

# Connecting Thought With Atoms - Emergence, Downward Causation (From The Macroscopic To The Atomic), and Epicurus

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2026 at 4:27 PM

I'll post separately that it might seem that the title of this thread and terms like "downward causation" are technicalities irrelevant to day to day life. However I'd posit that having a conceptual model of how complex systems like human beings emerge from atoms moving through the is essential to having any real confidence that the naturalistic explanation of the universe is sound.

If you can never get comfortable with the idea that non-thinking matter can give rise to thinking animals, then all the citations to 'atomism" in the world aren't going to serve the purpose for which they are needed. And in fact if you don't have a better developed understanding then you'll likely be stuck with Democritus making some critically-damaging conclusions about the implications of atomism.

To help process the implications of this issue I recommend the following short three-minute video which Kalosyni found:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxV3EXRfvBg>

And to show that Thomas Jefferson too thought about this see the underlined section below:

## Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820

[Full version at Founders.gov](#)

*Here Jefferson complains to Adams about Christian theology and states that “To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise.”*

.... But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It's crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, **I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.' I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them \*matter\*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it \*void\*, or**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5003-connecting-thought-with-atoms-emergence-downward-causation-from-the-macroscopic/?postID=39107#post39107>

**\*nothing\*, or \*immaterial\* \*space\*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.**

I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism of loadstone*. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of \*immaterial\* existences is to talk of \*nothings\*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are \*nothings\*, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.