

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

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2023 at 8:51 AM

There is a great deal of good information, which leads to explanation of why Epicurus disagreed with Democritus on a number of key things, in this article:

[Democritus \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

The article points out that there is a lot of controversy about what Democritus was really saying, but to the extent that he was interpreted to be saying that things which we perceive at the macroscopic level are "unreal," it is easy to see why Epicurus would object to that. Sedley's summary that Epicurus was holding that there are two levels - microscopic and macroscopic for shorthand - and that neither level has a monopoly on truth seems to me to be pretty good phrasing of Epicurus's position.

Quotes from the article:

He famously denies that perceptible qualities other than shape and size (and, perhaps, weight) really exist in the atoms themselves: one direct quotation surviving from Democritus claims that 'by convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void' (DK 68B9, trans. Taylor 1999a).

While several reports of Democritus' view, apparently direct quotations, mention exclusively sensible qualities as being unreal, a report of Plutarch includes in the list of things that exist only by convention the notion of 'combination' or *sunkrisis*. If this report is genuinely Democritean, it would broaden the scope of the claim considerably: the idea that any combination—by which he presumably means any cluster of atoms—is 'unreal' or merely 'conventional' suggests that Democritus is drawing a more radical distinction than that between sensible and nonsensible qualities. The implication would be that anything perceived, because it is a perception of combinations of atoms and not atoms themselves, would be suspect, not merely the qualia experienced by means of individual sense organs. One report indeed attributes to Democritus a denial that two things could become one, or vice versa (DK 68A42), thus suggesting that combinations are regarded as conventional.

However, Furley concedes that Plutarch at least understands the earliest atomists to be committed to the view that all combinations of atoms, as much as sensible qualities, should be understood as conventional rather than real (Furley 1993 pp. 76–7n7). This would suggest that everything at the macroscopic level—or, strictly, everything available to perception—is regarded as unreal.

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