

Episode 168 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 21 - Chapter 10 - The New Freedom 01

Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2023 at 3:17 PM

Welcome to Episode 168 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

We are now in the process of a series of podcasts intended to provide a general overview of Epicurean philosophy based on the organizational structure employed by Norman DeWitt in his book "Epicurus and His Philosophy."

This week we begin our discussion of Chapter 10, entitled "The New Freedom."

- Choosing And Avoiding
- The Double Choice
- Freedom And Necessity
- Necessity And Fortune

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 7:28 PM

A famous text we will likely include tomorrow: Cassius to Brutus:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world

Like a Colossus, and we petty men

Walk under his huge legs and peep about

To find ourselves dishonorable graves.

Men at some time are masters of their fates.

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

[Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene II \[Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world\] by William Shakespeare - Poems | poets.org](#)

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/53450489>

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 9:49 PM

EPICURUS' REFUTATION OF DETERMINISM

35

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.

nely well in "Epicurus'

Thread

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

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...



Cassius

June 3, 2020 at 8:43 AM

It is in this article that Sedley says that the swerve of the atom was likely not deduced from its necessity in cosmos-building but from its use in combating determinism:

accuracy (Lucretius II 246-50).
I do not propose to expend much discussion on the swerve's cosmogonical function (Lucretius II 216-42), which I suspect to be a problem dreamed up with a preconceived solution in mind. Chains of atomic collisions in extra-cosmic space could have quite adequately been explained by the lateral intrusion of one or more atoms from elsewhere, despatched, say, by the break-up of a nearby world. The question of how such collisions ever started in the first place would not arise, given the infinity of past time and past worlds. That is, indeed, the view strongly implied by the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Letter to Pythocles*,⁹ the physical epitomes which Epicurus wrote when he had already worked out his main cosmological views in Books I-XIII of his *On nature*. Since these two works also contain no hint of the swerve doctrine, the likelihood is that it was his later work on psychology, apparently in the closing books of the thirty-seven book magnum opus, that led him to the innovation, and that it was only then grafted onto the existing cosmological scheme.⁹

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 10:09 PM

This is a particularly clear statement by Sedley of Epicurus' core argument:

The opening challenge, *περικάτω ... ὁ ... λόγος τρέπεται*, is peculiar Epicurean jargon for what other philosophers came to express as *περιτρέπεται*. Determinism 'refutes itself'. As Burnyeat has beautifully demonstrated, there is a close parallel at the start of Lucretius' anti-sceptic argument, where the sceptic who claims that nothing is known is a man who (IV 472) «has stood with his own head where his feet belong» — clearly Lucretius' imaginative rendering of *περικάτω τρέπεται*.²⁴ Indeed, 'turn a somersault' could conceivably be the metaphor underlying Epicurus' choice of term. In both passages it is a pragmatic self-refutation that is envisaged.²⁵ There is no internal logical inconsis-

tency in either the sceptic or the determinist position. But to defend scepticism is to presuppose that the premisses of one's arguments are known; and to defend determinism is to treat the parties to the debate as undetermined agents.

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 10:23 PM

Hard to overstate how critical this paragraph is:

As Sedley says, Epicurus rejects "reductionist atomism," in favor of the common sense perspective: **"that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter, but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."**

Epicurus' response to this is perhaps the least appreciated aspect of his thought. It was to reject reductionist atomism. Almost uniquely among Greek philosophers he arrived at what is nowadays the unreflective assumption of almost anyone with a smattering of science, that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter; but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth. (The truth that sugar is sweet is not straightforwardly reducible to the truth that it has such and such a molecular structure, even though the latter truth may be required in order to explain the former). By establishing that cognitive scepticism, the direct outcome of reductionist atomism, is self-refuting and untenable in practice, Epicurus justifies his non-reductionist alternative, according to which sensations are true and there are therefore *bona fide* truths at the phenomenal level accessible through them. The same will apply to the *πάθη*, which Epicurus also held to be veridical. Pleasure, for example, is a direct datum of experience. It is commonly assumed that Epicurus must have equated pleasure with such and such a kind of movement of soul atoms; but although he will have taken it to have some *explanation* at the atomic level, I know of no evidence that he, any more than most moral philosophers or psychologists, would have held that an adequate *analysis* of it could be found at that level. Physics are strikingly absent from Epicurus' ethical writings, and it is curious that interpreters are so much readier to import them there than they are when it comes to the moral philosophy of Plato or Aristotle.⁴²

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 10:29 PM

An important cite to Lucretius to include in this discussion:

make-up may be responsible for disorderly motion in their mind atoms (10-11),⁵¹ but it does not follow that they cannot make decisions which override those motions. One is reminded here Lucretius' insistence that even though the atomic composition of the mind at birth determines an animal's natural temperament, nothing prevents our learning to overcome that temperament.⁵² Even the natural coward, Epicurus would say, can use his rationality to learn courage.

Shortly after the lacuna, the relationship of 'developments' to the self's responsibility is amplified. Implicitly, at birth we *are* just atomic mechanisms. The self becomes responsible as soon as the animal develops a certain type of characteristic

⁴⁹ Cf. text quoted in note 18 above. It is not clear what the hallmark of a 'wild' animal is, but it is a good bet that the term covers the same ones as are picked out in *RS XXXII* as incapable of forming a social contract and hence beyond the realm of justice and injustice. The comparison with *RS XXXII* (as also that with Lucretius II 251-93) supports my assumption that ζῷα are the unspecified neuter subject. Cf. also P.M. HUBY, *The Epicureans, animals, and freewill*, «Apeiron» 3 (1969), pp. 17-19.

⁵⁰ For another Epicurean appeal to the non-identity of our conscious selves with our constituent atoms, see Lucretius III 847-61.

⁵¹ Glenn Most has persuaded me that it is more natural to take ἐξέλιθς (10) as referring back to φύσις (8) than to αἰτίαν (10), as I originally thought. (On the latter reading 10-12 would be making almost the same point as 18-20).

⁵² Lucr. III 288-322.

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2023 at 10:52 PM

VS09. Necessity is an evil, but [there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity](#).

VS40. The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity

Post by "Don" of April 2, 2023 at 3:00 PM

During the episode, I expressed my misgivings/frustrations about the stock phrase "choice and avoidance." Avoiding, avoid, and avoidance have always struck me as [milquetoast](#) words. It reminds me of stepping around a mud puddle. "I avoided getting my foot wet."

Epicurus specific words are in the title of the work that laid out his thoughts on these actions: Περὶ αἰρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν. (Peri haireseon kai phugon). First, let's get the LSJ definitions on the table:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, αἴρεσις](#)

αἴρεσις (hairesis) does mean "choice" but the connotation for me is much more active than just "choosing": "purpose, course of action or thought" Interestingly enough, it can also refer to the "taking" of a town by an army. It connotes for me an active process, not just a casual "choosing" what one has for dinner. I can live with "choice, choosing" but want to keep that active connotation in mind.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φεύγω](#)

φεύγω is what I really dislike translated as "avoidance." The first LSJ definition is "flee, take flight." If αἴρεσις is the taking of a town, φεύγω is fleeing or retreating. LSJ states that it is the opposite of διώκω which it "pursue or chase." *A form of that word shows up in VS46:*

We cast off common customs just as we would do to wicked men who have been causing great harm for a long time.

τὰς φαύλας συνηθείας ὥσπερ ἄνδρας πονηροὺς πολὺν χρόνον μέγα βλάψαντες τελείως ἐκδιώκομεν.

ἐκδιώκομεν in this context means "to chase away, banish." So, φεύγω would refer to those being chased or being banished.

So, in keeping with my active sense of αἴρεσις, I see the same for φεύγω. It's not just a casual avoidance or avoiding, it is an active fleeing, taking flight (as in Gandalf's telling the Fellowship "Fly, you fools!" as he fell in Moria), or escaping from something. True, LSJ includes "avoid" but down the list and in the context of all those other active words.

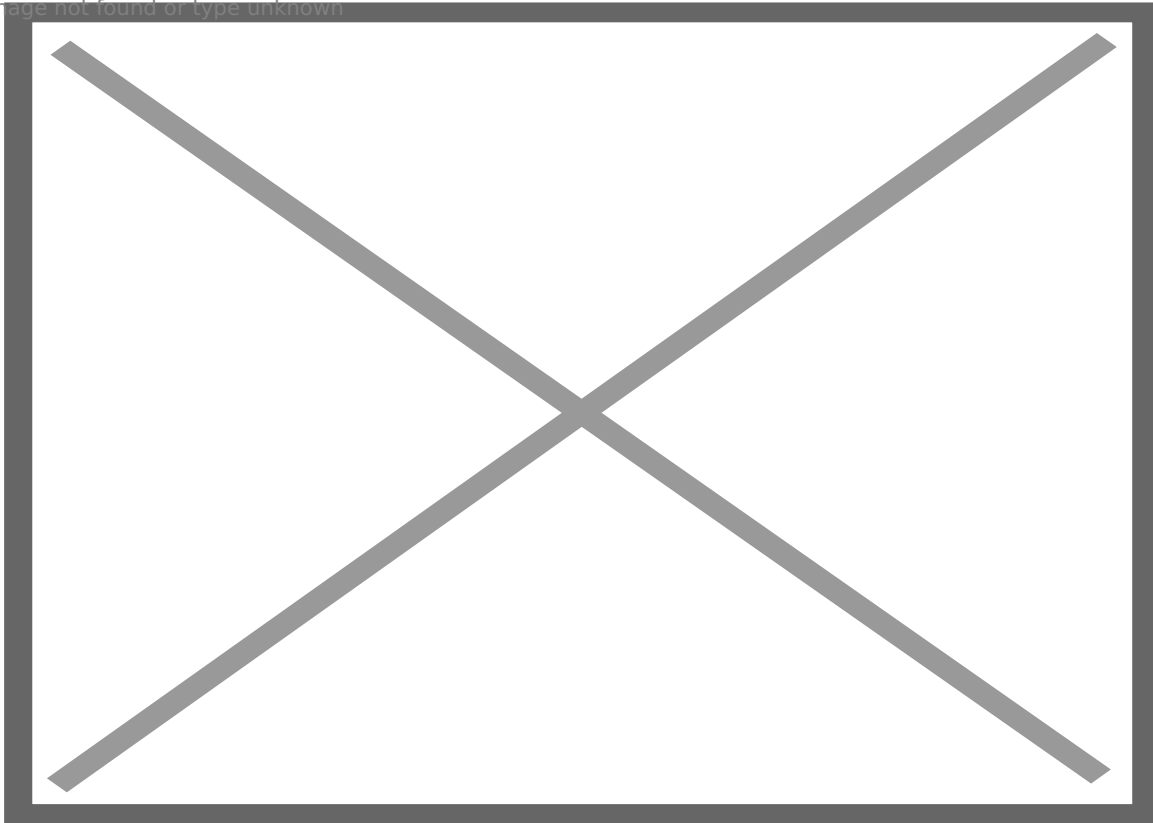
So, I much prefer, if I were to translate Epicurus's book Περὶ αἰρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν (and subsequent mentions of the practice) as "Concerning Choice and Flight" or "Choice and Escape" or "Pursuit and Escape" or something more active than "Choice and 'Avoidance'." You'll often see me use "choice or rejection" on the forum, but I would prefer to use one of those other translations.

Post by "Don" of April 2, 2023 at 5:02 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/>

For your consideration...

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[How a Flawed Experiment “Proved” That Free Will Doesn’t Exist](#)

It did no such thing—but the result has become conventional wisdom nevertheless
blogs.scientificamerican.com

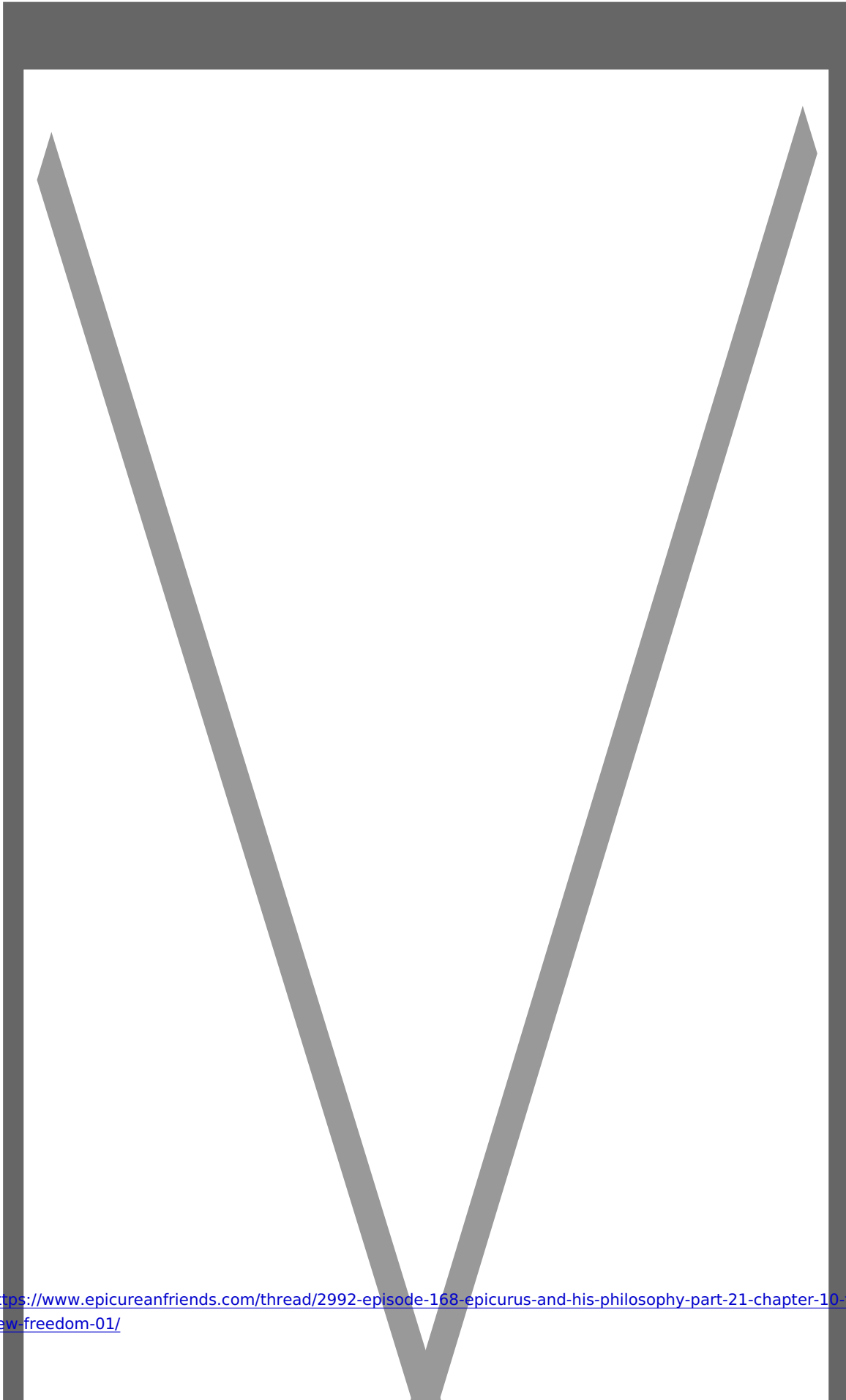
<https://youtu.be/Ry7hjt5Gi-E>

Post by “Don” of April 2, 2023 at 8:47 PM

Oh, and the table referred to in the episode: Determinism vs Fatalism

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/>

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[Determinism vs. Fatalism - InfoGraphic \(a comparison\)](#)

I've been seeing the confusion between two different "no free will" positions crop up a lot recently - Determinism and Fatalism. Needless to say these aren't...

breakingthefreewillillusion.com

Post by "Cassius" of April 3, 2023 at 12:49 PM

There is a great deal of good information, which leads to explanation of why Epicurus disagreed with Democritus on a number of key things, in this article:

[Democritus \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

The article points out that there is a lot of controversy about what Democritus was really saying, but to the extent that he was interpreted to be saying that things which we perceive at the macroscopic level are "unreal," it is easy to see why Epicurus would object to that. Sedley's summary that Epicurus was holding that there are two levels - microscopic and macroscopic for shorthand - and that neither level has a monopoly on truth seems to me to be pretty good phrasing of Epicurus's position.

Quotes from the article:

He famously denies that perceptible qualities other than shape and size (and, perhaps, weight) really exist in the atoms themselves: one direct quotation surviving from Democritus claims that 'by convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void' (DK 68B9, trans. Taylor 1999a).

While several reports of Democritus' view, apparently direct quotations, mention exclusively sensible qualities as being unreal, a report of Plutarch includes in the list of things that exist only by convention the notion of 'combination' or *sunthesis*. If this report is genuinely Democritean, it would broaden the scope of the claim considerably: the idea that any combination—by which he presumably means any cluster of atoms—is 'unreal' or merely 'conventional' suggests that Democritus is drawing a more radical distinction than that between sensible and nonsensible qualities. The implication would be that anything perceived, because it is a perception of combinations of atoms and not atoms themselves, would be suspect, not merely the qualia experienced by means of individual sense organs. One report indeed attributes to Democritus a denial that two things could become one, or vice versa (DK 68A42), thus suggesting that combinations are regarded as conventional.

However, Furley concedes that Plutarch at least understands the earliest atomists to be committed to the view that all combinations of atoms, as much as sensible qualities, should be understood as conventional rather than real (Furley 1993 pp. 76-7n7). This would suggest that everything at the macroscopic level—or, strictly, everything available to perception—is regarded as unreal.

Post by “Cassius” of April 5, 2023 at 6:08 AM

While editing this episode I want to highlight Don's comment to the effect that the words "choosing and avoiding" probably do not adequately convey the "action" quality of what is being discussed. In English, both words (and maybe particularly "avoiding") carry a subtle implication of a sort of detached or hesitant quality. Don used the example that avoiding sounds mundane, as in avoiding a mud puddle. Another example that comes to my mind is that it sounds like someone walking slowly past a buffet of food daintily picking an olive here or avoiding a cheese there.

Don makes the point that these words probably carry in the Greek a more intense quality - like "fleeing" or even "rejecting" and that he prefers "choose and reject" to 'choose and avoid.'

I am not sure I really picked up this point in the times that Don has brought it up in the past but hearing the point spoken was more effective in causing me to appreciate it, and it definitely sounds right to me. There's an intensity to Epicurus that can be easy to miss given the associations of the word "pleasure" and I think Don is clearly right.

Post by “Cassius” of April 5, 2023 at 8:25 AM

Episode 168 Is Now Available! Don joins us again as we begin our discussion of Chapter 10

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/53450489>

Post by “Godfrey” of April 5, 2023 at 9:30 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/>

Well done discussing emergent properties: I kept wanting to raise my hand and say "what about emergent properties!?" That seems to be the bridge between atomic scale and everyday living scale, and I think that it goes beyond the leaf v stone example and applies more on the level of consciousness. Which might make the smaller, lighter atoms involved in the swerve the key bridge for Epicurus.

This idea also, in my mind, breaks any connection between determinism at the atomic level in that I see emergent properties as potentially unpredictable.

The book Atomic Habits, by James Clear, is a book on habits and not philosophy. But to some degree it addresses determinism by discussing that our habits are determined by our environment. However, a key idea of the book is that we can take control of our habits by modifying our environment.

Great podcast and I look forward to part 2!

Post by "Cassius" of April 5, 2023 at 9:39 PM

Godfrey I am going to reread that Sedley article before next week. Have you read that and the new text that he quotes from Epicurus?

Post by "Godfrey" of April 5, 2023 at 10:58 PM

I may have read it some time ago, but I'm not sure. Sounds like a good one.

Post by "Godfrey" of April 6, 2023 at 1:20 AM

Brilliant article! Lots to chew on in there.

Post by "Cassius" of April 6, 2023 at 3:57 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/>

Yes it is very good. The parallel arguments against both determinism and skepticism are fascinating and I think powerful.

Post by “Don” of April 6, 2023 at 4:11 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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Display More

Here's a little more on the "choice and avoidance" commentary from above:

Περὶ (+ genitive) = "about, concerning, because of"

αἰρέσεων = genitive plural form of αἴρεσις

φυγῶν = genitive plural form of φύγη

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φυγή](#)

I find it interesting that αἰρέσεων can refer to the taking of a town in battle, and φυγῶν flight in battle. There's a metaphorical war going on when you make "choices and 'avoidances'" which is why I'm encouraging a more active English word.

Look at other uses of φύγη other than Epicurus in LSJ definition 2. "flight or escape from a thing, avoidance of it":

- Aeschylus, Suppliant Women 395: Chorus: I am determined *to flee to escape* this marriage that offends my soul,...

- Sophocles, Antigone 364: Chorus: From Death alone he shall procure no escape, but from baffling diseases he has devised *flights.*

- Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus 280: Oedipus: But rather consider that they look on the god-fearing man [280] and on the godless, and that never yet has an impious man found *escape.*

-Euripides, Helen 799: Helen: Here, as a suppliant, I am asking for an *escape* from his bed.

- also cites Philodemus in P.Herc.1251.11 (peri haireseon kai phygon, i.e., his book of the same title as Epicurus's); opp. δῶξις, Epicur.Sent.25. (see above for comment on δῶξις)

Here's P.Herc.1251. Column 11 with line numbers:

[] -ca.?- []ντελο[] -ca.?- []

[-ca.?-]ναιτου[-ca.?-]
πα[.....]α καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δ[ῆ-]
λον [ἔτ]ι τῶν κ[α]κοπραγι[ῶν ἐ-]
5 [κ]εῖνω[ν] ἔξω κ[ακ]ίστ[ους] εἶν[αι· δ]
[διὰ] τὰ π[ε]ρὶ τῶ[ν] τεττάρω[ν εἰ-]
[ρ]ημένα λέγεται, το[ῦ] τῆ[ν] περί-]
ληψιν τὴν περὶ τῶν κυρι[ωτ]ά-
[τ]ων καὶ τὴν μνήνην π[ολ-]
10 λὰ συμβάλλεσθαι πρὸς τὰς
οὔσας αἰρέσεις καὶ φυγὰς οὐ-
κ ἴσους τιθεμένου, καθάπερ
ἔξεδέξαντό τινες ἀγροί-
κως, τῶι τινὰς ἀναφέρουσ-
15 θαι τῶν αἰρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν
ἐπὶ τὰς περὶ τούτων ἀτα-
ραξίας, ἀλλὰ τῶι κ[α]τ[ρο]ρθοῦσ-
θαι μὲν αὐτὰς τοῖς τέλεσι
τοῖς τῆς φύσεως παραμε-
20 τ[ρ]ούντων, πολλὰ δὲ [τ]ῶν
[..]τ[α][..]α[τ]ας[.....]τ[ι].]εν

PS. The Epicur.Sent.25 refers to [PD25](#)...

[PD25](#). If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether to ****avoid or pursue**** something, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony.

εἰ μὴ παρὰ πάντα καιρὸν ἐπανοίσεις ἕκαστον τῶν πραττομένων ἐπὶ τὸ τέλος τῆς φύσεως, ἀλλὰ προκαταστρέψεις εἴτε ****φυγὴν εἴτε δίωξιν**** ποιούμενος εἰς ἄλλο τι, οὐκ ἔσονταί σοι τοῖς λόγοις αἰ πράξεις ἀκόλουθοι.

Seems to me a better translation there would be "flee or pursue" or "escape or pursue" not milquetoast "avoid" since δῶξις is the opposite of φυγή.

Post by "Cassius" of April 6, 2023 at 6:40 AM

I hope we can do it this coming weekend when Don joins us again, but to repeat I really want to bring out Sedley's point about the logical inconsistencies (I think I recall) being involved in those who argue that knowledge is impossible and those who argue that all things are necessary.

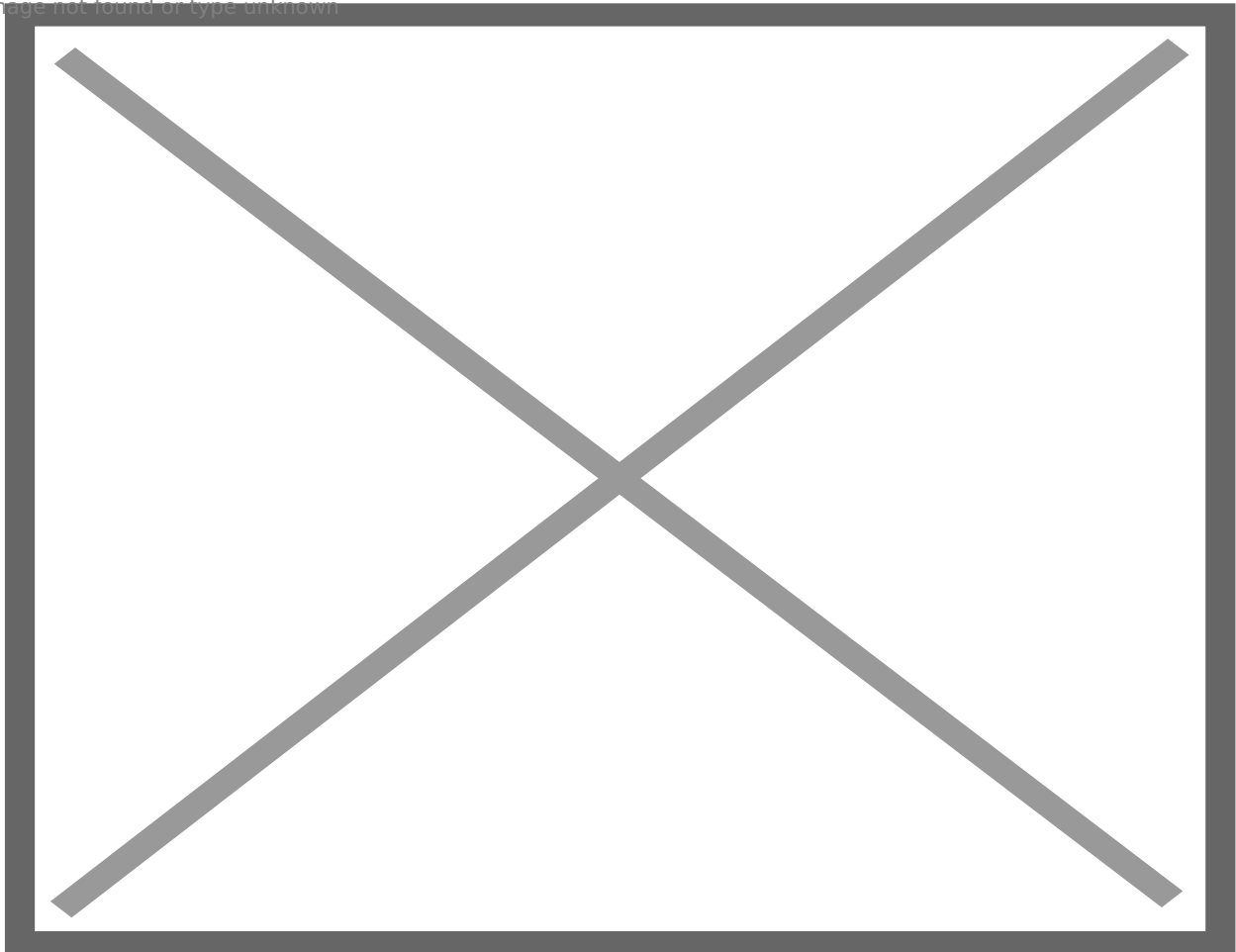
It seems to me that Sedley goes a long way toward making these clear and if we can do the same then bringing this argument to the forefront would be a big accomplishment toward nailing things down on these issues.

Along with the point about how emergent bodies can themselves affect the atoms (and therefore illustrate how "free will" can operate) making these points a regular point of discussion would help a lot on many issues.

Post by "Cassius" of April 8, 2023 at 6:51 AM

Don posted this in a private conversation and it is an excellent article! The author's answer is "No!"

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[Does Quantum Mechanics Rule Out Free Will?](#)

Superdeterminism, a radical quantum hypothesis, says our “choices” are illusory
www.scientificamerican.com

Post by “Don” of April 8, 2023 at 7:57 AM

Here's the compatibilist perspective from Sean Carroll:

<https://youtu.be/rohgVwQ57uM>

Post by “Don” of April 8, 2023 at 7:59 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2992-episode-168-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-21-chapter-10-the-new-freedom-01/>

And here's a variety of perspectives: Dennett, Kaku, Sapolsky, Pinker, et al...

<https://youtu.be/3O61I0pNPg8>