

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

Post by "Don" of August 16, 2020 at 10:19 AM

I have found this thread fascinating and greatly appreciate those who have participated. It has been enlightening and intellectually stimulating.

But...

1) Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans cannot be held to a modern standard of scientific accuracy and detail. They had no instruments, no experimentation (other than the most rudimentary processes). They didn't have the benefit of centuries of hypotheses and theories. They had no Newton, Einstein, Hawking, et al. Those scientists stood on the shoulders of the giants before them. The ancient philosophers were basically building the scaffold for the later giants to stand on, then the scaffold got wrecked by Christians and barbarians and had to be repaired before science could even become a thing.

2) The fact that Epicurus and his predecessors used the word [ἄτομος atomos "un-cuttable"](#) is, in some ways, unfortunate. The fact that the ancient term was repurposed by [John Dalton in 1805](#) entices us to place all our modern interpretations and discoveries backwards onto the ancient Greeks. "We use the same word, we must mean the same thing." While there are similarities between the modern "atom" and the ancient ἄτομος, they are not the same and we cannot impose a modern interpretation on the ancient term.

The same can be said about [φύσις physis](#) and [Physics](#), the modern sense being applied in 1715. Again, the similarities are there but only in the basic outlines. The ancients were attempting to explain "natural things." Modern physics has narrowed its focus and has had access to increasingly more sophisticated processes and equipment.

3) If we want to call ourselves Epicureans, we can't lose the vision of the forest for the trees. My perspective is that we have to focus on Epicurus's intent: The Universe is material. There are no supernatural causes. This, in turn, means there is no existence after death. I fully realize that's overly simplified, but I think we hold Epicurus to an unrealistic standard if we insist on fitting an Epicurean φύσις peg into a quantum physics hole. We can muse over the similarities and be impressed with what Epicurus had glimpses of from his observations and reasonings. But I think we have to, as Illka mentioned above, cut the ancients some slack.