

David Konstan, *A Life Worthy of the Gods. The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (new edition). Las Vegas/Zurich/Athens: Parmenides Publishing, 2008. Pp. XX, 176. ISBN 978-1-930972-28-5. \$ 34.00 (paperback)*

David Konstan's (= K.) book is a revised edition of his 'Some Aspects of Epicurean Psychology', published in 1973. The original version has been updated in the light of the past decades' research on Epicurus and his school. Quite a number of references, especially to Philodemus, have been added, which occasionally serve to strengthen the argument (e.g., 118–119). Translations have been provided for all Greek and Latin quotations. The first chapter has been added to this edition, so that the book now consists of four chapters ('Epicurean "Passions"', 'Psychology', 'Social Theory', and 'Epistemology'). These very reductive titles do not in every case give a real idea of the main focus of the chapter. But this is in some way characteristic of this complex book which does not lend itself to easy paraphrasing.

Epicureans held the falseness of mental concepts (or *kenodoxia*) largely responsible for the anxieties and unfulfilled desires affecting human beings. Most importantly, the unrecognized fear of death was considered to be the fundamental disturbance responsible for all kinds of mental suffering. But it is not too clear exactly how this mechanism was supposed to work. According to K., this kind of argument is characteristic for Epicurus, in that he saw a 'linguistic confusion or unconscious allegorical substitution' (xvi) as the crucial intrapsychic operation. K. claims that for Epicureans an operation of this kind took place in a greater number of fields than has been recognized so far, and his book is about its genesis and its working. The book deals mostly with mental images which take on a kind of independent existence.

The first chapter (1–25), written independently and added to the new edition, lends a framework to the arguments. The convincing discussion of the difference between *πάθη* (which are fundamentally irrational, instinctive and similar to sensation) and emotions (which have a rational component and can thus in a way be 'false') leads to an assessment of the nature of fear which is of course crucial to what follows. According to K., Epicurus necessarily located fear in the rational sphere of the soul because only here it could be 'embellished by the addition of belief' (24). But these beliefs can be false — the failure to recognize the fear of death as the true cause of all kinds of distress being the most prominent example. Epicurus addressed the problem why persuasion does not work in certain cases more radically than his predecessors. K. claims that his theory of *páthē* gave the idea of being mistaken about the causes of fear a completely new twist, for all its Platonic and Aristotelian roots and its parallels in Stoicism (25).

The second chapter (27–77) aims at elucidating the exact way in which, according to Epicurus, the unconscious circle of anxiety and limitless desires functions. Characteristically, K. draws a great deal on Lucretius to reconstruct Epicurus' doctrine regarding this point. K. explains this mechanism partially as implying symbolic thinking, so that 'poverty' (as the state of being bereft of everything)

* I thank Diya Roy for correcting my English. All remaining flaws are mine.

represents death itself. This makes humans strive to accumulate wealth and status in a hopeless counter-measure (K., 45–46), a process which only reinforces itself. But does this adequately explain why the fear of death is so persistent and by what kind of energies it is constantly fuelled? K. plausibly diagnoses an explanatory gap here (58) which he tries to fill by referring to Lucretius' famous allegory (*De rerum natura* 3.978–1023) in which the famous mythical sinners are explained as allegories of the *conditio humana*. K., disagreeing with Heinze, is convinced that Lucretius here preserves an 'important fragment of Epicurean doctrine' (68), which describes another vicious circle: As long as life is ridden by 'irrational and unfulfilled desires' (68), such spectres will appear as a result of a projective mechanism. This is plausible in itself, since for Epicurus 'all mental pictures are derived from real *simulacra*' (65, with reference to Cumont); however, direct evidence for such allegorizing in Epicurus is scanty. This is followed by an account of Lucretius' concept of *amor* (4.1091–1104), the third great passion alongside with *avaritia* and *ambitio* (68–72). According to K., the problem with *amor* is again an epistemological one, namely the fact that it feeds on *simulacra* and is thus insatiable. Somewhat loosely attached is a discussion of Epicurus' notion of 'false opinion', which closes the chapter (72–77).

In his third chapter (79–125), K. raises the question at what exact point in the development of mankind this kind of error became operative. The chapter contains detailed analyses of various aspects of human cultural development. Most importantly, K. shows the role that language plays in the rise of false opinions. Language had a bearing on the kind of errors under discussion, as its development also introduced the use of 'vain sounds' (108) and facilitated the rise of empty and irrational desires. The same holds good for legal punishment, the origin of which K. discusses in depth in the final part of the chapter (111–125). The rule of law with the possibility of chastisement will reinforce fear (and also irrational desires: 113), but at certain stages of human cultural development it is indispensable. However, its effects will be short-term, and it is unimportant to the sage who is free to transgress laws if necessary (123–124).

The sage also forms the starting-point of K.'s fourth chapter (127–152). This chapter deals with the fact that Epicureans — whose philosophy was mainly concerned with mortality — were prone to calling the sage and certain members of their own circle 'immortal' (or 'godlike'), of all things. For Epicureans, this term had a very specific meaning. 'Immortality' described an absolutely 'stable condition of the body and, especially, of the soul' (143), the state in which the individual has properly understood the limits of the body and of pleasure (130). The sage's *diathesis* does not 'require or admit of improvement over time' (ibid.) and is perfectly stable due to its immunity against any kind of atomic perturbation (135). But according to K., this could lead to another kind of linguistic confusion: the *simulacra* representing an idea of absolute security and of godlike joy were misinterpreted in a temporal sense, as though immortality could be achieved by an extension of the life-span. Thus the empty circle of vain desires was triggered once again (146).

A similar kind of confusion leads to irrational love-passion, in which a desire for total unity, originally derived from a false idea of friendship, is constantly rekindled by the vain hope that it may be quenched (148). K. considers the relation of desire

and fulfillment also to be the key to the two parts of Lucretius' proem to Venus (148–150). In the final pages of his book (151–152), he describes Epicurean friendship as a way of establishing a kind of stable tranquility and as a way to live in a community which sheltered its members 'from the environments that reinforced their passions' (151), from false interpretations and misguided desires. Some questions may arise here. Why did Epicureans use so misleading a vocabulary in order to characterize, e.g., their sage? Doesn't Epicureanism itself thus promote the creation of false opinions? Similarly, K.'s passages on erotic passion could lend themselves to the interpretation that Epicureanism with its emphatic idea of friendship could be partially responsible for the kind of fatal 'misinterpretation' Lucretius describes.

Among the few general things one might criticize is the fact that despite the astuteness of the book, in some respects the organization of the arguments seems a little arbitrary. As already mentioned, the assignment of the topics to the single chapters does not always appear very cogent (e.g., the separation of the two passages on love in chapters 2 and 4 may leave a reader somewhat disoriented). The book sometimes reads like 'variations on a theme', and one is not always sure how close one is to the core of the argument and how neatly the points elaborated are connected to each other (some transitions appear a bit awkward; e.g., 72: '... in some way ... ', 145: '... in part, at least...'). Sometimes the relation between one section and another seems to be one of similarity rather than of logical continuity.

Lucretius' originality is, of course, not K.'s subject. However, this reviewer confesses that he feels somewhat uneasy with purely doxographically oriented readings of *De rerum natura*. Is this poem really about nothing except fending off false ideas, disturbing influences and erroneous *simulacra*? Is it not also about investigating novel and independent ways to describe the aesthetic power of images? Despite such questions, K.'s book is history of Epicureanism at its best.

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