

Tim O'Keefe -- Ouch!

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2026 at 2:26 PM

Yes and thank you for this post. This is good information to keep on hand. Tim O'Keefe has written some very good stuff on Epicurus, but this part of his attitude has to be kept in mind. This situation reminds me of Cyril Bailey, whose work is extremely helpful to us, but who personally assessed Epicurus perhaps in even more negative terms than does O'Keefe here.

Here, the main problem is that he's not even trying to be open-minded about the big picture. As O'Keefe well knows, Epicurus was not a technician. It's clear from Epicurus' arguments that he's basing his positions on a combination of logic AND observation. The terminology used to describe "atoms" matters only to the extent that the point is that there is at SOME point a limit of divisibility. It's totally ridiculous to talk as if just because Epicurus used different terminology than we do now that we should throw out everything he had to say. The point is the ultimate one: We don't live forever and we know everything and we never will, so what do we expect the truth to be based on the best information at our disposal?

The big-picture conclusions are that there is nothing outside or above nature, no human life after death, and no universal ideas or moral absolutes. Those conclusions are absolutely valid today. That's the level at which Epicurus was focusing his attention, and it's ridiculous to pretend that Epicurus was doing anything else. Protons and electrons and neutrons are not big-picture conclusions. The big-picture conclusions are that everything operates *naturally and without supernatural guidance*, and the simple fact that we are alive doesn't give us the ability to dictate to nature what we think might be or should be the way things are.

All this is a matter of being reasonable and charitable in assessing the big picture. No doubt it's possible to take that statement from O'Keefe and excuse it and say O'Keefe meant it in a limited way. After all, if O'Keefe really thought that everything Epicurus had to say was obsolete, it's unlikely that O'Keefe would have devoted so much of his career to talking about Epicurus.

Perspective is the problem we're constantly confronting. We always need to focus on the big picture and never get so lost in details that we lose sight of the real take-away.

We really need to ask every writer: Where do THEY stand on whether there are supernatural forces? Where do THEY stand on life after death? Where do THEY stand on whether the same laws should apply in Rome and Athens vs Jerusalem, and at all times past present and future? If a writer can't clearly communicate that they agree that there are no supernatural forces, that there is no life after death, and that morality and justice is contextual and not absolute, then whatever else they might be they are not in a trustworthy position to provide leadership in Epicurean philosophy.

Examining people on motives is what we do in court with Experts. Lawyers' cross-examine experts to determine how much they were paid for their opinions, and about other opinions those experts have given in other cases. Everyone brings their own biases and prejudices when they give opinions, and I don't see a better way to make decisions than we do in court. Bring to every question a sweeping and thorough examination not just of what the "expert" says is the truth, but also examine the biases and prejudices of the expert, and then in the end let each listener draw their own conclusion. In judging their credibility on interpreting Epicurus, It's important to know that Bailey was highly critical of Epicurus' conclusions about ethics, and that Okeefe has a problem with Epicurus' approach to physics.

There's no perfect system and no guarantee of success, but at least examining backgrounds and motives allows for the possibility of success, and it doesn't allow for bias and prejudice to gain a totally impregnable hold on everyone.

Of course when I approach a complicated subject I want information from experts to help me form my conclusion. But when it's a matter of life and death and I need brain surgery, it's relevant to know whether the surgeon has some personal motivation to do his best to help me, or whether he is motivated to hate my guts.