

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

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2023 at 10:27 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[..in Buddhism..] The ultimate truth is its emptiness.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I personally reject any idea of "two truths" (no matter the source) because it leads to meaninglessness and passivity.

Yes, that is the point. And as Dewitt says in the chapter we are discussing in the podcast right now, to a moral reformer like Epicurus, skepticism and determinism, which go hand in hand with meaningless and passivity, have to be exposed as illogical and denounced as unacceptable:

"To [Epicurus] as a moral reformer two things ranked foremost as abominations, skepticism and physical determinism."

"In the domain of physics the charge of ingratitude is aggravated because the sin is against Democritus. "What is there in the Physics of Epicurus that is not from Democritus?" demands Cicero, and elsewhere he says: "What he changes he seems to spoil." Incidentally, every offense that was charged to Epicurus seemed more heinous than those of others. The defection of Epicurus from the teachings of Democritus, however, is almost wholly in the domain of ethics. To him as a moral reformer two things ranked foremost as abominations, skepticism and physical determinism. To such moral indignation Nausiphanes seems to have been immune; even if he rejected Pyrrhonian skepticism, this need not mean that he became alert to the evil of skepticism in general. To Epicurus he seemed insensate. The pupil was advancing beyond the teacher.

As for Democritus himself, he committed himself to a certain degree of skepticism when he declared "atoms and void to be the only existences and all else to exist by convention." ⁴⁵ This, however, was only individual skepticism, which did not prevent him from practicing cheerfulness (*euthumia*) any more than Pyrrho was prevented from enjoying indifference. To Epicurus, on the contrary, belief or disbelief had become a matter of morals and the happiness of mankind. He was incapable of taking comfort in a negative attitude, as did Democritus and Pyrrho. Thus he was compelled by the inward urge to become a pragmatist as well as a dogmatist and to insist that knowledge must not only be possible but also have relevance to

action and to happiness. In this matter none of his teachers had set him an example.

"A second ground of his defection from Democritus was physical determinism. Determinism is not offensive to intellectuals, but to moral reformers it is neither conceivable nor tolerable. Moral reform is synonymous with the experience of conversion, and conversion presumes freedom of the will. To Democritus the prime and only causation in the universe was the motion of the atoms. In this motion there was no deviation, no freedom possible. It constituted an absolute determinism. In order to open an escape from this intolerable physical necessity Epicurus postulated sufficient play in the motion of the atoms to permit of freedom of the will. Thus he introduced into the sum of things a new cause, human volition, which was to him at one and the same time a necessity of thought and a necessity of action. This innovation may not be commendable in physics, but ethical considerations had become paramount and in ethics the desired end had been served by the innovation. For this invention he was in debt to no teacher."