

Sunday March 29, 2026 - Zoom Meeting - Lucretius Book Review - This Week: A Quick Look At Sedley's "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism"

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 10:48 AM

This week I would like us to take a step back from where we are in Lucretius so that David Sedley can explain the implications of the detail through which we are going about atoms and void. We've talked previously about his article "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism" which discusses these issues, but the same questions are explored with greater detail and clarity in this article:

Thread

[Article - David Sedley - 1988 - "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism"](#)

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:

https://www.academia.edu/3051123/Epicurean_anti_reductionism

Summary of Main Arguments and Highlights

1. Core



Cassius

March 26, 2026 at 9:13 AM

We won't by any means have time to go through the full article but we'll discuss the highlights, as these will help us grasp the takeaways of the issues we're discussing each week:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4999-sunday-march-29-2026-zoom-meeting-lucretius-book-review-this-week-a-quick-look-a/?postID=39076#post39076>

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

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

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.