailed mechanism will fit within our global theory of how things should be categorized. If it exists and can affect us, it is "material," no matter what we choose to call the details of the "matter." If it's not painful then it is pleasurable, no matter what we choose to call the details of the particular pleasurable experience.

I read Tim O'keefe's perspective as attempting to go further than is possible in looking for detailed explanation. That's why I say that we have to be careful that we don't make the mistake of looking for "the perfect" by focusing on a perfect explanation of exactly how things work and being disappointed when we can't find it. All we need is a "good" explanation of the big picture, and that good explanation is that while we don't know exactly how the atoms do it,

we are confident that that atoms do it naturally and without supernatural control. By all means we should always look for more information, because that will improve our quality of life in any number of ways. but we should not get confused by thinking that we are failures if we aren't disappointed with what we are able to find with the effort available to us.

"Reductionism" is a pretty good term, it seems to me, for those who ignore this issue and argue (as apparently Democritus did or was tempted to do) that only the atoms and void are "truly real." The implication I read in O'Keefe's perspective is that we should not consider reductionism to be a bad word, and I don't see him kicking back aggressively against the implication that reductionism leads exactly to Democritus' conclusion that our level of existence is not truly real. I can understand that he is adopting a more a technical perspective, but to stop there leaves the layman back in the same place as before. Embracing "reductionism" without focusing on its limitations leaves the laymen defenseless and without an understandable theory for having confidence that things are natural rather than supernatural. Graspable lines have to be drawn, and it's exactly the wrong thing to do to leave laymen without a way to understand the dangers of improper views of reductionism no less than determinism or skepticism.

Again, I'm not on a crusade against Tim O'Keefe's work, but I can see a legitimate charge that he's "missing the point" that both David Sedley and Epicurus are trying to make. From a practical perspective we'll never in our lifetimes (and probably many more lifetimes, if ever) have a 100% explanation of every step from atom to human brain, and we have to get comfortable with that fact. No one in history has had that level of knowledge, and we won't either, but that didn't mean that the ancient Epicureans had to admit the possibility of supernatural explanation any more than we do.

I forget whether it was DeWitt or Sedley or both who make the comment that "intellectuals" are not put off by the implications of determinism, and the same goes for reductionism / skepticism. Intellectuals revel in "what if" games that have no end.

So those who wish to can save this post and use it against me in the future, 😊 but I don't think Epicurus was concerned about playing to intellectuals, and I don't think we should be either. Our concern should be for ourselves and our families and friends, very few of whom are professional intellectuals who revel in the doubt and uncertainty of radical skepticism and determinism and atomic (or material) reductionism.

To the contrary, most normal people see these views as a total cop-out on the necessity of making important decisions in their own lives. I don't see Epicurus' response to the dialecticians or the determinists or the skeptics as anti-intellectual at all. In fact, given the conclusions of the philosophy , Epicurus was more intellectual than any of the rest, because he took into account the outcome rather than all the often insignificant details that surround it.

No doubt I've rambled and repeated myself but I do think this is a fascinating topic on which to get a handle. And it's on my mind because it's basically the subject of the podcast tomorrow .:-)