

Epicurus Was Not an Atomist (...sort of)

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 11:17 AM

Eikadistes I thought of your article in reading David Sedley's "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism," and I wanted to be sure you saw this.

I don't recall all the details of your article, but I think you'd find the concluding section of Sedley's article supportive of the argument that Epicurus should really not be considered *primarily* an atomist.

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My suspicion is that two considerations in particular are responsible for the prevailing interpretation. One¹⁶ is the impression that by a very long way the most careful Epicurean doctrine is stoicism, and that atomistic analysis must therefore be expected to play a significant part in every branch of Epicurean philosophy, including moral psychology. Against this, it should be pointed out that atomistic analysis features prominently only in the surviving treatises on explicitly physical themes — Epicurus' letters to Herodotus and Pythocles, and Lucretius' poem. In the *Letter to Diogenes*, in the critical writings of Philodemus, and in the fragments of Epicurus' ethics in general, it is strikingly lacking. And whose materialist analyses are mentioned by Epicurus in the fragmentary text on psychology mentioned above, it is precisely in order to deny or downgrade them. Thus our tendency to classify "atomist" as the defining label for Epicurus' philosophy carries with it the risk of distortion, on the one hand reflecting the accident that physics occupies an comparatively high proportion of the surviving fragments of Epicurean writings (as a glance at the fuller and presumably more representative selection of his titles at [Diag. Laus. v 278](#) will confirm), and on the other hand tending itself to confirm the unjustified impression that he is a committed materialist.

The second factor is Epicurus' emphatic assertion that the mind is corporeal¹⁷, an assertion aimed in particular at establishing its inability to survive the death of the body. Stipulatively interpreted, this already seems to saddle him with an identity theory of mind. But any such impression is due to no more than a misunderstanding of the scope of "mind". In modern usage, a theory of mind is a theory about the metaphysics of mental states. But if I am right, although the "mind" in Epicurus' system is the physical organ of consciousness, ac-

According to the brain and nervous system in more recent science, mental states are not amenable to a parallel physical analysis. The mind, like the brain for us, is the material entity in whose properties states of consciousness exist; but, for Epicurus at least, it does not follow that these states of consciousness are themselves merely material states, governed by the laws of physics.

One of the more influential sources in Epicurean studies, Carl R. Hahn, writing in 1928 came at one point astonishingly close to what I take to be the correct interpretation:

"The compound is more than a mere aggregate of its dependent atoms: it is their union in a complex, which has a new individuality of its own in which it may acquire qualities and even powers, which are not possessed by the individual component atoms. The soul or mind is a compound body of such particles continuous in the nature of its component atoms and their motions among themselves, that it acquires the power of sensation or consciousness."¹⁸

Fortunately, Hahn went on almost immediately to contradict this insight:

"The most material thinkers of our own time are content to say that consciousness — perception — is an 'epiphysion' — on the movements of matter. Epicurus went the step further and was prepared to say that consciousness, sensation, thought, and will are the movements of the soul atoms. Such an idea is in most respects sound, as it was to the majority of philosophers in Epicurus' day, unshakable: however the one set of facts and the other there is a great gulf fixed."¹⁹

Hahn was hardly to blame here for falling to foresee here the basic "unshakable" — the known — domain of mind would prove to be in future decades. Much more immediately wise

¹⁶ C. Bailey, *The Great Atomist and Epicurus*, Oxford 1928, p. 415.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 416.