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A Life Worthy of the Gods: The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus

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BOOK REVIEWS



DAVID KONSTAN. *A Life Worthy of the Gods: The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2008. xx + 176 pp. Paper, \$34.

This is a new edition of David Konstan's 1973 classic, *Some Aspects of Epicurean Psychology* (Brill), with a very substantial new introduction and a revised bibliography. Although Konstan preserves the basic structure of his earlier monograph, he ambitiously enlarges the scope of the present edition by engaging with new texts and new currents of thought and by advancing a line of argument both coherent and contemporary. The result is a seminal work of scholarship, which combines the subtlest textual analysis with genuine philosophical reflection and addresses key issues in Epicureanism as well as in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of action.

Chapter 1, "Epicurean 'Passions,'" advances the admittedly controversial thesis that the Epicureans draw a distinction between the non-rational and the rational parts of the soul, assigning to the former the *pathē* of pleasure and of pain but to the latter the emotions, for instance, anger, fear, and joy. On this approach, the Epicurean *pathē* ("feelings," "affects") are precisely pleasure and pain, do not involve judgments, and function automatically to indicate the moral value of things (13). Part of Konstan's motivation for defending this position is Epicurus' inclusion of the *pathē*, alongside sensations (*aisthēseis*) and preconceptions (*prolēpseis*), among the criteria of truth (D.L. 10.31): as the non-rational character of sensations guarantees that they yield unmediated and infallible information about external things, so the non-rational character of pleasure and pain constitutes an unmediated and infallible basis of choice and avoidance for humans and animals alike (15). Konstan adduces, in support of his claim, Epicurean texts which closely associate the *pathē* with the *aisthēseis* (notably, Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 37–38, 55, 63, 82). We may add Sextus' report of the Epicurean view of time as "an accident of accidents," in which *pathē* are specified as either pains or pleasures (*M* 10.219–27). But although these texts make it appear likely that, ultimately, all Epicurean *pathē* would be subsumed under "pleasure" and "pain," nonetheless they do not explicitly problematize or discuss the issue, i.e., whether all *pathē* are indeed subsumed under pleasure and pain. Moreover, although the function of *pathē* as criteria of truth precludes the simultaneous formation of judgments, it does not follow that the *pathē* should be assigned to a non-rational part of the soul: some degree of rationalization appears involved in my *pathos* of a sharp pain in the foot or in the pleasure of tasting honey. Criterial infallibility entails that our sensations, preconceptions, and feelings are not affected by judgment, but not necessarily that their functions are located in the non-rational soul. In any case,

later Epicureans do designate as *pathē* the emotions, such as envy, malicious joy, anger, and the fear of death. As Konstan points out, the main concern of the school is with the so-called empty emotions, i.e., the kind of emotions that involve false and harmful beliefs, irrational desires, and vain or even unreal objects.

Chapter 2, "Psychology," addresses in a novel and intriguing manner the questions why such emotions are resistant to reform and therapy, and, especially, why the false beliefs that they involve are resistant to rational persuasion. Focusing primarily on the fear of death which, according to the Epicureans, is the deepest and most fundamental fear of human pathology, Konstan explores the relationship between irrational fear and irrational desire and, in particular, the mechanism by which irrational fear gets converted into irrational desire. In rough summary, his argument is as follows. Not only does irrational fear induce irrational desire but, also, irrational desire in turn provokes irrational fear. At the root of that vicious circle lie images, myths, and associations which motivate the pursuit of vain objects and which derive in part from the metaphorical use of language. The more we pursue these objects, the more we reinforce our desire for them as well as the fears that motivate our pursuit in the first place. Konstan shows precisely how this mechanism works for the fear of death and, also, for erotic love—another emotion associated *par excellence* with false belief, insatiable desire, and insubstantial images. His detailed interpretations of relevant Epicurean passages (esp. *DRN* 2.1–13, 37–53, 55–61; 4.1091–1104) are models of textual exegesis for their scrupulousness, accuracy, and originality. Equally valuable are the leading philosophical questions that he poses and answers by reference to those passages. For instance, he asks why Lucretius thinks that people imagine that they can allay the fear of death through wealth and power (45–46) and, generally, through "exaggerated acquisitiveness," and then he answers that question by exploring the symbolic associations between wealth and security as well as those between poverty and death. Of course, several questions remain open for further discussion. Why do people associate wealth and power rather than some other external factor with security? Why is poverty particularly reminiscent of death? Why do certain allegories grip our imagination so much more than others? And what kinds of techniques are most efficient to liberate us from harmful metaphors? Also, Konstan's distinction between two kinds of fear of death, one deriving from a concrete and real threat, the other deriving from "something vaguely imagined to be an evil" (52), calls for comment. As Philodemus' *On Death* indicates, there are at least four different kinds of fear, which, to a certain extent, cut across Konstan's distinction: the fear of the state of being dead, which indeed can be described as "the dread of imaginary things which populate the darkness of people's ignorance" (49); the fear that we shall die sometime, which is all-pervasive and has no object imaginary or other; fears related to the process of dying, which are concrete to the extent that they derive from the possibility that that process will be painful; and the fear of premature death, which is concrete in so far as its object is real but also indistinct when it takes the form of anxiety over potentially unfulfilled desires and projects. The line

between the natural and concrete fear of a real life-threat and the unnatural and indefinite fear of a vaguely imagined evil is sometimes blurred. And the nature of these emotions, both natural and unnatural, can be more complex than we often acknowledge.

Chapter 3, "Social Theory," contains groundbreaking material on the Epicurean account of anthropological development, and especially the origins and development of technology, language, law, and religion. One issue is whether the Epicureans view human history as progress towards technological and social achievements and philosophy (the progressivist view) or, alternatively, as the record of human decline which is only mitigated by Epicurean philosophy (the primitivist view). The issue is not clear-cut: on the one hand, man has the natural capacity to lead the perfect life, i.e., freedom from irrational desires and fears, and, on some accounts, primitive man leads such a life; on the other hand, both material security and the emotional security afforded by the philosophy of Epicurus come only with the development of technology and society. Konstan addresses the matter by outlining three stages of human development and by asking when the passions arise for the first time. In the first stage, men lived "like wild animals" (*DRN* 5.932), and, although they were fearful of predators, natural phenomena, etc., they were not prey to irrational fears nor prone to universal unhappiness (88). In the next stage, the so-called *vita prior*, there were formed the first communities of humans. New elements include certain technological discoveries (houses, clothing, fire, and agriculture), the beginnings of language, and also the bonds of family and friendship (cf. *DRN* 5.1014–23). Konstan is surely right to claim that Lucretius' account of that stage brings no new elements to Epicureanism (92): the ideas that friendship is initially grounded on social utility and that the ability to love requires a social context are traced back to Epicurus. On the other hand, his statement that "friendship can only confer this benefit [sc. security] if it is sincerely believed in" (93) is controversial, at least concerning Epicurus and his immediate followers. On one line of interpretation, Epicurus held that friendship has elements of altruism and disinterested concern for others even if these elements cause tensions in his doctrine but, on another interpretative line, Epicurus' seemingly altruistic statements are reducible to his egoistic hedonism. On balance, it seems to me that Epicurus and his associates coherently held a self-interested and self-regarding view of friendship, whereas later Epicureans including Philodemus admit of sources of motivation other than pleasure and hence are able to say, e.g., that friendship is intrinsically choiceworthy (*SV* 23) and that friends are loved for their own sake.

The third stage of human development is marked by the transition from the *vita prior* and by the disappearance of friendship. According to Hermarchus, wealth and acquisitiveness are the main factors in the transition from friendship and fellow-feeling to violence. Another factor is that the memory of the utility of not murdering one's fellow man was no longer sufficient to make people abstain from murder (94–96). Law and punishment became necessary in order to preserve social utility and protect the social order. Konstan suggests that linguistic

development may also have played a role at this point (96). If I understand him correctly, his idea is roughly this. While language originally consists of names produced automatically as natural responses, later on it acquires elements of convention in so far as people agree to assign certain names to certain things and, at an even later stage, some people introduce abstract concepts that they then explain according to some prevailing interpretation (104). On the one hand, the conventional aspects of language contribute to its enrichment and functionality, but on the other hand, they also import an element of contingency and the danger of falsehood. One of the causes of irrational fears and desires lies, precisely, in “the abuse of language” (106) and, as Zeno’s school recognized, the ambiguity inherent in language in its fully developed form. Recall that Konstan locates the problem specifically in the metaphorical and allegorical uses of language and the empty beliefs and images that derive from them. An issue that remains open is whether his interpretation may be extended to all kinds of mismatches between a name and its purported reference.

Two further remarks on this chapter. Regarding the rule of law and the legal sanctions intended to put an end to violence, Konstan accurately points out that the Epicureans do not object to actual political authority as such nor, of course, to the security afforded by civic government (111). He also correctly notes that, nonetheless, they did not defend legal punishment and that both Lucretius and the author of *On Choices and Avoidances*, whom I take to be Philodemus, have a negative view of it. However, it seems to me that Philodemus advances a more positive view of legal punishment in his treatise *On Anger*. For the desire to have the offender punished for reasons of deterrence and security is an integral part of natural anger (cf. 40.32–41.9, 44.15–22), namely, a natural and unavoidable reaction to intentional offense which is experienced even by the sage. Concerning the origin of irrational fears about the gods, Lucretius’ explanation that early men acquired their conception of the gods from dreams and visions (*DRN* 5.1161–82) may well be “a valid one by Epicurean criteria” (114), but Konstan does not clarify just what “valid” means in this context. Do these dreams and visions establish that the gods really exist or, alternatively, does Lucretius’ story imply that the gods are in fact constructs of the human mind? His long footnote (115, n. 51) is helpful in distinguishing the different scholarly opinions about this matter, but Konstan does not choose to position himself on this issue here. For the record, my own view is that Lucretius’ account does not concern the origin of the correct conception of the gods as real divine beings but, rather, the origin of both true and false beliefs about their qualities and attributes. In any case, Konstan is surely correct in claiming that superstition derives from a mistaken view about the nature of the gods, not simply from the belief in their existence (116). Also, he fully justifies his conclusion that religion and law may be inevitable in the present state of things, but they are not part of a prescriptive Epicurean doctrine (119).

Chapter 4, “Epistemology,” explores two other symbolic confusions: people mistake the timeless pleasure and emotional security of the sage with physical

deathlessness; they are also misled by the image of fulfillment generated by erotic love and think that erotic love can satisfy their desire for the fulfillment of tranquility. I shall restrict my comments to the former confusion. Konstan's excellent discussion highlights important aspects of the sage's "godlikeness" and the ways in which they are anchored in the Epicurean doctrine. They include the sage's understanding of the body's nature and of the pleasure of which the body is capable (131); the distinction between static and kinetic pleasure, as well as the emphasis on the static pleasure that the sage experiences (*ibid.*); pleasure's completeness and timelessness (*ibid.*), and also the sage's experience of static pleasure as timeless (136); the stability of the sage's soul and his perfected disposition (133–34); the sage's independence and self-sufficiency, and his invulnerability to chance (135); and finally, the sage's capacity to mentally comprehend all the spaces in the universe and to discover the nature of things in its entirety (137–38). Although Konstan's analysis of Epicurean godlikeness contains some controversial elements, for instance, the overemphasis on the static pleasure of the sage at the expense of the kinetic pleasures which he also surely experiences (Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.41–42), nonetheless it offers valuable insights into the Epicurean version of "becoming similar to god." Also, we are invited to think hard about the question from where do we get this conception of godlike happiness. Konstan suggests that it comes from our image of the gods, however confused (145); the proper function of prayer and religion is, precisely, to make us receptive to the ideal of blessedness "that we perceive obtaining among the gods" (*ibid.*). But just how do we get the notion of divine happiness through a confused image of the gods? How do we "perceive" them being happy? And how does religious ritual help us to accept and emulate that ideal? These are major issues that Konstan puts on the table for further study.

The volume is beautifully produced and impeccably edited. It is published by Parmenides Publishing, a relatively new press which focuses on Ancient Greek Philosophy and prides itself, among other things, on reprinting or re-editing older books that have been landmarks in the field. David Konstan's 1973 monograph has played precisely that role. The same will hold, doubtlessly, for this revised edition for future generations of classical scholars and students.

On a personal note, I wrote this review during my tenure as an Onassis Foundation Fellow, and I am grateful to the Foundation for its generous support.

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