

# To What Extent, If Any, Does Modern Physics Invalidate Epicurean Philosophy?

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2020 at 9:28 AM

And my response to Alan:

Let me first respond to a couple of comments:

*"My position is that even if the conclusions of Epicurean physics are incorrect by modern standards, that in no way harms or reduces the impact of the ethics or epistemology (depending on how you interpret the latter)." I disagree with this statement because it is overly broad, and ambiguous, unless you clarify WHICH conclusions of Epicurean physics we are discussing. The ultimate conclusion of Epicurean physics, as I think I stated, is that there is no supernatural control over the operation of nature. If in fact "modern standards" were to produce satisfactory proof that one or more supernatural gods had created the universe and were superintending it now, then **\*\*of course\*\*** the conclusions of Epicurean physics and the rest of the philosophy would be totally overturned.*

*"From quantum chromodynamics, we know that these particles do frequently change properties, such as 'flavor', or are converted spontaneously into other particles, so it would be wrong to say that they are eternal and unchanging (unless you want to suggest that there is something even smaller than these?)." That is EXACTLY what I think Epicurus would suggest, because he did not believe then, nor do I believe he would admit now, that "things that exist" (whatever you want to call them) are "infinitely" divisible. His logical position was that at some level there is a final substance that gives the universe continuity and regularity, and that final substance is not changeable at its own discretion, as that would imply something supernatural. Human experience to this point shows that we do not have the ability to keep drilling deeper, and based on that experience it is not ridiculous to say that we will **\*ever\*** be able to extend our reach to such a point. Given that circumstance we today certainly, and probably the rest of humanity as long as it exists, will always have unanswered questions about these things, so the issue comes down to how we live our lives given the existence of these unanswered questions. Carrying the discussion one level deeper, step by step as you are doing into ever-more-"cutting edge" words, cannot be expected to lead to an "ultimate" conclusion next year, next century, or ever. The analogy here would be that Epicurus would assert, I think, that just as astrophysicists are not going to find "out there in the stars" a realm of ideal forms, as Plato suggested, exploration at a microscopic level is not going to find a pseudo-mystical "essence" in a material thing as Aristotle suggested. Epicurus' scientific conclusion was that such things do not exist.*

*"Let me conclude by saying that from the position of modern empirical science, the reality of nature is under no obligation to comply with unsound deduction (as DeWitt would say Epicurus*

*employed*). *Insisting on adhering to unsoundly deduced conclusions in Epicurean physics (e.g. swerve, infinity of universe, etc.) about reality (even if checked by our imperfect sensations) is deviating into the realm of the Platonic idealisms which you so vehemently detest.*" My issue with this conclusion is the same as throughout the discussion so far - you are not specifying what conclusions you are referring to. No one here is suggesting that science stands still and that we aren't going to incorporate new knowledge as our information improves. That was the entire point of my post. The issue we seem not to be joined on is the issue of what Epicurean philosophy is really all about. It is not at root a long list of specific scientific propositions that must always stand unaltered. It is rather a much higher-level outline of an approach to how to answer questions that appear to us to be unanswerable. It constitutes a framework for living as human beings to the best of our ability to understand our place in the universe and how that relates to the most important issues facing us, such as:

1 Is there a supernatural god?

2 Is there are realm of ideal forms / virtue to which we must conform?

3 Is there a "fate" which completely predetermines the course of our lives?

4 Is there a life after death in which we are punished or rewarded for our conduct?

- Given the answer to these questions being "no," then what in fact should we consider to be the guide of life? (feeling/pleasure-pain).

If a discovery in "science" were to invalidate one of the first four conclusions, which are ultimately based on Epicurean physics, then the entire philosophy would need to be discarded.

Unless you are reading the scientific literature differently than I am, there is no sound evidence whatsoever that any of the basic conclusions of Epicurean physics are incorrect. Surely it's great to use new words and new discoveries to explain how we reach the conclusions, but for probably 99% of humanity the issues of life come down to those conclusions, and what they and we need to always keep in mind is the big picture, without being worried that every improvement in microscopic technology is likely to cause any of these to need to be re-examined.

So ultimately I do not think we disagree, but I do think there are significant issues of presentation that are going to be very important for how these issues are discussed in audiences which are not tuned in to a highly technical conversation. There's certainly a place for those discussions, but context is always going to drive what is appropriate.