

Epicurus' Rejection of "Reductionist Atomism" (And The Related Issues of Skepticism and Determinism)

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

This is an important topic that bleeds over into epistemology / canonicity, but given how closely it is related to atomism it needs a thread here. I will try to go through the forum and crossreference threads to Democritus' statement about "...in reality, only atoms and void..." and why Epicurus would not have accepted this viewpoint. At the moment, one of the best discussions of this is in [David Sedley's "Epicurus's Refutation of Determinism"](#).

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."**

nents to be the later followers with whom the first atomists are favourably contrasted in 59-61.³⁷ The same possibility seems implicit in some remarks of Diogenes of Oenoanda, who attacks not Democritus himself but those who adopt Democritus' thesis of universal necessitation unmodified by the Epicurean swerve.³⁸

In confirmation of this, we can return to the close and apparently conscious parallelism between Epicurus' treatments of determinism and scepticism. The sceptics refuted in Lucretius IV must be, or prominently include, those fourth-century Democriteans like Metrodorus of Chios, Anaxarchus, and even Epicurus' own reviled teacher Nausiphanes, who had played up the sceptical side of Democritus' thought, and against whom Epicurus was eager to marshal the positive empiricist arguments which Democritus had also bequeathed.³⁹ This scepticism was the result of what I shall call reductionist atomism. Because phenomenal objects and properties seemed to reduce to mere configurations of atoms and void, Democritus was inclined to suppose that the atoms and void were real while the phenomenal objects and properties were no more than arbitrary constructions placed upon them by human cognitive organs.⁴⁰ In his more extreme moods Democritus was even inclined to doubt the power of human judgment, since judgment was itself no more than a realignment of atoms in the mind (*ἐπιρυσμίη*).⁴¹

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 13, 2023 at 8:48 AM

This is an important topic that bleeds over into epistemology / canonics, but given how closely it is related to atomism it needs a thread here. I will try to go through the forum and collect threads or references to Democritus' statement about "...in reality, only atoms and void..." and why Epicurus would not have accepted this viewpoint. At the moment, one of the best discussions of this is in David Sedley's "Epicurus's Refutation of Determinism" which we will also link here.

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2023 at 8:51 AM

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 *sunkrisis*. 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 13, 2023 at 8:52 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3007-epicurus-rejection-of-reductionist-atomism-and-the-related-issues-of-skepticism/>

This topic is discussed in the threads for podcast 168 and 169, especially 168:

Post

[RE: Episode 168 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 21 - Chapter 10 - The New Freedom 01](#)

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:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/>

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Cassius

April 3, 2023 at 12:49 PM

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 13, 2023 at 10:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"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)."

What comes to mind for me is that this claim by Democritus is slightly similar but yet different to the Buddhist "Two Truths" which according to a Tricycle article is: "The doctrine of two truths—the absolute and the relative—holds that there are two ways of viewing the world: as things appear to be, and as they are. In other words, existence is both relative (or conventional) and absolute. The relative or conventional explanation of reality is what we know and experience, while the ultimate or absolute truth is inexpressible, [empty](#) (*sunya*), and lies

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outside of conventional experience and language. The conventional truth about something is its dependence on conditions. The ultimate truth is its emptiness. This doctrine has its roots in the words of the historical Buddha, who acknowledged that some experiences, in particular nirvana, lie beyond the ability of language to describe."[\(Source\)](#)

I confess that I would need to read more of the Sedley article and a lot more on this to fully understand what Epicurus' stance was. I personally reject any idea of "two truths" (no matter the source) because it leads to meaninglessness and passivity. Yet there is one thing that I do hold to be true which is that the use of language is conventional, and that we must always take that into consideration - language is just a symbol pointing toward reality and it is not reality. Is there any indication of this in Epicurus, that language is understood as conventional?

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2023 at 10:27 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[..in Buddhism..] The ultimate truth is its emptiness.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I personally reject any idea of "two truths" (no matter the source) because it leads to meaninglessness and passivity.

Yes, that is the point. And as Dewitt says in the chapter we are discussing in the podcast right now, to a moral reformer like Epicurus, skepticism and determinism, which go hand in hand with meaningless and passivity, have to be exposed as illogical and denounced as unacceptable:

"To [Epicurus] as a moral reformer two things ranked foremost as abominations, skepticism and physical determinism."

"In the domain of physics the charge of ingratitude is aggravated because the sin is against Democritus. "What is there in the Physics of Epicurus that is not from Democritus?" demands Cicero, and elsewhere he says: "What he changes he seems to spoil." Incidentally, every offense that was charged to Epicurus seemed more heinous than those of others. The defection of Epicurus from the teachings of Democritus, however, is almost wholly in the domain of ethics. To him as a moral reformer two things ranked foremost as abominations, skepticism and physical determinism. To such moral indignation Nausiphanes seems to have been immune; even if he rejected Pyrrhonian skepticism, this need not mean that he became alert to the evil

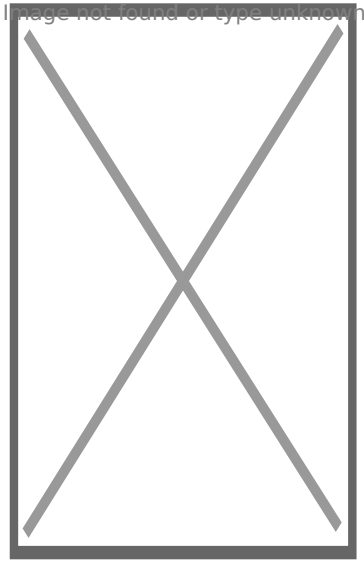
of skepticism in general. To Epicurus he seemed insensate. The pupil was advancing beyond the teacher.

As for Democritus himself, he committed himself to a certain degree of skepticism when he declared "atoms and void to be the only existences and all else to exist by convention." ⁴⁵ This, however, was only individual skepticism, which did not prevent him from practicing cheerfulness (*euthumia*) any more than Pyrrho was prevented from enjoying indifference. To Epicurus, on the contrary, belief or disbelief had become a matter of morals and the happiness of mankind. He was incapable of taking comfort in a negative attitude, as did Democritus and Pyrrho. Thus he was compelled by the inward urge to become a pragmatist as well as a dogmatist and to insist that knowledge must not only be possible but also have relevance to action and to happiness. In this matter none of his teachers had set him an example.

"A second ground of his defection from Democritus was physical determinism. Determinism is not offensive to intellectuals, but to moral reformers it is neither conceivable nor tolerable. Moral reform is synonymous with the experience of conversion, and conversion presumes freedom of the will. To Democritus the prime and only causation in the universe was the motion of the atoms. In this motion there was no deviation, no freedom possible. It constituted an absolute determinism. In order to open an escape from this intolerable physical necessity Epicurus postulated sufficient play in the motion of the atoms to permit of freedom of the will. Thus he introduced into the sum of things a new cause, human volition, which was to him at one and the same time a necessity of thought and a necessity of action. This innovation may not be commendable in physics, but ethical considerations had become paramount and in ethics the desired end had been served by the innovation. For this invention he was in debt to no teacher."

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2023 at 1:48 PM

I was tracing down one of Sedley's footnotes as to Democritus and it appears that for citing Democritus he is using a collection from [Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. : Hermann Diels; Walther Kranz :](#)



[Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. : Hermann Diels; Walther Kranz : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Berlin : Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959-60.
archive.org

I haven't had time to see whether there is an English equivalent but it sure looks like this would be a nice collection to find. Maybe there is a collection at Attalus.org.

The cite Sedley refers to is from that work at 68 B 7; cf. B 9, which Sedley implies contains essentially this argument as self-refuting on skepticism:

"The argument is essentially that of J.B.S. HALDANE, Possible Worlds (London 1927), p. 209: «If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true ... and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms ». (I think it was Bob Sharples who first drew my attention to this passage)."

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2023 at 4:25 PM

From the [inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda](#):

Fr. 54

...

If anyone adopts Democritus' theory and asserts that because of their collisions with one another the atoms have no free movement, and that consequently it appears that all motions

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3007-epicurus-rejection-of-reductionist-atomism-and-the-related-issues-of-skepticism/>

are determined by necessity, we shall say to him: «Do you [not] know, whoever you are, that there is actually a free movement in the atoms, which Democritus failed to discover, but Epicurus brought to light, —a swerving movement, as he proves from phenomena?» The most important consideration is this: if fate is believed in, all admonition and censure are nullified, and not even the wicked [can be justly punished, since they are not responsible for their sins.]

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2023 at 4:32 PM

While mentioning Diogenes of Oinoanda, here is the fragment that includes the "Who will choose to seek what he can never find?" argument that to me seems very powerful in the context of this discussion.

Who will seek knowledge of any kind if he is convinced that knowledge is impossible?

Who will seek to be free of the supernatural gods or of fear of death or pain of any kind if he is convinced that everything happens by necessity?

Here's the fragment:

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2023 at 4:39 PM

I do not think it would be going too far to assert that in fighting against skepticism and determinism Epicurus realized those doctrines ultimately deny the validity - the reality - of the world revealed to us by our senses (and our feelings and prolepsis).

Since the world revealed to us by our senses / feelings / prolepsis is the only one we have, and the only one we are ever going to have, few doctrines could be so destructive of human happiness than these.

They can't be left in the category of "Too complicated - I don't know."

It seems to me that Epicurus was emphasizing that we should place them in the category of "incorrect - wrong" - and that given the arguments we already have, no "waiting" is required for us to consider those theories as invalid and harmful.

And as we mentioned in the most recent podcast, given how many times this issue is hammered over and over in the letter to Menoeceus, in Lucretius, in Diogenes of Oinoanda, and in other places in the texts we still have, it seems a reasonable conclusion that refutation of determinism and skepticism deserves to be considered at the very core of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “TauPhi” of April 13, 2023 at 9:58 PM

Considering determinism as harmful or destructive is giving it too much power. I don't think it's such a powerful concept. If this is fallacy on my behalf, feel free to point it out but let me explain how I see it.

From Epicurean perspective, wouldn't it be more accurate to consider determinism similar to death? These should be nothing to us as we simply cannot experience them.

You mentioned that '[...] the world revealed to us by our senses / feelings / prolepsis is the only one we have, and the only one we are ever going to have [...]'. I see it exactly the same way. As humans, we perceive time linearly. There's no other way for us. Therefore, it doesn't make any difference if the world is deterministic or non-deterministic. We always experience it in non-deterministic way. Whether free will is objectively true or not, it is true to us. Even if we are automata, we're not able to experience autopilot mode.

To be clear, I'm not advocating for determinism. Not in the slightest. I'm just making a point that determinism seems to be like death. These concepts can be harmful only if we allow them to be by thinking about them in a way that make our lives unpleasant. In reality, we all experience free will in our lives. Then we die and we don't.

Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2024 at 2:12 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Considering determinism as harmful or destructive is giving it too much power. I don't think it's such powerful concept. If this is fallacy on my behalf, feel free to point it out but let me explain how I see it.

I was looking for something else today and came across this. Given the recent discussions with Onenski, Tau Phi, are you of the same opinion today? 😊