

Thomas Nail - Returning to Lucretius

Post by "Cassius" of January 29, 2026 at 3:16 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

So, back to the thrust of my question above: Why should anyone dwell on whether Lucretius interpreted Epicurus wrongly or indeed intentionally declined to include Epicurus' atomism?

This is a very good question and being able to answer it thoroughly is what this forum is all about.

There are many aspects to it beyond those relating to whether Lucretius intentionally or accidentally deviated from Epicurus. That's important in itself, but it's not nearly as important as addressing what you wrote here:

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I don't see why one must believe Epicurus was right about atoms and their movement to be adherents to his ethics, canonics, etc.

What does it mean in this context to say that Epicurus was "right" or "wrong" about atoms?" I would argue that questions such as whether photons are considered to be particles with mass or waves or whether matter and energy are interchangeable" does *not* render Epicurus' belief in eternally unchanging elemental particles. People can argue all day about new discoveries about details of atoms but if they remain at that level of analysis they are totally missing Epicurus' point.

The issue is not establishing the exact specifications of what we call molecules or atoms or subatomic particles. Epicurus never claimed either to do that or to explain the mechanism of the swerve. What he *did* claim is that it is incorrect to speculate that things can be divided infinitely because that creates a logical impossibility.

If infinite divisibility were accepted, you'd have no mechanism for establishing that anything is or could be eternal and therefore reliable. You would have no foundation for a natural universe rather than a completely arbitrary supernatural one. You'd have no basis for having confidence in any conclusion whatsoever. It's possible to argue all day about the difference between "confidence" and "certainty," and say that all you need is "probability." That's a very old argument and what we'll be taking it up in discussing the "Academic Questions" discussed by Cicero.

Epicurus was not a particle physicist and made no claims to be doing anything more than providing a rational basis for a non-supernatural universe. Neither Epicurus nor Lucretius nor any other Epicurean took up careers in splitting atoms or building atomic bombs, because engineering and technical innovation is secondary to having a rational theory for living life in the here and now.

The issue is not that of being willing and able to accept and incorporate new observational discoveries. That's been going on for thousands of years and will always continue. The issue is the logical and conceptual one of whether ANY number of observational discoveries can ever be sufficient to allow us to conclude that the universe is natural and not supernatural. Or do we always have to hedge our bets and never escape the doubt that when we die we'll be tortured forever in hell?

It's at that level that I would maintain even today that Epicurus was absolutely right about his important conclusions. He was right as to "atomism" that the universe ultimately has a natural and eternal material basis. He was right as to "canonics" that knowledge is possible and radical skepticism is a fraudulent impossibility. He was right as to "ethics" that there are no absolute supernatural rules and that nature provides all the guidance we need if we simply take a wide view of pleasure as all mental and physical experience in life which is desirable.

There's going to be a wide disagreement among individuals on which pleasures to pursue because individual circumstances vary. But if we want to live happily we have to have a framework for making decisions now, that that means that everything in physics is divided between matter and space, everything in ethics is divided between pleasure and pain, and everything in canonics can be divided between true and false.

In each of those three areas you have to look very carefully at what is meant by each word:

- matter vs space
- pleasure vs pain
- true vs false

There's an Epicurean way of looking at each one of those terms and how they relate to each other. This is the analytical framework that David Sedley described in his article "The inferential Basis of Epicurean Ethics."

This analysis provides a framework in which you can have confidence because the alternatives in each category exclude all other possibilities once you see how sweeping they truly are. The details of what "observational scientists" tell you yesterday, today, or tomorrow are not nearly so important as that you have a framework within which to understand them. And that's what Lucian of Samosata was talking about in saying that Epicurus would have been confident that Alexander the Oracle Monger was a fraud, even if Epicurus were not immediately able to ascertain the precise manner in what Alexander was carrying out his trickery.