Simplicity as an Epicurean Explanatory Virtue

Philosophy may begin with wonder, but it ends, when successful, with explanation. Many philosophical systems would look entirely different if their modes of explanation were altered. Aristotle without teleology would not be Aristotle. Likewise, the ancient atomists would not be the same if one took away their emphasis on simplicity.

Or so it seems. Many contemporary scholars have commented on the use of simplicity as an explanatory virtue in Epicureanism, especially as it affects Epicurean theology. Bergson (1959) argues, for example, that the Epicurean gods cannot interfere with our world because our world can be explained without recourse to divine intervention. Penwill (1996) also argues more or less the same, that Epicureans claimed that by applying "Ockham's Razor" the idea of divine intervention can be ignored. In addition, Saunders (1984) wonders why Epicurus did not adopt a simpler view of free will, assuming that such a thing would have been attractive to him.

David Sedley has been perhaps the strongest proponent of the view that Epicureanism had simplicity as a guiding concern in forming explanations. Sedley (2007) argues that Democritus (and presumably Epicurus) used simplicity as a guideline in developing atomic materialism. Long and Sedley (1986) apply this to Epicurean theology, claiming that Epicureans did not believe their gods were real, but rather mere concepts, and that the genesis of this view involved, again, concerns of simplicity. Epicurus, according to Sedley, took Democritean insights, realized that actual gods were not necessary, and thus banished them from his ontology.

My paper will argue against this trend of assuming Epicureans applied something like Ockham's Razor to their explanations. I will first examine the concept of simplicity as described by analytic philosophy in Swinburne (1997) and Keele (2010). Then I will offer two main lines of evidence against the view that Epicureanism considered simplicity an explanatory virtue. The

first derives from the Epicurean Principle of Multiple Explanations, according to which all explanations consistent with the data are to be considered possible. Second, a charitable reading of Epicurean texts, focusing on Lucretius, makes it very difficult to believe that Epicureans accepted anything like a principle of parsimony. The import of this study lies both in Epicurean philosophy of science and theology, roughly supporting the deductive reading of Epicurean philosophy of science found in DeWitt (1954) and opposing the recent anti-realist interpretation of the Epicurean gods begun by Long and Sedley (1986).

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