

Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics - Article By David Sedley

Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2026 at 8:53 PM

As an aside here Joshua I think we are seeing in going through Tusculan Disputations how important it was to Cicero (and presumably the Stoics) to say that there is only a single good - virtue - and that nothing else is truly good. That allows them to argue that being virtuous is totally within our control and that means that having what is good is totally within our control.

In contrast Sedley argues that Epicurus was approaching ethics like he was approaching physics. This implies Epicurus thought it essential to first and foremost establish that there is a bright line separating good from bad in general, just like there's a sharp distinction between bodies and space. Once you establish a position that there are only two options, you can categorize everything within one of the two options and rule out the existence of anything else (endless "what-aboutism" leading to radical skepticism).

And Sedley observes that in both lines of argument, Epicurus follows up this "either/or" starting point by arguing that other philosophers are wrong in asserting the existence of anything of any nature that falls outside that "either one or the other" structure.

It's pretty easy to see that this has major advantages in defending the senses and opposing radical skepticism. Skeptics are going to reject the analysis anyway, but it gives those of us who accept the legitimacy of the division a very firm starting point for rejection of otherworldliness - leading to the confidence that Cicero dislikes but cites as an Epicurean trait.