

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

[Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"](#)



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

Post by “Cassius” of June 3, 2020 at 9:41 AM

[Note: This is such an important topic that I am going to try to preserve some of the most helpful comments here in this thread, even if they are posted elsewhere like this one.]

Charles: Good to know that Sedley is identifying which brand of determinism that Epicurus is so strongly against, though it wouldn't be too far to include pleasure and desire within that sphere of "atomic billiard balls", in which case it would then serve as a good rebuttal to our pons asinorum problem that's so common with the 18th Century French Epicureans.

Cassius: Charles there is a lot in this article, and I personally have a hard time sorting through all the different "brands of determinism" that are out there. To me, perhaps the key aspect of this article is to observe how Epicurus avoids the "reductionism" that some take as a necessary application or implication of atomism. While everything is ultimately composed of atoms and void, that is not the same as saying that the emergent properties that arise from atoms and void [such as we ourselves] are themselves equivalent in every respect to their constituent atoms. The article contains a lot of details about this perspective which are well worth reading, because this issue applies on so many levels, probably not only skepticism, as referenced in the graphic I include, but to all types of "nihilism."

Post by “Cassius” of June 3, 2020 at 10:20 AM

Another comment: The information in this article has implications far beyond the often-tedious and never-ending arguments about "determinism vs free will." What's really being discussed here is how we can integrate in our minds that we are in fact made up of combinations of atoms and void, without concluding erroneously from that observation that we're no more than dirt. People think that atomism leads to nihilism, and it can definitely be used that way in the wrong hands, but that's not Epicurus. Epicurus observes the workings of the atoms and the void and doesn't end up with a despairing scream, but with an understanding of the reverse, that life is too precious to waste in confusion about the true nature of things and by giving in to fantasies about the way we might *wish* the world would be.

The information contained here could just as well lead to an article entitled "Epicurus' Refutation of Skepticism and Nihilism."

Key terms and categories of the Epicurean argument: "Self-Refuting" and "Untenable in Practice." That's Determinism, That's Skepticism, and that's Nihilism.

Post by “Cassius” of June 3, 2020 at 10:34 AM

TH:

General comment. wrote it before there are two ways to approach free will:

1) brain vs mind. in that case free will is an illusion (because there is no such thing as the "mind")

2) brain vs the world. in that case free will exists because the world is bigger than the brain and each moment the brain must choose a way to function.

Emergence is the invention of atheists to replace god 😄

Cassius Amicus:

As I understand the use of the term "emergence," Theo, it is simply being used as a placeholder to describe that on our level of function we observe these things to be true, without offering any explanation of the precise mechanism or relationship with the underlying atoms. I believe that to be the point that Sedley is making in the article, drawing on the statements of Epicurus. It's not necessary to use the word "emergence" and I am sure alternatives could be better. But the basic point of the argument in the article is that what is being described is something (the world of our senses) is very real to us in our functioning as humans/animals, and not a fantasy such as the religious arguments for the supernatural.

Post by “Cassius” of June 3, 2020 at 10:38 AM

Moderation comment that hopefully isn't necessary here: Theo raised a general point about use of the word "emergent" that should be addressed. However as a caution as the thread continues, please let's try to keep the discussion focused around the arguments raised by Epicurus and Sedley in the article. A back and forth repetition of the general arguments used in the debate over "free will" won't be as helpful as if we read and discuss the points in the article.

Another aspect of this discussion that IS relevant is the physics observations on the relationship between the eternal properties of the atoms themselves vs the qualities of the bodies which arise from combinations of atoms and void. This is discussed in book one of Lucretius and probably elsewhere too:

[420] All nature therefore, in itself considered, is one of these, is body or is space, in which all things are placed, and from which the various motions of all beings spring. That there is body common sense will show, this as a fundamental truth must be allowed, or there is nothing we can fix as certain in our pursuit of hidden things, by which to find the Truth, or prove it when 'tis found. Then if there were no place or space, we call it void, bodies would have no where to be, nor could they move at all, as we have fully proved to you before.

[431] Besides, there is nothing you can strictly say, "It is neither body nor void," which you may call a third degree of things distinct from these. For every being must in quantity be more or less; and if it can be touched, though ne'er so small or light, it must be body, and so esteemed; but if it can't be touched, and has not in itself a power to stop the course of other bodies as they pass, this is the void we call an empty space.

[439] Again, whatever is must either act itself, or be by other agents acted on; or must be something in which other bodies must have a place and move; but nothing without body can act, or be acted on; and where can this be done, but in a vacuum or empty space? Therefore, beside what body is or space, no third degree in nature can be found, nothing that ever can affect our sense, or by the power of thought can be conceived. All other things you'll find essential conjuncts, or else the events or accidents of these. I call essential conjunct what's so joined to a thing that it cannot, without fatal violence, be forced or parted from it; is weight to stones, to fire heat, moisture to the Sea, touch to all bodies, and not to be touched essential is to void. But, on the contrary, Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like, which not affect the nature of the thing, but when they come or go, the thing remains entire; these, as it is fit we should, we call Events.

[460] Time likewise of itself is nothing; our sense collects from things themselves what has been done long since, the thing that present is, and what's to come. For no one, we must own, ever thought of Time distinct from things in motion or at rest.

[465] For when the poets sing of Helen's rape, or of the Trojan State subdued by war, we must not say that these things do exist now in themselves, since Time, irrevocably past, has long since swept away that race of men that were the cause of those events; for every act is either properly the event of things, or of the places where those things are done.

[472] Further, if things were not of matter formed, were there no place or space where things might act, the fire that burned in Paris' heart, blown up by love of Helen's beauty, had never raised the famous contests of a cruel war; nor had the wooden horse set Troy on fire, discharging from his belly in the night the armed Greeks: from whence you plainly see that actions do not of themselves subsist, as bodies do, nor are in nature such as is a void, but rather are more justly called the events of body, and of space, where things are carried on.