

Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"

Post by "Cassius" of June 3, 2020 at 8:43 AM

This is the thread for discussion of the Sedley article on Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism. This is BY FAR the best treatment of this subject I have ever read, and I highly recommend it to everyone who participates in this forum.

David Sedley is an outstanding scholar who is generally very sympathetic to Epicurus, and this article brings together the familiar passages from Lucretius with Sedley's interpretations of Herculaneum fragments from Epicurus' "On Nature." The result is a persuasive picture of the approach Epicurus took to refuting determinism, and how the swerve fits in as a physics observation that allows human agency, without an understanding of the precise mechanism

EPICURUS' REFUTATION OF DETERMINISM

35 I highly recommend this

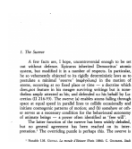
The metaphysical status of phenomenal properties, states of mind, etc. is that of accidental properties of groups of atoms.⁴³ That is, they cannot exist independently of the atoms. But the common assumption that they *are* just patterns of atomic motion does not follow from this, and is ruled out by Epicurus' epistemology. Sensations, which come out always true on his account, never report patterns of atomic motion, since atoms are imperceptibly small.

Cognitive scepticism is not the only outcome of reductionist atomism. Another is determinism. If human judgments, impulses and emotions just *are* the mechanical bouncing around of atomic billiard balls in the mind, there seems no room for individual self-determination or responsibility. This is precisely the mechanistic brand of determinism which we have already seen reason to identify as Epicurus' target. And his treatment of it, we have also seen, consciously parallels his treatment of scepticism. By showing it to be both self-refuting and untenable in practice, he justifies the level of description used elsewhere in the same book of *On nature*, one which allows for a rational autonomous self with its own judgments and impulses, none of these being straightforwardly reducible to motions of a person's constituent atoms.

The article is available here:

File

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1983 Paper which is the one of the best treatments of Epicurus' view of the Free Will / Agency / Determinism issue available.



Cassius

June 3, 2020 at 8:40 AM