

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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**James Warren (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism. Cambridge Companions.* Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. ix, 342. ISBN 9780521695305. \$29.99 (pb).**

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## [Preview](#)

In this *Companion to Epicureanism*, J. Warren presents a comprehensive and well-balanced investigation of the major areas of the Epicurean Garden, from the early Hellenistic period until its reception in the early modern period. The work's aim is not only to provide a complete and close presentation of the thought of Epicurus according to traditional divisions of subject matter, but also to explore the rich implications of Epicurean thought in a number of new and innovative ways. A first group of contributions provides a historical overview from the Epicureanism's beginnings as a philosophical community located in Asia Minor to its relocations in Athens (D. Clay, pp. 9-28), and continuing to the decentralization of the movement during the Roman Republic (D. Sedley, pp. 29-45) and Empire (M. Erler, pp. 46-64). A second group of articles focuses only on physics (P.M. Morel: *Epicurean atomism*, pp. 65-83), ethics (R. Woolf: *Pleasure and desire*, pp. 158-78, and T. O'Keefe, *Action and responsibility*, pp. 142-57), logic and linguistic theory (C. Atherton: *Epicurean philosophy of language*, pp. 197-215), politics (E. Brown: *Politics and society*, pp. 179-96), and psychology (C. Gill: *Psychology*, pp. 125-41), as well as on more specific fields or problems: *Epicurean empiricism* (E. Asmis, pp. 84-104), *Cosmology and meteorology* (L. Taub, pp. 105-124), aesthetics (D. Blank, *Philosophia and techne: Epicureans on the arts*, pp. 216-33), *Epicurean therapeia* (J. Warren: *Removing fear*, pp. 234-48, and V. Tsouna, *Epicurean therapeutic strategies*, pp. 249-65), and Fortleben (C. Wilson: *Epicureanism in early modern philosophy*, pp. 266-86).

The volume's contributions are exhaustive and up to date, and the different biases of authors are clearly presented and integrated: e.g. the theory of emergence in opposition to reductionism in explicating the cause of change or motion. More importantly, the work's various contributors refer to one another, giving a coherency to the volume that is rare in collected articles.

In his introduction (pp. 1-8), Warren underlines the abundance of primary sources relating to Epicurean doctrine and opportunely mentions (a) the remarkable preservation of works at the 'Villa dei papiri' covered by the eruption of Vesuvius (79 a.D.), and (b) the exceptional inscriptions of Oinoanda in Lycia (Asia Minor). Clay's contribution shows how the epistles contribute to our knowledge of Epicurean doctrine and knowledge of the hero cult surrounding the figure of Epicurus as an authentic and eternal witness of wisdom. Sedley's contribution proposes one of the first and reliable introductions to Philodemus, the pupil of Zeno of Sidon and protagonist of the Epicurean circle at Herculaneum. Sedley notes that "the most striking feature of Philodemus' oeuvre is the total absence of works on physics" (p. 35); exactly the contrary of the principal contents of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, a work to which Sedley consecrated his important essay: *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, Cambridge 1998. Erler focuses on the positive role of Diogenes of Oinoanda; additionally he underlines that the Christian interpretation of Epicurean doctrine did not aim at its refusal. In fact, a convergence can be observed in their mutual aversion to pagan superstition and offering of an alternative communal way of life, as well as in the consideration of happiness as serious goal. Erler, after W. Schmidt, is today the premier specialist of this aspect of Epicurean engagement.

engagement.

P.M. Morel not only stresses the Democritean heritage of Epicurean atomism, but thinks that a theory of the composition of bodies, integrated with a theory of generation, allows for an explication of all the phenomena of the kosmos. In particular Morel observes that: "Atomism does not (...) cease to be a theory of composition, but it does turn out to be a theory of selective composition" (pp. 82-83). One might ask, however, if such a connection might complicate the ordinary theory of causality.

E. Asmis studies perception as the foundation of true scientific inference. She correctly points out that Epicurus, unlike Democritus, teaches that the mind preserves perceptions by proving that they correspond to our environment. L. Taub underlines the centrality of the *Letter to Pythocles* in focusing cosmological and meteorological matter and the methodological process in researching; and so we can appreciate not only the Epicurean attention to the principle of analogy, but also how "the method of multiple explanation" can be successfully applied to remote phenomena.

Having dealt with the body, this volume then deals with the Epicurean psyche. C. Gill observes that, for Epicurus, the psyche is in fact a body, and, to be more precise, a part of the body, an atomic composite. From this issue, the central question becomes whether Epicurus' materialist and mechanical world-view enabled him "to offer a credible psychological account of human beings as rational agents, capable of virtue and happiness" (p. 132). This problem directly concerns ethics and the responsibility of human action. T. O'Keefe's contribution faces just this question: is free will (and effective agency) possible? O'Keefe cites the Principle of Bivalence in decision and settling the role of fate; but the real problem is how to explain the connection of choice with the atomic swerve. As O'Keefe points out, Cicero had observed in his *De Fato* 22 that *Epicurus thinks that the necessity of fate is avoided by the swerve of an atom*. O'Keefe refuses the trivial (eliminativistic) interpretation attributed to Democritus concerning the atomistic structure of the mind and tends to merge an 'emergent' view of psychological 'states' to a more general reductionist theory. Responsibility, then, becomes a consequence of our rationality: *On Nature* 25 points out that some actions are under rational control, meaning we can "act effectively" (p. 157); but it is not easy to defend against those who insist that everything – even thought – occurs in a mechanical fashion, removing the possibility of any personal responsibility.

In his contribution on 'Pleasure and desire', R. Woolf emphasizes the ascetic role of pleasure, while confirming that the meaning of physical pleasure and its relation to desire do not involve a negative (and corrupting) conception of luxury. The true problem remains, however, the achievement of a life without anxiety. Woolf views the connection of kinetic and static pleasure as decisive; is it possible to consider any commitment to kinetic pleasure as a component of good life (as a component of freedom from pain and distress)? The 18th *Kuria Doxa* in fact states that bodily pleasure does not increase once the pain caused by want is removed; and from this statement (which is, as a matter of fact, a limit produced by our reflection) it is necessary to start, as Woolf points out. E. Brown explores the problem of 'philia' and the meaning of community. The central question concerns the view, ascribed to Epicurus, that friends and friendship are valuable for their own sake. It is important to define the meaning of self interest, pleasure, egotism, but - I think - an adequate understanding will be obtained only if we remember that we are ever referring to the 'sapiens' and not to everyman. This consideration can help us also when we approach the political field: only if the community is a community of wise friends will it be possible to realize an effective security and tranquillity (i.e. the pleasure). But whether on the one hand "the ideal community of friends is full of justice ... on the other hand, Epicurus is clear that there is no justice without a convention that rules out inflicting and suffering harm" (191).

C. Atherton asks 'is there such a thing as Epicurean philosophy of language' (p. 197). Since, in Epicurus, ethical interests are central, language is seen as the means to attaining truth. Given this viewpoint it is not easy to decide whether Epicurus' interpretation of relation between words and things was intensionalist or extensionalist. In any case, we must agree with the conclusion which calls attention to linguistic naturalism and the consequent conservatism, to the cognitive value of language and to the relevance of its correct use in practice.

The privileged position accorded to philosophy conditions the Epicurean attitude to technai. D. Blank studies evidence from Philodemus and the Papyri, in order to show the importance to a philosopher of knowing grammar, poetry, rhetoric and the other 'liberal' arts as useful means for living the Epicurean life. The wise man will converse correctly on music and poetry, but this will not be his principal concern. It is thus on the basis of the philosophy that a proper approach to the arts is assured.

As R. Woolf pointed out, the absence of pain is a condition of pleasure. In his contribution, J. Warren notes that the absence of mental disturbance is the goal of human life and the path to mental pleasure. Anxiety and fear are the result of ignorance and false opinions. Epicurus' analysis regarding the existence of the gods is pertinent: at first glance, Epicurus' cosmological theory could seem unnecessary. However, a deeper investigation reveals that a necessary consequence of this theory is that the gods play no role in governing the cosmos and human affairs. Why, therefore, our anxiety and fear? The Epicurean solution concerning death is the same: not having any direct experience of it, we can live without anxiety or fear. Additionally, Warren asks what reason there might be for the wise man to keep on living if a good Epicurean life (an ataraxic life) has been grasped. He correctly observes that "unlike the Stoics, the Epicureans seem to have generally frowned on suicide" (p. 248).

Epicurean ethical theory provides a true ethical program: strategies for confronting pain and fear, death and the gods, are likewise a medicinal regimen (the *quadrifarmacon*). As V. Tsouna points out, an analogy with the medical model was proposed by Lucretius, Philodemus and Diogenes of Oinoanda. Two elements appear very important: the correct disposition of man ('diathesis') and the correct use of reason. Tsouna studies the therapeutic techniques that we can obtain directly from Epicurean texts as well as from the Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and the treatises of Philodemus (as, for example, *On frank speech*). However, as we read in the 16th *Kuria Doxa*, we can be cured from fear and suffering only by using our reason in every moment of our life.

The last contribution, by C. Wilson, is dedicated to a rapid survey of the presence of Epicurean doctrines in early modern philosophy: from the important discussions in Cicero to Gassendi's and Charleton's Epicureanism in the seventeenth century.

As a whole, this collection provides an up-to-date assessment of Epicurean doctrine and an overview of the state of Epicurean research. A useful bibliography helps the scholar to probe the different questions approached. The volume has one fault: non-Anglo-Saxon contributions are cited in a passing manner, downplaying the international nature of the work's scope.

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