

Article - David Sedley - 1988 - "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism"

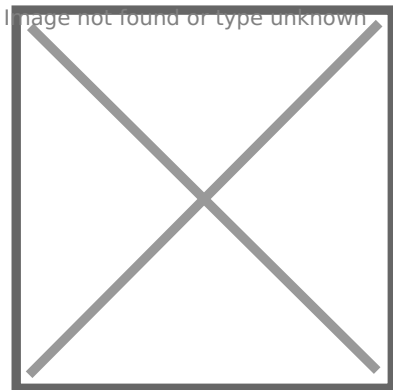
Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 9:13 AM

We've referenced many times on the forum the comments about this topic made by David Sedley in his "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism."

I don't think we previously cited - or that I knew of - an article Dr. Sedley had written directly on point:

Epicurean Anti-Reductionism - 1988 - J. Barnes, M. Mignucci (eds.), Matter and Metaphysics (Naples 1988), 295-327

Full article available here:



[Epicurean anti-reductionism](#)

Epicurean anti-reductionism

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Summary of Main Arguments and Highlights

1. Core Thesis: Epicureanism is Not Fully Reductionist

Sedley's central claim is that Epicurean philosophy, although grounded in atomism, **cannot be understood as a purely reductionist system.**

- While everything is composed of atoms and void, Epicurus does **not reduce all explanations** to atomic properties alone.
- Instead, Epicureanism allows for **higher-level explanations** that are not eliminable into micro-level physics.

Key implication:

Epicurus is a **qualified materialist**, not a strict reductionist.

2. Distinction Between Atoms and Compounds

Sedley emphasizes a crucial distinction:

- **Atoms:** possess only a few **immutable properties** (shape, size, weight).
- **Compound bodies:** exhibit **qualities that do not belong to atoms themselves**.

This aligns with Lucretius' distinction between:

- **Coniuncta (necessary qualities)**
- **Eventa (accidental qualities)**

These qualities:

- Depend on atomic arrangements
 - But are **not reducible to atomic descriptions**
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3. Emergent Qualities Are Real (Not Illusions)

A central anti-reductionist point:

- Qualities like **color, heat, solidity, life, and agency** are:
 - Not properties of individual atoms
 - Yet **genuinely real features of compound bodies**

Sedley stresses that Epicurus:

- Does **not treat these as mere appearances or illusions**
- Instead treats them as **objective, though derivative, realities**

Conclusion:

Epicureanism supports a form of **emergence**—higher-level properties arise from but are not identical to lower-level constituents.

4. Explanatory Pluralism

Sedley argues that Epicurus uses **multiple levels of explanation simultaneously**:

- Micro-level: atoms and their motions
- Macro-level: observable phenomena and qualities

These levels are:

- **Compatible**, but
- Not interchangeable

Thus:

- Some explanations are best given **at the level of bodies**, not atoms.
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5. Rejection of Eliminative Reductionism

Epicurus rejects the idea that:

Quote

Only atomic-level facts are “really real”

Instead:

- Observable properties retain **explanatory legitimacy**
- Everyday descriptions (e.g., “fire is hot”) are **philosophically valid**

This is a direct rejection of:

- The view that higher-level properties must be eliminated in favor of physics
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6. Stability and Identity of Objects

Sedley highlights that:

- Compound bodies have **stable identities**
- These identities depend on:
 - Structural organization
 - Functional roles

Not merely:

- A list of atomic constituents

Thus:

- A thing's identity is tied to **its emergent organization**, not just its atoms
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7. Ethical and Psychological Implications

This anti-reductionism is not merely physical—it extends into ethics:

- Human experiences (pleasure, pain, fear) are:
 - Grounded in atomic processes
 - But must be understood at the **level of lived experience**

Epicurus therefore:

- Treats psychological states as **real and explanatorily significant**
 - Not reducible away into physics
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8. Lucretius as Key Evidence

Sedley relies heavily on *On the Nature of Things* to support this interpretation:

- Lucretius explicitly distinguishes:
 - Atomic properties
 - Emergent qualities of bodies
 - He shows that:
 - Qualities arise from **arrangements and interactions**, not intrinsic atomic features
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Overall Interpretation

Sedley's interpretation can be summarized as follows:

- Epicurus is a **materialist** → everything is made of atoms and void
- But also an **anti-reductionist** → not everything can be explained purely at the atomic level

This results in a philosophical position that combines:

- **Ontological reduction** (everything is atoms)
 - With **explanatory pluralism** (not everything is explained in atomic terms)
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Concise Takeaway

Quote

Epicurean philosophy holds that while atoms are the fundamental constituents of reality, the world we experience—including qualities, objects, and human life—must be understood at their own level and cannot be reduced away into atomic descriptions.