

CRITICAL REVIEW:  
ON CATHERINE WILSON'S *EPICUREANISM AT THE  
ORIGINS OF MODERNITY*

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Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 304pp., \$65.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780199238811.

We are growing more and more familiar with the idea that the history of modern philosophy (or 'early modern philosophy' as it is called in North America) has to be revised, in order to go beyond a particularly epistemological rendition of the variety of doctrines, contexts and practices in terms of rationalism and empiricism.<sup>1</sup> Catherine Wilson casually acknowledges this sort of critique in the penultimate chapter of her book, when discussing Leibniz and Locke: to set empiricism against rationalism 'reflects an anachronistic, post-Kantian perspective' (p. 204). Where does she locate herself in this regard? Some of the scholars who have challenged the 'epistemological paradigm' have focused more on natural philosophy, moral psychology, jurisprudence or political thought. Catherine Wilson actually remains a practitioner of the history of early modern philosophy as a set of systems – those of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and Leibniz primarily, with a large self-contained chapter on Robert Boyle thrown in<sup>2</sup> and some short, non-controversial sections on Spinoza. The title of her book speaks of *modernity*, a category which might inspire either alarm or weariness in the reader, but as it turns out, she does not mean anything by it, simply the emergence of modern thought, again chiefly manifested in the above-mentioned figures. There is no strong claim of the sort made recently by Jonathan Israel that, e.g., with Spinozism an entirely new form of society (and metaphysics, and politics) is ushered in.

What story does Wilson wish to tell, then? The general contours seem essentially familiar to us, and the usage of non-standard material (from the standpoint of typical Anglophone history of philosophy) is always in small doses. Her claim is both a modest one and at the same time a more inflated one. Modestly, it is the historical claim that all of these significant figures of early modern thought are involved with Epicureanism, in one way or another – whether it is atomism as a kind of broad research programme at the basis of Boylean corpuscularianism or

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Cartesian mechanism, or the Epicuro-Lucretian critique of superstition and ethics of pleasure, or lastly, any combination of these. After all, famously, the Epicurean teaching, contrary for instance to Plato's, was that the study of nature could have moral value, particularly in therapeutic terms. To quote Hans Blumenberg's study of Lucretianism (which is not mentioned by Wilson),

Lucretius had stressed humanity's liberation from fear. It was primarily events in nature – and only secondarily events in the human world, as a category of natural events – that could cause fear. Therefore, liberation was to be found, above all, in Epicurus' atomistic physics, which had taught that all possible explanations of natural events should be seen as equally valid and consequently a matter of indifference for men. (Blumenberg 1997: 111, note 48)

But Wilson also has a larger claim, which is somehow meta-historical: she wants to say that the very form and essence of modern philosophy as we know it (and, one surmises although she never says it explicitly, as we have *continued* to practice it since then, through Kant and Husserl or Frege or Quine or Bachelard) is somehow a legacy of Epicureanism.

I think that Wilson is onto something here, which sounds obvious once it has been said, but that most of us have in fact neither thought of explicitly nor written. The idea is neither in great works of erudition such as René Pintard's *Le libertinage érudit* nor in Jonathan Bennett's volumes on early modern philosophy. Briefly put, Wilson's idea is that *all* of what we think of as modern philosophy now, whether it is Descartes or Locke, Cudworth, Leibniz or Pufendorf, could not exist without Epicureanism – either because they actually *were* a species of atomist (Descartes, Boyle, Gassendi) or because they adopted a strong version of hedonism, albeit with voluntarist revisions (Locke) or simply because they engaged so vigorously with so many aspects of Epicurean doctrine in an effort to rebut it (Leibniz). An author who is not mentioned here – Wilson tends to leave out *minores*, at least authors that traditionally have been perceived as such – is the English deist Anthony Collins. Collins is an interesting case because ideologically he is an extreme radical deist, determinist, materialist and so on, but when it comes to antiquity he explicitly prefers Stoicism to the messy randomness of Epicureanism.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson achieves this manneristic reworking of early modern thought by means of an interesting stylistic gesture, a combination of immersion and internal philosophical analysis: each chapter begins with a long quotation from *De rerum natura* in its original English translation of the 1650s by Lucy Hutchinson, while the textual analysis within the chapters makes use of a current translation (Martin Ferguson Smith's, in the Hackett edition). Somehow, such a deceptively simple procedure gradually places the reader in a more comfortable, proximal relation to Lucretius; it lessens the estrangement we might feel from a Roman poet of the

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1<sup>st</sup> century BC or even his seventeenth century rendition. And on various occasions throughout the book, we can be dazzled by Wilson's own prose, which appears to be trying to emulate Lucretius. Unfortunately, this gives way to more pedestrian stretches of writing, as if the book had been written in different moods and not thoroughly revised to produce a uniform work. (This is true in general of the book, the organisation of which leaves a lot to be desired, as I shall note with a few major examples.) So, for instance, within a few pages one can move from the refinement of 'Locke, who enjoyed food, flirtation and furniture, and whose chest hurt, was able to allow pleasure and pain a central role in his moral psychology' (p. 33) to the clunkiness of '[Hobbes'] view that all was body nevertheless emerged sooner or later' (p. 31).

Some chapters – the introductory essay (which is entitled 'The Revival of Ancient Materialism' but is not actually about materialism), Chapter 9 on Boyle, or Chapter 10, the final chapter, entitled 'The Sweetness of Living' – are quite self-contained, and elaborate. But most of the others suffer from grave problems of form and content. The form is that of a collage, with small, self-contained sections (say, Locke on hedonism, or Descartes on the soul) placed in chapters which otherwise make no reference to these issues. So, the beautiful final chapter 'The Sweetness of Living', which gives some real traction to the claim that Epicureanism is a viable moral philosophy, not just a remedy for fear, a critique of superstition or a shallow hedonism, incomprehensibly also contains a section on Cartesian ethics; Chapter 8, 'The Problem of Materialism in the *New Essays*', goes very smoothly but then comes to a halt with a self-contained section on Locke's hedonism that does not engage Leibniz. One might think of this as the 'advent calendar' method of constructing a total picture of an epoch. Or, it might be because these are mostly preexisting articles (none of which are referenced), not fully woven together as a book.

As to content, it is similarly uneven. The level is sometimes quite high, especially when it comes to fast-paced, internal analysis of a metaphysical problem in an author; but it can then descend to the level of undergraduate teaching notes (such as Aristotle on the four causes, p. 82f.; sceptical arguments in Descartes' *Meditations*, p. 115f.; Leibniz as the unifier of Plato and Aristotle, p. 167; Hobbes' political thought...). We also find, scattered throughout the book, pronouncements which range from the merely odd (the presence of 'ideas' in Locke's empiricism 'surrounded the *Essay* with an aura of spirituality', p. 153; the success of Epicureanism caused universities to become 'institutions... devoted to the cultivation of intellectual and sensory pleasures and the remediation of pain and deprivation', p. 38: yet-unknown Fourierist universities, perhaps?) to the numbingly inaccurate and dismissive, as when Wilson says of Hume, 'Despite the author's materialistic and atheistic leanings, Hume's essay 'The Epicurean' must be judged a virtually worthless piece of literary trivia' (pp. 36–37). Whether or not one appreciates Hume's essays is surely a matter of taste, but to describe

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him as a borderline materialist and atheist does not fit either a careful reading of his work or the past fifty years of Hume scholarship.

Materialism, like many such words, is never given any particular definition in Wilson's book. But the introductory chapter is nevertheless an exciting one, since after all so many philosophers take the existence of materialism for granted and fail to recognise just how historically complex and manifold it is (compare, say, Hobbes and Toland, whose concepts of matter, mind, nature or religion are so profoundly different!). As I mentioned above, this chapter, 'The Revival of Ancient Materialism', curiously is not really about materialism. It seems to be about the impact of Epicurean/Lucretian ideas on England (and nowhere else—there is not a sentence on Germany or France!). A suggestion I would make is to read Wilson's *Epicureanism* in tandem with Ann Thomson's *Bodies of Thought* (Thomson 2008), which is more historically sophisticated, and considerably extends the analysis of mortalism and materialism.

Consider also the case of atheism. Wasn't it problematic for early modern philosophers to be associated with Epicureanism, as a species of atheism? Boyle and Descartes famously were quite concerned about being taken for Epicureans. Wilson quotes an ingenious—and little-known—passage from Bacon that offers one solution:

Nay, even that school which is most accused of atheism doth most demonstrate religion; that is, the school of Leucippus and Democritus and Epicurus. For it is a thousand times more credible, that four mutable elements, and one immutable fifth essence, duly and eternally placed, need no God, than that an army of infinite small portions or seeds unplaced, should have produced this order and beauty without a divine marshal.<sup>4</sup>

Boyle, in his *Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (1686), opted for essentially this solution: the 'Epicurean casual concourse of atoms' could never have 'brought mere Matter into so orderly and well contriv'd a Fabrick as This World', hence a divine intelligence must have (Boyle 2000: vol. 5, 534; quoted by Wilson, p. 93). But in addition, Boyle reflected on the explanatory gaps that existed between pure mechanical explanations based on size, shape and motion of particles, and the actual variety of phenomena. As usual (given that he elsewhere described the body as a 'hydraulic-pneumatic machine'), he suggested a variant of mechanism that was more supple (charitably put) or more blurry (negatively put) than Galileo's or Descartes'. In an unpublished manuscript quoted by John Henry, he explicitly says that it is difficult to deduce all phenomena from the 'mechanical affections of atoms' and thus that one should not 'reject or despise' all explanations that are not immediately deducible from those properties (see Henry 1994: 123).

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Atheism is a notoriously problematic category to apply when interpreting early modern authors: because it is applied to thinkers who were in fact not atheists but something different (Spinoza, Bayle, Gassendi, Toland), or, perhaps, because it is, as was prominently argued by Alan Charles Kors, an entirely ‘fictive’ category made up by apologeticists, such that there are in fact *no* atheists before, say, the Baron d’Holbach in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. And when one finally discovers texts such as the *Theophrastus redivivus* (1659), one needs to elaborate suitable interpretive categories all over again!

It would have been helpful to have more of a statement of ‘method’, of intent, or at least of where Wilson feels her contribution sits in relation to various historiographical and philosophical debates about the Enlightenment (from Spinozism and the Radical Enlightenment to the Scottish and German ‘moments’, not to mention major studies of the emergence of autonomy, republicanism, Machiavellianism and so forth) or the Scientific Revolution, since after all this new focus on Epicureanism directly affects the issue of ‘revolution’, continuity or discontinuity, the rejection of antiquity and/or the revival of contrarian forms of antiquity against other, more orthodox forms.<sup>5</sup> It’s not that she has to choose a position, or give a lengthy review of methodological claims (which after all do not always match up with either the practice of the historian or the particular object they have reconstructed<sup>6</sup>), but we would have benefited from at least some discussion of the context. For instance, the category of ‘Epicureanism’ was a fluid one in early modern polemics, being almost synonymous with ‘Hobbism’, ‘atheism’, ‘Spinozism’ and so forth. Figures such as Ralph Cudworth or the Abbé Pluquet (Pluquet 1757) are among the few anti-materialists who devoted any effort to constructing serious typologies and taxonomies of unbelief or atheism, distinguishing for instance between some of the enemy thinkers who believe in the role of chance (Epicureans) and others who believe in necessity (Hobbists, Spinozists), and so forth.

But Wilson tends most of the time – not always – to revert to a canonical set of figures, or of analyses, such that the existence of alternate figures never perturbs the interpretive categories. Chapter 4 is somewhat baffling in this regard: if one opens a chapter entitled ‘Mortality and Metaphysics’ in a book on Epicureanism in early modern philosophy, one expects to hear something about the materialist or proto-materialist ‘pneumatologies’ being articulated in the wake of Paduan Averroism, and about new theories of the ‘mortal soul’ or the ‘material soul’ and how these articulate a new kind of psychological approach to the mind. And little has been written so far on this topic (aside from some ground-breaking papers by John P. Wright). But no: Wilson’s chapter is an odd collage of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz on standard metaphysical issues of body and mind (though admittedly the Leibniz section does discuss mortality and immortality). Its companion chapter (Chapter 5, entitled ‘Empiricism and Mortalism’) is devoted to the same

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issue but on the other side of the Channel (chiefly Locke and Hobbes), and suffers from another rather large omission: the existence in late seventeenth-century of a sustained debate, or better, series of pamphlets authored mainly by physicians, on the topic of the mortality of the soul.

This reprisal of the mortalist heresy began with the Leveller Richard Overton's *Mans Mortalitie* (1644), in which man is described as 'a compound wholly mortal' (Overton [1644] 1968: 7), and continued with a series of works by William Coward, such as *Second Thoughts on the Human Soul* (1702); equally important are Henry Layton's *A Search After Souls and Spiritual Operations in Man* (published without a date or place) and the theologian Henry Dodwell's *Epistolary Discourse, Proving from the Scriptures . . . that the Soul is Naturally Mortal* (1706). Dodwell is of course the author whose writings precipitated the controversy between Collins and Clarke—which makes all of this a bit less remote from the historian of early modern philosophy. In any case, Wilson does in fact mention on the first page of this chapter that Locke's father owned Overton's *Man's Mortalitie* (citing a recent biography of Locke), but then says nothing about any of these texts. These mortalist writings matter because of their unusual combination of Christian doctrine and materialism, developed later in the eighteenth century by Joseph Priestley in his *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777).<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, this problem of 'major and minor figures' is rarely, if ever fully resolved in anyone's work—it is also possible to lose sight of the coherence of a system by endlessly enumerating other works and debates of the time—but in the case of Catherine Wilson's book it is curious, because she can mention Valla, Vanini and Bentley on one page but not make any use of their works (typically the citation is to a secondary source). And what tends to follow is a fairly traditional capsule analysis of Locke or Hobbes. Again, Chapter 6, 'Some Rival Systems', is meant to present some of the anti-Epicurean argumentation. But then, why not provide us with some analysis of Richard Bentley's arguments in his Boyle Lectures? Instead, we get summaries of Leibniz and Berkeley. Chapter 7 is mysteriously entitled 'The Social Contract' (it never mentions the social contract); it is a presentation essentially of Hobbes' social theory, in summary terms. One might have expected Mandeville to make an appearance in the context of Epicurean social theory: but he doesn't, not once.

It has been claimed that

many of the early modern thinkers who became interested in Lucretius and Epicurus and their materialist natural science reversed the order of priorities in the Epicurean system. They essentially ignored the ethical standpoint that is the ultimate goal of natural science and took up the physics and biological investigations as of interest in their own right. (Meis 2005: 35)<sup>8</sup>

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Wilson, by contrast, suggests that Epicureanism became popular because it was morally and emotionally appealing. This doesn't seem quite right—what about Gassendi, the Epicurean physician Guillaume Lamy, or Walter Charleton? Weren't they motivated by natural-philosophical concerns? Moreover, if we look back at Blumenberg's statement quoted above we find the venerable Epicurean idea that the study of nature itself could have ethical relevance inasmuch as it would dispel fear. Certainly, there are plenty of cases of thinkers who worry about the ethical implications or consequences of an Epicurean cosmology (like Leibniz's moral reaction to Descartes' Epicurean hypothesis of world formation, discussed pp. 161–162).

What happens in modern Epicureanism (to use a phrase of La Mettrie's) that makes it different from ancient Epicureanism? Wilson suggests an additional way of differentiating ancient and modern atomism, which combines a shift in attitudes with an ontological or matter-theoretical shift: the ancients, she writes, had a 'relatively passive attitude' (p. 69) towards atoms, seeing them as 'existing irremediably outside of the range of human perception and manipulation', so that humans can only resign themselves to using their sense-perception to enjoy life as long as they can, without any ultimate knowledge of Nature. In contrast, the moderns felt that 'atomism awarded a permission and provided for a locus of control', through experimentation and reason (one thinks notably of Boyle's corpuscular physics as an extension of Baconian programs for the mastery of nature). Also pertaining to this kind of ontological shift would be the way in which Epicureanism creates a kind of ontological problem—of qualities, of reduction, of the difference between phenomenal experience and scientific explanation—which philosophers of science continue to battle with today (see Chalmers 2009). This is to go back to the idea that Epicureanism somehow engendered the modern world.

I would add an entirely different aspect of the shift from ancient to modern atomism: the move from the inanimate atom to a kind of *vitalized* atom, or living minima (see Wolfe forthcoming a). This is apparent in the materialist appropriation or extension of Gassendi's *semina rerum*, in the Epicurean physician Guillaume Lamy, in La Mettrie, who authored an entire *System of Epicurus*,<sup>9</sup> and in Diderot, who was fascinated with atomism from his earliest writings to the end of his life (the first draft of *D'Alembert's Dream* was actually entitled *Democritus' Dream: Le rêve de Démocrite*) (see Naigeon 1821: 213). None of these figures are mentioned by Wilson. Closely connected to this is matter theory (which comes up several times in the book, particularly in the good discussion of effluvia and seeds in Chapter 2, but never with an in-depth analysis, least of all of Gassendi). We might also have expected to hear more about problems such as the divisibility of matter (which runs from classical atomism to Descartes and straight through to Hume, via Collins and Clarke), or about the role of chemistry ('chymistry') in these transformations.<sup>10</sup>

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Aside from these various problems in form, in content, and perhaps in method, I do wish to emphasise that it is useful and important for us to have a book of this sort, perhaps not as specialised scholarship (of the sort found in collections on Epicureanism edited by Margaret Osler and by Gianni Paganini and Edoardo Tortarolo<sup>11</sup>), but as a general account of Epicureanism in modern philosophy. It is certainly useful to have a means of teaching something other than the opposition between Continental rationalists and British empiricists. In sum, *Epicureanism at the origins of modernity*, which is neither history of ideas nor strictly internalist history of philosophy, can serve as a high-level introductory work but will need to be supplemented right away with other works in the history of ideas and the history of science. Over various, somewhat disconnected, chapters and sub-chapters, it makes interesting use of the idea that modern philosophy is in its essence Epicurean. However, again, Wilson's book will not be of much use to the specialised reader: for the curious, it will not serve as the terminus.

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- (forthcoming b) 'A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie's medical Epicureanism', in *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, ed. Neven Leddy and Avi Lifschitz, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, n.p.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> An early call to dispense with the categories of rationalism and empiricism in dealing with early modern philosophy was David Norton's (Norton 1981), still focusing on epistemology; more recent versions of the idea are put forth in Gaukroger (2005) and Haakonssen (2006).
- <sup>2</sup> For a similar, but perhaps more complete presentation of Boyle see Shapin's 'Who was Robert Boyle?', Chapter 4 in Shapin (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Collins (1717) 60. The later 'pseudo-Collins' text entitled *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* (London, 1729) adds that the Stoic notion of *hexis* or *officium* is itself a determinist idea: we don't choose the role we must play in this world, and it 'determines' us to act in one way rather than another.
- <sup>4</sup> Bacon, 'Of Atheism' (Essay XVI), in Wilson (2008) 91.

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- <sup>5</sup> Wilson could have consulted the series of books edited by P.-F. Moreau under the general title *Le retour des philosophies antiques à l'âge classique* (the first volume is on the revival of Stoicism, the second on scepticism, and the third on Epicureanism: Moreau (1999, 2001) and Moreau and Deneys-Tunney (2003)).
- <sup>6</sup> As noted nicely in Thomson (2008) 22n.
- <sup>7</sup> On the mortalists see Burns (1972) and Thomson (2008), Chapter 4.
- <sup>8</sup> For more details on how modern Epicureanism 'betrays' its ancient model, see Moreau and Deneys-Tunney (2003) 7–9.
- <sup>9</sup> It is surprising to find no mention of La Mettrie, who was undoubtedly one of the most radical and self-affirmed Epicureans of the Enlightenment (perhaps sharing this position with Mandeville). On La Mettrie's Epicureanism see Wolfe (forthcoming b).
- <sup>10</sup> On atoms, matter and divisibility a useful and very clear book is Holden 2004; on chemistry and its connection to philosophy, Clericuzio (2001).
- <sup>11</sup> Osler (1991) and Paganini and Tortarolo (2004). See also Moreau and Deneys-Tunney (2003).