

# Episode 168 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 21 - Chapter 10 - The New Freedom 01

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 9:49 PM

EPICURUS' REFUTATION OF DETERMINISM

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The metaphysical status of phenomenal properties, states of mind, etc. is that of accidental properties of groups of atoms.<sup>43</sup> That is, they cannot exist independently of the atoms. But the common assumption that they *are* just patterns of atomic motion does not follow from this, and is ruled out by Epicurus' epistemology. Sensations, which come out always true on his account, never report patterns of atomic motion, since atoms are imperceptibly small.

Cognitive scepticism is not the only outcome of reductionist atomism. Another is determinism. If human judgments, impulses and emotions just *are* the mechanical bouncing around of atomic billiard balls in the mind, there seems no room for individual self-determination or responsibility. This is precisely the mechanistic brand of determinism which we have already seen reason to identify as Epicurus' target. And his treatment of it, we have also seen, consciously parallels his treatment of scepticism. By showing it to be both self-refuting and untenable in practice, he justifies the level of description used elsewhere in the same book of *On nature*, one which allows for a rational autonomous self with its own judgments and impulses, none of these being straightforwardly reducible to motions of a person's constituent atoms.

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Thread

[\*\*Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"\*\*](#)

This is the thread for discussion of the Sedley article on Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism. This is BY FAR the best treatment of this subject I have ever read, and I highly recommend it to everyone who participates in this forum.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/?postID=23343#post23343>

David Sedley is an outstanding scholar who is generally very sympathetic to Epicurus, and this article brings together the familiar passages from Lucretius with Sedley's interpretations of Herculaneum fragments from Epicurus' "On Nature." The result is a persuasive...



Cassius

June 3, 2020 at 8:43 AM

It is in this article that Sedley says that the swerve of the atom was likely not deduced from its necessity in cosmos-building but from its use in combating determinism:

accuracy (Lucretius II 246-50).

I do not propose to expend much discussion on the swerve's cosmogonical function (Lucretius II 216-42), which I suspect to be a problem dreamed up with a preconceived solution in mind. Chains of atomic collisions in extra-cosmic space could have quite adequately been explained by the lateral intrusion of one or more atoms from elsewhere, despatched, say, by the break-up of a nearby world. The question of how such collisions ever started in the first place would not arise, given the infinity of past time and past worlds. That is, indeed, the view strongly implied by the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Letter to Pythocles*,<sup>8</sup> the physical epitomes which Epicurus wrote when he had already worked out his main cosmological views in Books I-XIII of his *On nature*. Since these two works also contain no hint of the swerve doctrine, the likelihood is that it was his later work on psychology, apparently in the closing books of the thirty-seven book magnum opus, that led him to the innovation, and that it was only then grafted onto the existing cosmological scheme.<sup>9</sup>