

Eliminative Materialism

Post by "Cassius" of January 5, 2025 at 7:44 AM

You picked out a very interesting comment that does get to the heart of the issue:

Quote

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 do not think that Epicurus would recommend the formulation "*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."

As I see it, the entire point of Epicurus' canonism is to emphasize exactly the point that the mind IS *something above and beyond the atoms that constitute it.* To say that the mind is "nothing" other than the atoms and the void is to ignore the entire "event" and "emergent property" analysis as if it is "nothing" separate from the particles themselves.

Yes I acknowledge that O'Keefe' is bouncing back and forth and saying in the same sentence that "it is a real thing" and "a real entity," but he is also insisting that in the end these emergent characteristics are "nothing" separate from the atoms moving through the void.

And I don't see Sedley as skirting "woo" at all - he's simply seeing that Epicurus insisting that we see what our canonical faculties tell is real as no less significant and real as what our minds tell us that these events are ultimately composed of indivisible atoms and void. And Epicurus goes all the way to the ultimate conclusion - it is only because the study of natural science and the identification of atoms and void gives us confidence to live our lives properly that we really have need of natural science and atomism in the first place.

These are points that appear to me not only absent in O'Keefe's presentation, but points which it appears he's not comfortable with, thus leading to the entire project of making a point of

disagreeing with Sedley's conclusions.

So when you say....

[Quote from Don](#)

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

... I would say that where texts conflict as to placement of an omicron it's perfectly appropriate to "wait" until more evidence is found. Such an issue is not essential to day to day life.

However issues of determinism or fatalism or reductionism are essential to day to day life, and they directly relate to Epicurus' overall focus on our place in the universe and our relationship to the biggest issues such as supernatural control and life after death. I think that Epicurus would say that most everyone of normal education should have a working view on these issues that informs the way they live their lives daily. I see such a workable view in Sedley's formulation but i do not see it in O'Keefe's.

In the end, I have the uneasy feeling that one of the major takeaways of O'Keefe's point is that he is ultimately trying to defend Democritus from Epicurus' attacks. To the extent that is what he is doing, I see nothing to be gained from that. The Epicureans had much more of Democritus' texts than we will ever dream to have, and they concluded based on those texts that Democritus had crossed a red line over into skepticism and determinism. I see very little to be gained from an approach that amounts to "maybe Epicurus was wrong about Democritus."

It's worthy of note that I wasn't the one who started this conversation - that was Bryan! 😊 And it's also worthy of note that for those of us who wade through these details, I think we come out on the other side with a stronger appreciation for how important these issues are, no matter which commentator we decide is doing a better job.