

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

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 1:52 PM

Thanks for your question, Dave. It comes up frequently so I have updated the FAQ. Here's the short version:

Epicurus would be the *last* person to insist we cling to 2,000-year-old technical details in physics just because he said them. He was emphatically committed to observation and experience over authority — including his own. So when you say modern physics has advanced what Epicurus encouraged, I agree completely. The question is really: *what specifically did Epicurus encourage in the area of physics, and why does it still matter to how we live?*

Here's the crux: Epicurean physics was never really *about* the technical details of atoms for their own sake. It was constructed to do a specific job — to address three towering sources of human misery:

- 1. The fear that supernatural gods are watching us, judging us, and will punish us after death.**
- 2. The fear that the universe is governed by Fate or Necessity, that nothing we do matters, and that we have no real agency in our own lives.**
- 3. The view that what we see around us is not real, and that our lives and everything we value is essentially 'unreal.'**

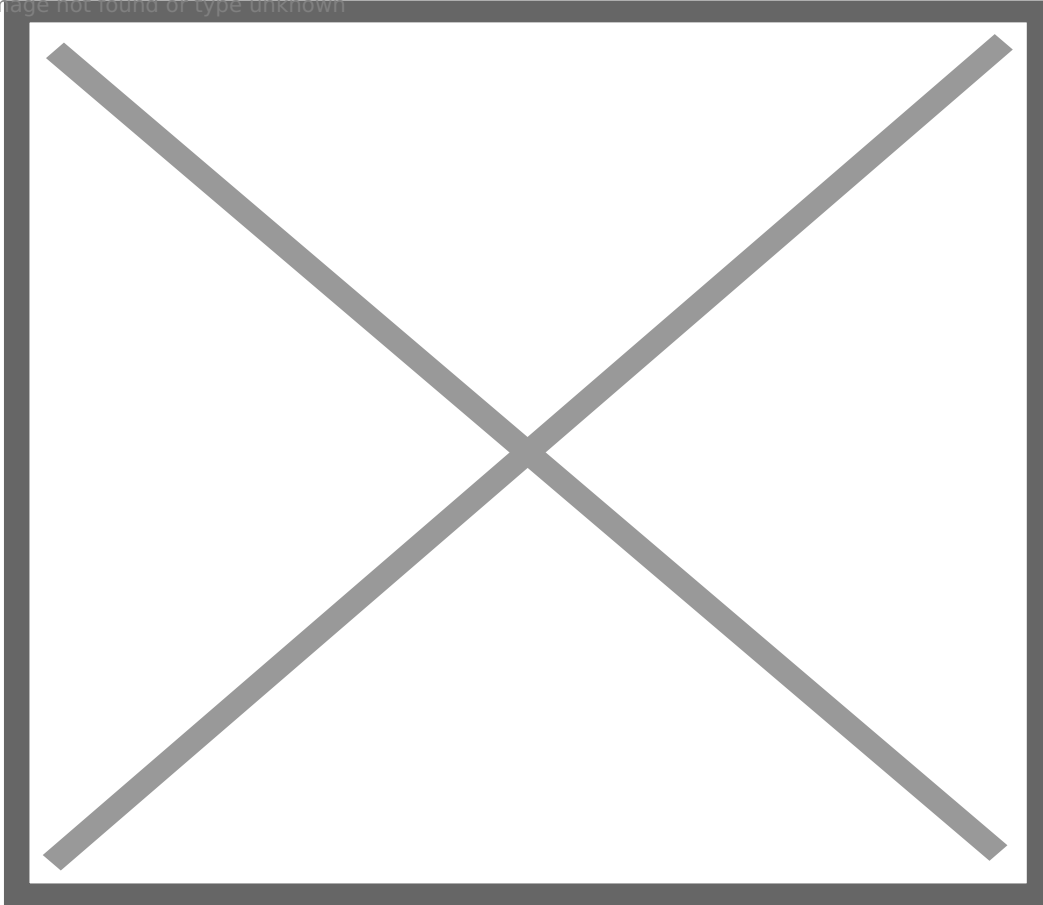
Epicurus built his physics — the atoms, the void, the swerve, the emergent properties of compound things — specifically to establish that the natural world we experience is self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Nothing comes from nothing; nothing goes to nothing; the universe operates by natural processes, not divine whim or iron destiny. That framework is what allows the ethics to work. Pull out the physics, and you immediately create space for the supernatural to rush back in — which is exactly what Epicurus' rivals (Plato, the Stoics, and later the Christians) did with great success.

Now, as to the Sedley article specifically — and the question of whether Epicurus was a "reductionist" — this turns out to be very relevant to modern Epicurean life, more than it might first appear. Sedley's argument is that Epicurus was not a strict reductionist: he did not say that your feelings of pleasure and pain, your lived experience, your psychological states are "mere illusions" that dissolve into atomic physics if you look closely enough. The qualities of compound things — including the pleasure and pain we feel — are real, not eliminable, and must be understood at their own level. That is philosophically powerful ammunition against the modern dismissal of Epicurean ethics as "merely subjective" or "just brain chemistry."

So the short answer to your question "why should I care about the atoms debate if so much science has changed?" is: care not because the technical atomic details are sacred, but because the *method and framework* Epicurus established — natural causation, no supernatural intervention, emergent reality at the level of lived experience — is exactly what you need to build and defend a life philosophy grounded in nature. And you need confidence in a framework that establishes that your life and the things you value are truly real. The details update as science advances; the framework remains as essential as it ever was.

The full updated FAQ answer is here:

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[Why Should I Care About Epicurean Physics When So Much Science Has Changed in the Last 2,000 Years? - Epicureanfriends.com](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4997-article-david-sedley-1988-epicurean-anti-reductionism/?postID=39081#post39081)

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