Booknotes

At this time of Darwin's bi-centenary, and of contemporary controversies about the scope and validity of science, Catherine Wilson's *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2008) has a particular, if surprising, relevance. For her fascinating study is an attempt to show how the ideas of Epicurus and, more particularly of Lucretius, were, overtly or covertly, underlying many of the thought processes of the thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Gassendi, Boyle, Hobbes and Locke, whose speculations catapulted us into the modern world view both in science and in politics and ethics. The relevance of Darwinism, though not explicitly mentioned by Wilson, is that much of the Darwinian account of human psychology and social evolution is anticipated in Lucretius, and that in a way Darwinism can be seen as the working out scientifically of themes and issues implicit not only in the ancient Epicureans, but also in Hobbes and Locke.

There is a second relevance of Darwin to the story Wilson tells. For just as the accounts of social evolution we find in Lucretius and his more modern followers were largely speculative until the theory of evolution got underway in the nineteenth century, so was the corpuscularism of Gassendi, Hobbes and the rest until the development of nineteenth century chemistry. The corpuscular picture and what went with it about physical objects, human nature, gods and ethics is all largely present in Lucretius, and in various guises was developed as the new science of man and the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but not as a strictly scientific theory.

During the seventeenth century treating matter as the operation of atoms moving in the void and justice as a non-aggression pact formed the basis of most progressive scientific and political enquiry. The concomitant denials of final causes and of any good and evil beyond what was required to maximise the purely natural facts of pleasure and pain, and the displacement of any genuine role for God (if there is one) went seamlessly along with corpuscularism, as both defenders and critics realised at the time. Referring to an account of this new philospophy given by Leibniz (a fascinated but horrified critic of Hobbes), Wilson neatly sums up as follows: 'He will be led, as Hobbes was, first to the doctrine that all is body, then to the view that names are arbitrary, and that truth is man-made, then to a conception of good and evil, justice and injustice, as conventional, or as analyzable in terms of pleasure and power, then to mortalism and atheism.'

doi:10.1017/S0031819108000910
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819108000910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One question which Wilson's account highlights is that the underlying corpuscularism was hardly more required by empirical observation in the seventeenth century than it had been at the time of Epicurus or Lucretius. It seemed to be accepted as much on philosophical or even ethical grounds as on what scientific observation strictly demanded. Nevertheless this whole current of enquiry proved and continues to prove hugely successful as a method for investigating the physical world, and very largely owing to the work of the seventeenth century pioneers. Maybe this somewhat jagged foundation of to-day's physics should make us slightly hesitant before we go along with the whole Epicurean package. Even in Roman times, as Wilson pointed out, Cicero argued against Epicurus both that there was a virtue in knowledge for its own sake and also that there were virtues over and above those related to pleasure and pain, points also urged in the seventeenth century and still worth considering to-day. Furthermore, following decades of discussion of physicalism and supervenience, it is perhaps even less clear in 2008 than it might have been in Hobbes' day that thought and consciousness can be easily reduced to the operations of material particles on our sense organs and brains. Here, in contrast to chemistry and atomic physics, the scientific filling out of the Lucretius-Hobbes picture has been far less convincing.

Finally there is the claim often made on behalf of Epicurus and Lucretius, that their materialistic philosophy absolves us from fear, fear of gods, fear of priests and above all from fear of death. As one commentator, quoted by Wilson puts it, 'with Epicurus a new spirit enters Greek philosophy, one that is light, warm and humane'. Doubtless this is how many followers of Epicureanism, ancient and modern, have seen things. But there is nothing necessary about this effect, as readers of the firmly atheistical Philip Larkin's Aubade will appreciate:

> . . .and specious stuff that says 'No rational being
> Can fear a thing it will not feel', not seeing
> That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
> No touch, or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
> Nothing to love or link with,
> The anaesthetic from which none come round.

'Specious stuff', a little strong perhaps; but Wilson's fascinating researches lead one to the conclusion that the acceptance of the whole Epicurean world view remains even to-day as much a matter of temperament as of reason, for all its undoubted position at the heart of modernity.

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