

# Eliminative Materialism

Post by “Don” of January 5, 2025 at 12:27 AM

Okay, I (mostly) read Sedley's and O'Keefe's articles and believe I get the gist of each. I will freely admit that I'm more of a Sedley-leaning Epicurean than an O'Keefe-leaning, but they both have provided volumes of helpful materials. With that...

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

If all someone has time for is the big picture, I'd suggest that page 34 of Dr. Sedley's article.

...in which Sedley posits that:

## Quote from Sedley

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.

From my reading, both Sedley and O'Keefe would agree on this point. Additionally, I *think* both would agree that Epicurus posited that all material phenomena are the result of atomic motion and interactions between atoms.

I personally like O'Keefe's distinction between reductionism and eliminativism and although it may be splitting hairs, they are two hairs benefit from splitting. I'll admit I don't like the academic-sound of the terms. But to *reduce* something to an explanation of atomic interaction in the void is not to *eliminate* the very real experience of phenomena at our level of perception. O'Keefe provides some examples:

## Quote from O'Keefe

First, the mind is a real thing, but it is nothing above and beyond the atoms that constitute it. An example of this sort of thing would be a flock of sheep. A flock of sheep is a real entity, but it is nothing above and beyond the group of sheep gathered together. Second, although the mind has properties and powers which none of its atoms have, it has these only in virtue of the properties of and relationships amongst its constituent atoms, and the possession of these properties can be explained by

reference to these properties and relationships. Third, appeals to structural and formal elements are permissible, but only if they are ultimately reducible to relationships amongst atoms, e.g., the tendency of a group of atoms to clump together because of the atoms' hooks getting entangled.

I see no differences Epicurus would have with this explanation. We are physical beings, living in a material universe, and the properties we experience - the sensations we have are real and true and reflect a real reality external to ourselves - are all the result of the interaction of atomic motion. Including our minds! I see no way around the Epicureans holding that view. Atomic motion gives rise to bodies; we are bodies; our bodies react to and sense the world through our sensations and make sense of it through reason; reason is a property of our minds; and our minds arise from atomic motions.

Now, saying all that, while we do NOT know the full processes that makes our "minds" - our brains - work; we can rest assured (like looking at Alexander the Oracle Mongers' snake) that the process is ultimately understandable and has a physical basis (which no doubt includes chemical, electrical, cellular, physiological, environmental and more aspects). There are no woo-woo, magic, metaphysical aspects. This brings me to the unease I feel about Sedley's other arguments in his paper.

On p. 42 of Sedley's article, he talks about volition being a "non-physical cause" for an atoms change in motion or position. On p. 45, he writes:

Quote from Sedley, 42

All this evidence supports the following story. Epicurus dismissed the reductionist psychology of earlier atomism as self-refuting, and thus justified a non-reductionist psychology which permitted the attribution of responsibility to an autonomous self with volitions, beliefs, impulses, etc., none of these being straightforwardly reducible to patterns of atomic motion. That was, in my view, his most significant contribution to the crusade against determinism. But his atomic and logical theories still had to be so constructed as not to preempt the self's decisions by determining the animal's behaviour independently of them. Hence the indeterministic swerve, and, parallel to it in logic, the denial of bivalence - both theories being designed not to explain what volition is but to guarantee its efficacy by keeping alternative possibilities genuinely open.

The term "non-physical cause" gives me pause and skirts a little too close to "metaphysical cause" or worse "supernatural (beyond natural) cause."

O'Keefe to my reading (and I realize I need to go back over both articles with the proverbial fine tooth comb... but that probably isn't going to happen) gets around the potential for woo-woo in writing things like:

## Quote

When Epicurus says that things "depend on us" because our reasoning is causally efficacious, what this amounts to is still up for grabs: but the crucial point is that it still *is* up for grabs. Once again, Epicurus' argument is compatible with a wide variety of views about the mind. Annas puts this rightly: "We should note that this argument does *not* show that Epicurus is not a determinist. It shows that he thinks that, properly understood, determinism must be compatible with our commonsense understanding of ourselves and of the world."<sup>34</sup> Epicurus thinks it impossible to abandon our conception of ourselves as agents and be pragmatically consistent about it.<sup>35</sup> What we become is *not* determined by our natural temperaments, since we can reason about what is best and change ourselves. Nor is what we do determined by the environment, since how we respond to the environment depends on our beliefs also, and is up to us.<sup>36</sup> And to argue against this thesis already presupposes its truth.

There are hairs to split in both articles: reductionism vs eliminativism; determinism vs fatalism. And these appear to be important hairs.

But, in concluding this post, let address Cassius's concern for addressing the needs of the common person-on-the-street and "big picture" approach:

*The brain/mind doesn't work the way Epicurus or Lucretius thought it did many centuries ago.* I personally find it of historical philosophical interest to put myself in the mind of Epicurus and to read what he wrote on the topic. I am not mandated to adopt his 2,000 year old ideas as some kind of Epicurean orthodoxy from which I can't divert. We find out more and more every year even more exciting things about how our mind and consciousness and thinking work, including evidently contributions from our gut bacteria. We don't have soul atoms that are spread through our body. We can analogize and make metaphors trying to fit the ancient peg into the modern scientific hole. That's a fool's errand. The primary "big pictures" at this level are:

- The mind is a part of the body and dies with the body.
- The mind - no matter what the processes are at play - is composed of physical processes not some intangible, supernatural, ethereal substance.
- For me, I sense that I have volition and reason to change my own behavior and, therefore, can attempt to influence the behavior of other beings who have their own volition and reason. That is the realm in which I move and live.
- I can understand that lying underneath all that are atoms and void (or elementary particles if we want to go modern); but that doesn't make my lived experience any less real.

There's also the textual evidence that all scholars of Epicurus deal with, including O'Keefe and Sedley. Both are looking at the same fragmentary papyri and making guesses and interpretations on what they read. The differences in these two authors current papers often come down to a difference in what they see IN the ancient texts. Neither can say the the other is absolutely wrong; nor can either one assert that theirs is the ONLY right interpretation. Where

there are holes in the texts, neither can say for certain what went there. This is where the "big picture" should come into play as well. Scholars can argue (and I enjoy it!) over whether that's an omicron or an upsilon in the text that completely changes the word. Where there is ambiguity, obscurity, or simply absence of text, we need to step back - if we're going to think of ourselves as Epicureans and try to figure out the big takeaway UNTIL more evidence comes to light. That's where the value of scholarship comes in in this argument. As Epicureans, we withhold final judgement on a thorny problem until more evidence is available. Was Epicurus a reductionist or a determinist or an eliminativist or a fatalist or a compatibilist or a ....? We can be more or less sure on each of those; however, we can be sure that he taught we live in a material universe with no need of supernatural governors looking over our shoulders and that we have the responsibility for making our choices and rejections with the reason we humans have and are expected to exercise.