

Epicurus' Rejection of "Reductionist Atomism" (And The Related Issues of Skepticism and Determinism)

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 10:23 PM

This is an important topic that bleeds over into epistemology / canonicity, but given how closely it is related to atomism it needs a thread here. I will try to go through the forum and crossreference threads to Democritus' statement about "...in reality, only atoms and void..." and why Epicurus would not have accepted this viewpoint. At the moment, one of the best discussions of this is in [David Sedley's "Epicurus's Refutation of Determinism"](#).

Hard to overstate how critical this paragraph is:

As Sedley says, Epicurus rejects "reductionist atomism," in favor of the common sense perspective: **"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."**

nents to be the later followers with whom the first atomists are favourably contrasted in 59-61.³⁷ The same possibility seems implicit in some remarks of Diogenes of Oenoanda, who attacks not Democritus himself but those who adopt Democritus' thesis of universal necessitation unmodified by the Epicurean swerve.³⁸

In confirmation of this, we can return to the close and apparently conscious parallelism between Epicurus' treatments of determinism and scepticism. The sceptics refuted in Lucretius IV must be, or prominently include, those fourth-century Democriteans like Metrodorus of Chios, Anaxarchus, and even Epicurus' own reviled teacher Nausiphanes, who had played up the sceptical side of Democritus' thought, and against whom Epicurus was eager to marshal the positive empiricist arguments which Democritus had also bequeathed.³⁹ This scepticism was the result of what I shall call reductionist atomism. Because phenomenal objects and properties seemed to reduce to mere configurations of atoms and void, Democritus was inclined to suppose that the atoms and void were real while the phenomenal objects and properties were no more than arbitrary constructions placed upon them by human cognitive organs.⁴⁰ In his more extreme moods Democritus was even inclined to doubt the power of human judgment, since judgment was itself no more than a realignment of atoms in the mind (ἐπιρυσμίη).⁴¹

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 *πάθη*, 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.⁴²