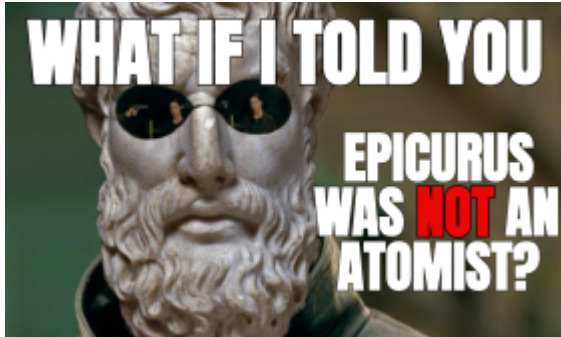


Epicurus Was Not an Atomist (...sort of)

Post by "Eikadistes" of December 22, 2025 at 2:24 PM



Greetings, all! I [published some thoughts](#) about the limitations in our employment of the word "atomism" as an expression of ancient Epicurean particle physics. I'll admit that I might be splitting hairs here, and exploiting a post-structuralist position about the symbols and their context ... I read a lot of Derrida back in college. I apologize in advance. 😊

In a nutshell:

- The notions of "atomism" and "ancient Epicurean particle physics" can be contrasted for nuance.
- "Atomism" in its context can be understood as an artifact of Renaissance Latin (it carries *some* prejudices).
- For most of the modernity, "corpuscularians" rejected "atomism" as "Epicurean atheism" (...super confusing)
- Fun fact! The root of "atomism" (the "tomism" part) is *also* used as a synonym for "particles" (*without the "a-"*).
- Ancient "atoms" correspond better with "sub-atomic" particles than modern "atoms".
- Consider that all of the "atomists" are, *also*, technically "voidists" so far as they are "atomists".
- Particles are described like motes of dust, grains of cereal, and hooklets on flower seeds, not mathematical points.
- How about them *apeirons*, *microns*, and *ametabletons*?
- Avoid "ismizing" in the first place! We are students of "the true philosophy" who contemplate "invisible beginnings".

But, like always, no one gets penalty points for saying "atomists" (I've always been partial to the designation "atom-prophets"). Nor is it a party foul to employ "Epicureanism" instead of "Epicurean Philosophy" (though I try not to.) [Elli](#) some of our earlier conversations about language and context lead me down the path of these kinds of thoughts. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2025 at 3:31 PM

Lot of work there and will take some time to read but thanks for posting!

Post by “Patrikios” of January 3, 2026 at 10:01 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Greetings, all! I published some thoughts about the limitations in our employment of the word "atomism" as an expression of ancient Epicurean particle physics. I'll admit that I might be splitting hairs here, and exploiting a post-structuralist position about the symbols and their context

[Eikadistes](#) ,

Thank you for illuminating us as you *'share the original flavor of the “true philosophy”!* I greatly appreciate how you provide such in-depth review of the ancient text and translations from Greek to Latin. You provide us an interesting educational viewpoint by challenging the linguistic conventions that have obscured our understanding of the Sage's teachings. By focusing on the actual words from Epicurus, we better understand how he preserves the reality of sensation and the reliability of perception in describing his physics.

Thanks for an enlightening article. ☐☐

Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2026 at 11:17 AM

Eikadistes I thought of your article in reading David Sedley's "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism," and I wanted to be sure you saw this.

I don't recall all the details of your article, but I think you'd find the concluding section of Sedley's article supportive of the argument that Epicurus should really not be considered *primarily* an atomist.

My suspicion is that two considerations in particular are responsible for the puzzling interpretation. One³⁹ is the impression that by a very long way the most careful Epicurean doctrine is atomism, and that atomistic analysis must therefore be expected to play a significant part in every branch of Epicurean philosophy, including moral psychology. Against this, it should be pointed out that atomistic analysis features prominently only in the surviving treatises on explicitly physical themes — Epicurus' letters to Herodotus and Pythocles, and Lucretius' poem. In the *Letter to Herodotus*, in the ethical writings of Philodemus, and in the fragments of Epicurus ethics in general, it is strikingly lacking. And where materialist analyses are mentioned by Epicurus in the fragmentary text on psychology discussed above, it is precisely in order to deny or downgrade them. Thus one tendency to choose "atomism" as the defining label for Epicurus' philosophy comes with it the risk of distortion, on the one hand reflecting the accident that physics occupies an unrepresentatively high proportion of the surviving fragments of Epicurean writings (in a glance at the fuller and presumably more representative selection of his titles at *Diag. Laet.* x 27-8 will confirm), and on the other hand reading itself as evidence for the unjustified impression that he is a committed materialist.

The second factor is Epicurus' emphatic assertion that the mind is corporeal⁴⁰, an assertion aimed in particular at establishing its inability to survive the death of the body. Simultaneously interpreted, this already seems to saddle him with an identity theory of mind. But any such impression is due to no more than a misunderstanding of the scope of "mind". In modern usage, a theory of mind is a theory about the metaphysics of mental states. But if I am right, although the "mind" in Epicurus' system is the physical organ of consciousness, ac-

responding to the brain and nervous system in more recent science, mental states are not assumed to be parallel physical entities. The mind, like the brain for us, is the material entity on whose properties states of consciousness arise; but, for Epicurus at least, it does not follow that these states of consciousness are themselves merely material states, governed by the laws of physics.

One of the most influential sources in Epicurean studies, Carl Bailey, writing in 1978, came at one point strikingly close to what I take to be the correct interpretation:

"The compound is more than a mere aggregate of its dependent atoms: it is their union in a complex, which has a new individuality of its own in which it may acquire qualities and even powers, which are not possessed by the individual component atoms. The soul or mind is a compound body of such particles sensitive to the nature of its component atoms and their motions among themselves, that it acquires the power of sensation or consciousness."⁴¹

Fraserburgh, Bailey went on almost immediately to conclude this insight:

"The more material thinkers of our own time are content to say that consciousness 'expresses' as an 'epiphenomenon' on the movements of matter. Epicurus went the step further and was content to say that consciousness, sensation, thought, and will are the movements of the soul atoms. Such an idea is in itself entirely correct, as it was to the majority of philosophers in Epicurus' day, unshakable, because the one set of facts and the other there is a great gulf fixed."⁴²

Bailey can hardly be blamed here for failing to foresee how far from "unshakable" the identity theory of mind would prove to be in future decades. Much more immediately we-

³⁹ C. Bailey, *The Greek atomists and Epicurus*, Oxford 1926, p. 419.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 416.

Post by "Bryan" of April 10, 2026 at 4:49 PM

Another idea in support of this argument is that atomic space (*i.e.*, an indivisible magnitude of space) is just as important as atomic matter (*i.e.*, an indivisible magnitude of matter).

"Therefore it is pleasing to those around Epicurus that all [primary particles] be moved with an equal speed through the partless [distances] - otherwise their atomic [distances], if divided, would not be atomic."

[Simplicius of Cilicia (fl. 520 CE), Commentary on Aristotle's Physics, 6.2]

Post by "Cassius" of April 10, 2026 at 7:29 PM

Thanks Bryan - it's a shame that we do focus on the term "atom" as if he were concerned about a particular object, when what he really was concerned about the logical imperative that there must be a limit to a division of both bodies and space!

It's so much easier for people to dismiss him by putting him in a box labeled "atoms" than to realize that what he's really campaigning against is the use of logic divorced from sensation to overthrow the senses.