

Article - David Sedley - 1988 - "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism"

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 9:32 AM

There's a LOT of interest in that article. Here's a section that both interesting and "funny" as to what should probably be our love-hate relationship with Cyril Bailey:

One of the most influential voices in Epicurean studies, Cyril Bailey, writing in 1928, came at one point tantalizingly close to what I take to be the correct interpretation:

« The compound is more than a mere aggregate of independent atoms: it is their union in a complex, which has a new individuality of its own in which it may acquire qualities and even powers which are not possessed by the individual component atoms. The soul or mind is a compound body of such peculiar constitution in the nature of its component atoms and their motions among themselves, that it acquires the power of sensation or consciousness »³¹.

Frustratingly, Bailey went on almost immediately to torpedo this insight:

« The more material thinkers of our own time are content to say that consciousness "supervenes" as an "epiphenomenon" on the movements of matter: Epicurus went the step farther and was prepared to say that consciousness, sensation, thought, and will *are* the movements of the soul-atoms. Such an idea is to most modern minds, as it was to the majority of philosophers in Epicurus' day, unthinkable: between the one set of facts and the other there is a great gulf fixed »³².

Bailey can hardly be blamed here for failing to foresee how far from "unthinkable" the identity theory of mind would prove to be in future decades. Much more immediately wor-

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rying is his account of this "step farther" taken by Epicurus. Nowhere in his entire book does Bailey supply evidence or arguments for this assertion that Epicurus identified states of consciousness with the movements of soul atoms. Nevertheless, earlier³³ he has made it clear enough why he assumes Epicurus to hold such a view: it is because it is the only view which a materialist can consistently hold! To decide in advance that Epicurus merits the label "materialist", and to circumscribe so narrowly the range of theories available to someone who, like Epicurus, starts out from inanimate particles of matter, is to miss a good deal of the interest that this topic holds. Did Bailey not know, for example, that C. D. Broad, in his prestigious 1923 lectures published in 1925 under the title *The mind and its place in nature*, had defended a theory of "emergent vitalism" as superior both to mechanistic materialism and to epiphenomenalism? « I know no reason whatever » Broad had written³⁴ « why new and theoretically unpredictable modes of behaviour should not appear at certain levels of complexity, or why they *want* be explicable in terms of elementary properties and laws of composition which have manifested themselves in less complex wholes ».