

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

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2026 at 5:04 PM

Dave, the answer to both of your questions seems to me to be pretty much the same. These things are not "totally subjective" nor are they "just brain chemistry." As the article is discussing, emergent properties like the mind's actions are not mechanically determined by atoms and void, nor are they totally subjectively under the power of the mind. Most people cannot through mental will power find burying their hands in a fire to be pleasurable - on the other hand did not the feeling of pleasure and pain work regularly across people, there would never be any regularity at all in what people find to be pleasurable or painful.

That's why this discussion is important. Epicurus is discussing the limits and boundaries of properties of atoms and the qualities that emerge from combinations of atoms. All of this directly refutes the idea that human life is either chaotic or determined supernaturally.

And in the end what we are doing is PHILOSOPHY - we are exploring a 'systematic study of nature' that allows us to have confidence that all of this is occurring naturally and without input from or direction from gods (if you're the religious type) or chaotically (if you're the nihilist type). I suspect that you are neither and that's why you think it's ok to go right to ethics, but Epicurus thought (and I do too) that the world in general is not that way, and that everyone from childhood needs to be taught a systematic approach to the way the world works that allows us to live successfully.

These are the issues we are really talking about and that Epicurus is addressing. Epicurus could care less whether we call fundamental particles atoms or protons or neurons or quarks or anything else, and I think if he were here today those who focus on that perspective are in fact lost and will never see the bigger picture until they back up and decide philosophically what "reality" really means.