

Eliminative Materialism

Post by “Bryan” of January 4, 2025 at 11:23 AM

I have been in the habit of saying that Epikouros is not a "full" reductionist, or not a "capital R" reductionist. The idea is good, but it may be more precise to say that Epikouros *is* a reductionist (he explains the operation and the existence of everything we sense by appealing to the most basic components), but he is *not* an eliminativist (he does not deny the reality of sensed experience or emergent properties).

Tim O'Keefe, in his article "*The Reductionist and Compatibilist Argument of Epicurus' On Nature, Book 25,*" argues that Epikouros' explanation of autonomous mental activity in Book 25 is not antagonistic to full reductionism. From my perspective, O'Keefe's argument is based mostly in differentiating reductionism from eliminativism. I used to think he was splitting hairs, but it may be a helpful point when we read about the relationship between the movement of atoms and one's control over mental movements.

O'Keefe makes it simple when he says: "To explain something is not necessarily to explain it away."

https://www.jstor.org/stable/4182694?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Post by “Cassius” of January 4, 2025 at 12:49 PM

At this point I still side with David Sedley's view of the general issue as correct, and that OKeefe is risking muddying the water by introducing the term "eliminative.." But for someone really into the academic fine points probably the distinction makes sense.

My first view though is that Sedley's view covers at least 98% of the issue that is important for most people to know, and that the extra 2% probably isn't worth the effort. Here I am referring to the quote from Sedley's article (Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism) that there are truths at both levels and neither has a monopoly on the full picture.

I think you're referring to an article which I haven't read, and I am going on my review of OKeefe book that we mentioned in the recent podcast on determinism.

So maybe at some point I will find the article and see if it changes my mind.

Post by “Don” of January 4, 2025 at 1:02 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

O'Keefe makes it simple when he says: "To explain something is not necessarily to explain it away."

I do like that quote. And the article goes on...

Quote

To explain something is not necessarily to explain it away. Nor does saying that the mind is nothing above and beyond a group of atoms entail that the mind is unreal; it entails just the opposite: if the mind is identified with a group of atoms, and the group of atoms is real, so too is the mind. The reductionist in philosophy of mind need not say dismissively that mental facts are "mere appearances" of atomic facts; it is the eliminativist who does that. ... A reductionist can accept that wholes have properties that their parts do not. People can cry, while atoms cannot, but if crying is nothing more than the secretion of water from the tear ducts of a living organism, we can explain what crying is, and why people can cry while atoms cannot, in a way consistent with being a reductionist about crying.

Post by “Cassius” of January 4, 2025 at 1:15 PM

Yep, and you've also got to know when good enough is good enough vs when the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. I think Sedley has that balance better struck in this case.

Post by “Don” of January 4, 2025 at 1:57 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

when good enough is good enough vs when the perfect becomes the enemy of the good.

Sorry, I'll admit I don't understand to what you're referring with that maxim here.

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.

Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2025 at 3:20 PM

I find this highly interesting and worth discussing, especially this:

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.

..... seems to me to be a very understandable and acceptable way of untying the knot of reconciling the two levels (atomic level and "our" level.

It may well be academically true that talking about "eliminative" terminology can bring greater precision to the specialist, but I doubt very much whether the normal person has any need to go that deep. The level at which Sedley is speaking seems to me to be the "practical" level of understanding how "our world" relates to "atoms," and that's the level of practical guidance that most people need.

Focusing specifically on the context that the purpose of this forum is to bring practical Epicurean philosophy to normal people who are not and are never going to be academic specialists, I'm interested in any comments anyone wants to make on that issue.

I'm not trying to be overly critical of Tim O'Keefe, either, because he's an academic writing for academics. Our goal here ought to be always focused on looking for practical constructions that deal with the great majority of a problem.

Not to say that any individuals here should not look for greater precision, but as a "group" we ought to swing for the sweet spot of aiming at the "middle class" that Cicero was complaining about picking up Epicurean philosophy on the crossroads of Rome.

We don't want to let the "perfect" explanation that Tim O'Keefe might be looking for become the proverbial "enemy of the good" -- in this case the good being defined as a practical and beneficial worldview for normal people.

Sedley seems clearly right in his broad strokes that excessive reductionism is akin to excessive skepticism and excessive determinism, and those are almost as much the enemy of Epicurean philosophy as supernatural religion. (And arguably *more* so, given what Epicurus said in the letter to Menoecus.)

So if anyone disagrees specifically with where Sedley is coming from I'd definitely like to hear that commentary.

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 :-)

Post by "Pacatus" of January 4, 2025 at 7:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So those who wish to can save this post and use it against me in the future, 😊



Post by “Cassius” of January 4, 2025 at 7:55 PM

I've reread the thread and I can certainly see that it's legitimate to say that O'Keefe winds up in the same place as Sedley ultimately, with O'Keefe agreeing that *the idea that our reality is unreal is bad*, but saying that *reductionism doesn't necessarily mean that our reality is unreal*.

But that observation just leads me back to Bryan's initial inclination that O'Keefe was "splitting hairs." The real question is not how to get the finest dictionary definition of the term "reductionism," but to understand what the philosophical issue is and why it has practical importance. That's what David Sedley did very eloquently in his original observations in *Hellenistic Philosophers* and his later article.

If all someone has time for is the big picture, I'd suggest that page 34 of Dr. Sedley's article will give them most everything they really need to know about the relationship between Epicurus and Democritus on this point. But if someone finds that the additional points made in "Epicurus On Freedom" provides them a more clear picture, or fills in some gap that they find missing in Sedley's viewpoint, then of course that's helpful.

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."³⁴ Epicurus thinks it impossible to abandon our conception of ourselves as agents and be pragmatically consistent about it.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.

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 waded 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.

Post by "Bryan" of January 5, 2025 at 8:21 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The mind is a real thing, but it is nothing above and beyond the atoms that constitute it

I agree the O'Keefe model is not good. The "Sedley / anti-reductionist" argument also strikes me as the natural interpretation. We can create our own mental movement.

Many things are "greater than the sum of their parts" and have emergent qualities that absolutely exist, even if those qualities do not exist in-and-of-themselves. Although I was wondering if O'Keefe is technically correct that this viewpoint is not really "anti-reductionist."

Epikouros is a reductionist in the sense that he reduces everything to the atoms and void, but he is not a reductionist in the sense that he does accept the real existence of everything that we see and feel. Would it be more accurate and expedient to say he *is* a reductionist and *not* an eliminitivist?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Sedley seems clearly right in his broad strokes that excessive reductionism is akin to excessive skepticism and excessive determinism

I agree. Epikouros makes good use of reductionism, skepticism and determinism -- but he does so with nuance -- and he does reject the version of each that "goes all the way."

This was the angle of my interest, which we have discussed before: to what extent is it beneficial for us to employ a term for the "excessive" version of each? (as "Pyrrhonism" stands for excessive skepticism.)

Post by "Cassius" of January 5, 2025 at 9:26 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Many things are "greater than the sum of their parts" and have emergent qualities that absolutely exist, even if those qualities do not exist in-and-of-themselves.

And a key issue is focusing in on what is mean by "absolutely exist."

I've taken to focusing on those things that have "an eternal and unchanging existence" (atoms, void, the universe as a whole) vs those things that do not -- things that can change over time.

But that's only one way to look at it, and I suspect it really means "real to us" in the sense that Epicurus is saying that if our senses, anticipations, and feelings, register it, then we should consider it to be "real." just don't make the mistake of thinking that everything that they register has an eternal unchanging existence, or that everything is *equally* significant to us.

Post by “Don” of January 5, 2025 at 10:29 AM

"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."

<https://youtu.be/b8drxafsHiA?si=Q7jrdo-K9Nz13qQY>

I see this as illustrating the points at hand, maybe a little ham-handed but analogous nonetheless. The sheep** are the atoms; the field, the void. But there is a real thing called a "flock" that has its own qualities and movements. I'm seeing the real qualities and phenomena that we deal with in this way. The individual elementary particles and molecules of the sweetener I put in my tea are not "sweet," but I experience a real sensation of sweetness in my tea. I sense that, it influences my experience of the tea, and that experience is real and has a causal effect on how I respond to the tea. Likewise, the mind. Taking a leap, I realize, but it's still applicable to me. The individual "atoms" allowing me to reason and to even write these words are not individually capable of reason; and yet I can experience my mind as existing and having causal impact on the universe (and if I play my cards right, influence on other beings' minds). Our minds emerge temporarily in the cosmic flow of atoms, **really** exist, but will eventually get recycled over and over like they did before I was born.

***PS: I'm also including the sheepdogs as essential parts of the "flock." I do NOT want anyone to analogize the sheep as the atoms and the dogs as some kind of non-physical cause of the flock's behavior. They're all part of what I am calling the "flock." The sheep and dogs act in concert giving rise to the emergent phenomena I'm referring to as the "flock."*

Post by “Cassius” of January 5, 2025 at 3:38 PM

I think your own description is good Don, which is why I find fault in the formulation:

[Quote from Okeefe](#)

"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

I can't read "nothing above and beyond" the sheep gathered together as saying anything more than that the individual sheep have a higher status of significance to us than does the flock.

A more complete statement would be more like :

"An example of this sort of thing would be a flock of sheep. A flock of sheep is a real entity with real attributes, just as the individual sheep are real entities with different attributes. Just as the individual sheep are made of atoms, the flock is made of individual sheep."

Then one among many further points that Velleius among others might make would be that individual sheep can come and go from the flock so long as a large number of sheep remain. The flock maintains its existence and attributes despite the coming and going of individual sheep. And in fact the flock can remain in existence far beyond the lifetime of an individual sheep, and in fact indefinitely, so long as the flock or the shepherd maintain the flock against hazards that come against it.

Post by "Don" of January 5, 2025 at 9:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"An example of this sort of thing would be a flock of sheep. A flock of sheep is a real entity with real attributes, just as the individual sheep are real entities with different attributes. Just as the individual sheep are made of atoms, the flock is made of individual sheep."

I like this. That's well done.

I'm not sure I'm entirely ready to embrace the last paragraph, but the reasoning is sound it seems to me. I'm assuming you're aiming for a mechanism for the existence of the (physical) gods.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2025 at 7:24 AM

Yes, but it's interesting that it applies to us as well, and it highlights that the reality of the emergent form is not limited to the continued participation of the same individual components.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2025 at 8:05 AM

Of course what we're talking about here as well is the "you can't bathe twice in the same river" paradox.

It seems Epicurus is telling us to realize that both things are true: (1) the drops / atoms of the river are constantly changing, but (2) it is perfectly proper and beneficial to consider that the "river" is the same river from moment to moment.


If this perspective were not adopted, we would be in all sorts of variations of Plato's cave, and we'd think that nothing we sense is "real" but only a shadow flickering on a wall. Or as Diogenes of Oinoanda attributed to Aristotle, we'd be in the position of thinking that everything was moving so fast that we could never be sure of anything.

The importance of this issue is that Epicurus' perspective allows us to be confident in dealing with both levels of experience and seeing them in a relationship that is proper to human life. It gives us confidence that we don't have to constantly agonize over the mind-bending games of philosophers who wish to attack the reliability of the senses and the possibility of knowledge -- with the goal of making you see things the way they want you to see them!

Quote from Lucretius Book 1 - [102]

You yourself sometime vanquished by the fearsome threats of the seer's sayings, will seek to desert from us. Nay indeed, how many a dream may they even now conjure up before you, which might avail to overthrow your schemes of life, and confound in fear all your fortunes.

Post by “Don” of January 6, 2025 at 8:31 AM

Oh, and I just want to add here that I don't give out  too often, and [Cassius](#) got ~~two~~ three in a row 