

Epicurus' Panpsychism

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*nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare
mortalis, quoniam belli fera moenera Mavors
armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se
reiiicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris,
atque ita suspiciens tereti ceruice reposta
pascit amore avidos inhians in te, dea, visus
eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.*

-Lucretius

Epicurus is arguably an exponent of a form of panpsychism. The atomic swerve can be understood as “a small amount of free will exhibited by the atoms,”¹ and has two distinct consequences. In terms of Epicurus' physics, the swerve is the condition of atomic collisions; without the swerve, atoms falling downward through the void at equal speed would remain apart eternally. In terms of Epicurus' ethics, the swerve is the condition of our own free will; according to Epicurus, our free will cannot be an emergent property and must belong to the atoms themselves. The physical and ethical consequences of the swerve are, according to these accounts, discrete. The will to depart slightly from downward fall through the void has no apparent ethical goal, and free will, although present at the atomic level, is not manifest in all compounds. There is, however, another possible account of Epicurus' panpsychism, one which unites physics and ethics. This alternate account also solves a problem created by the swerve, the problem of contact and collision that plagued the atomism of Democritus. And while the swerve is the condition of free will, freedom is merely a necessary condition for the real goal of Epicurus' ethics, ataraxia. The pleasure that attends the state of ataraxia is, I argue, best understood as the feeling of invulnerability, and invulnerability is best understood as a mental property.

1 Skrbina 2017: 60.

In the first part of this paper I argue that panpsychism provides a solution, consistent with Epicurus' account of the atom, to a tenacious problem in Epicurus' physics. The argument goes:

1. Atomic contact and atomic collisions are necessary for Epicurus' physics;
2. Atomic contact and atomic collisions are *physically* impossible;
3. Atomic contact and atomic collisions are *mentally* possible;
4. Atoms are mental beings whose indivisibility and independence are expressions of atomic mind.

In the second part of the paper I argue that, for Epicurus, *ataraxia* is achieved when the mind acquires the essential characteristic of the atomic nature, invulnerability, by contemplating the nature of the atom. *Ataraxia* attends invulnerability, and there is intrinsic pleasure found in being immune from harm. This is the life of the gods, but the gods only achieve this state by felicitously imitating the atomic nature. While the gods, born in intermundial space and composed from the finest atoms, never suffer harmful impacts and thus incidentally simulate the atomic state, humans must work to emulate the impassivity of the atom. With great effort humans can make their bodies and, more importantly, their minds, resilient to all external impact. The crucial speculation is that there is a pleasure in invulnerability not only for gods and humans but for the atoms themselves. There is something it is like to be an atom, and this is a pleasurable state. This argument goes:

5. Our ethical goal is the intrinsic mental pleasure that is found in *ataraxia*;
6. *Ataraxia* arises when we make ourselves invulnerable;
7. We make ourselves invulnerable by practicing the continuous contemplation of nature;
8. In the continuous contemplation of nature the mind becomes like its object, viz. the atom.

THE ARGUMENT FOR PANPSYCHISM FROM EPICURUS' PHYSICS

Premise (1) is derived from Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*. According to Epicurus, everything is made up of bodies and void. Bodies include compounds and that from which compounds are made, atoms. Atoms move continuously, collide, and either rebound or, becoming temporarily entangled, form compounds.²

Premise (2) is derived from the implications of Epicurus' attempt to conceive of the discreteness of atoms and thus allow for contact and collision.³ It seems that Epicurus was aware of the problem of contact in Democritus' physics. For Democritus, divisibility requires void. Atoms are indivisible because they contain no void. However, as Aristotle points out, Democritus is at a loss to explain why two atoms in contact, i.e., with no void between them, do not become one and indivisible.⁴ Epicurus seems to have considered the minimal parts of his atoms as a solution to this problem. Konstan formulates Epicurus' solution as the principle that "the relationship among minimal parts in an atom is fundamentally different from the relationship among atoms."⁵ As Bell puts it, "the Epicureans adopted the view that the minimal parts of an atom are essentially constituents of *that* atom, and have no separate existence outside it. Thus minimal parts of two different atoms coming into contact are separable, but from this it no longer follows

2 Diogenes Laertius 10.40-43.

3 The general problem of collision in mechanistic physics is articulated in Kline and Matheson 1987. Godfrey 1990 argues that Democritus would have concurred with the Kline-Matheson thesis. Eliya Cohen 2018 has proposed an ingenious solution to the problem of contact in Epicurus' physics, as well as a persuasive account of compound individuation versus mere contact.

4 GC 326a 32-33.

5 Konstan 1979: 407. The minima can begin to overcome the problems of contact and collision because they are not corporeal. Deleuze 1990: 268 recalls the notion, originally attributed to Democritus, of the atom as *idea*: "The atom is that which must be thought, and that which can only be thought." Deleuze emphasizes that our grasp of the atom, whose shapes and sizes are for us unimaginable, is stabilized in the intelligibility of the minima: "the atom is endowed with parts that are thought, but there is a minimum thought which represents the smallest part of the atom. The individual atom is formed of thought minima" (ibid).

that minimal parts of the same atom are separable.”⁶ However, it is not clear that this does not simply move the problem to the level of minima. As Pyle notes, ascribing both separability *and* inseparability to minima “seems to involve attributing to each minimum part a sort of ‘knowledge’ of to which atom it belongs.”⁷

Premise (3) is required unless Epicurus is going to give up premise (1) or ignore premise (2). We can see that a version of premise (3) has already been suggested by Pyle, although he immediately objects that, “it is hard to see how one might begin to account for this in terms of mere distribution of matter.”⁸ Bodnár also introduces the possibility of a mental aspect of the atom in his discussion of an Epicurean version of ‘remote touch,’ i.e., the alternative to contact that Philoponus proposed in his account of Democritus’ atoms. Bodnár writes,

when two atoms have reached each other they do not try to push forward and do not come to a halt, rather what they do is detect that there is an obstacle ahead and change direction without waste of time. That atoms ‘sense’ each other only when they have reached adjacent locations, and not when they are one or two spatial units ahead of collisions, does not seem to make a crucial difference in the description of natural processes.⁹

Pyle and Bodnár are not the first to wistfully attribute mentality to Epicurus’ atoms. As Solère reminds us, Bayle lamented Epicurus’ renunciation of the souls Democritus gave to his atoms.¹⁰ But a similar idea was advanced in earnest by Marx in his 1841 doctoral dissertation, *On the Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. Marx perceives in Epicurus’ atoms “the natural form of abstract individual self-consciousness,”¹¹ and writes concerning repulsion that

6 Bell 2006: 42.

7 Pyle 2006: 657.

8 Ibid.

9 Bodnár 1998: 58-59.

10 Solère 2017. Cf. O’Brien 1981: 342 on a “degree of animism” in Democritus.

11 Marx 1975: 65.

it is the first form of self-consciousness, it corresponds therefore to that self-consciousness which conceives itself as immediate-being, as abstractly individual. The concept of the atom is therefore realised in repulsion, inasmuch as it is abstract form, but no less the opposite, inasmuch as it is abstract matter; for that to which it relates itself consists, to be true, of atoms, but other atoms.¹²

Marx conceives of the atoms themselves as asserting their individuality in collisions with other atoms.¹³ Marx does not connect the abstract self-consciousness of the atom to the minimal parts. However, Konstan¹⁴ and Bodnár¹⁵ agree that Epicurus' minimal parts provide a 'deep structure' that allows for some degree of individuality in atoms. Thus, unlike modern atoms, which are qualitatively identical, Epicurus has the resources to make every atom (even the infinite number of atoms with identical extrinsic qualities, i.e., shape, size, and weight) independent and individual. All that is required is a notion of atoms as mental beings.

(4) is the first conclusion, which follows from (1), (2), and (3). The suggestion that atoms have minds is not novel. When treating the doctrine of the four elements of soul, Kerferd takes up the question of the mysterious *psychicity* of the unnamed fourth element discussed by Epicurus' successors. For the purposes of an exhaustive treatment of the logical possibilities, Kerferd considers first the possibility that *psychicity* "is a specific property of the separate, individual atoms of the fourth element,"¹⁶ but quickly dismisses it, saying,

it is hardly possible that this should have been Epicurus' view. It violates the general principle that atoms are quality-free except for shape, size, and weight – par. 54 (though admittedly the prohibition there applies to the assignment of *perceptible* qualities other than shape, size and weight) and the doctrine that atoms cannot change and so are *apathe* – par. 54-55.¹⁷

12 Ibid. 52.

13 For a brief and very clear account of Marx's dissertation, see Schafer 2003.

14 Konstan 1979: 407.

15 Bodnár 1998: 59.

16 Kerferd 1971: 85.

17 Ibid.

Kerferd's admission that Epicurus is, strictly speaking, merely silent on intrinsic, imperceptible qualities of the atom, is important for my argument, as is the objection that *psychicity* would necessarily involve a change in the atom, and violate the condition that the atom be *apathe*. As a physicist, Epicurus is generally silent on the intrinsic qualities of the atom. However, Epicurus does offer us a glimpse of the 'deep structure' of the atom, i.e., its minimal parts, and some idea of their qualities. The minima are parts of the atom *per se*, and cannot, by definition, exist independently. Epicurus also tells us that "it is not possible for these [minimal parts] to possess motion and so move together [into compounds]." ¹⁸ The minima are responsible for the independence and the indivisibility of the atom. From this it is clear that the minima do not behave like atoms, which move together into compounds, but are never parts of a true whole. The minima *actively* relate to one another; there is nothing else to hold them together. *The minima are the continuous activity of the atom.* The atom is indivisible because the minima 'refuse' to be divided in the same way that the atom is independent because the minima of one atom 'refuse' to be united to the minima of another atom.

The Stoic cosmos provides an example of how to conceive of this atomic consciousness without violating the principle that the atom is *apathe*. In Book II of *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero's Balbus explains that the cosmos is a single, continuous, spherical, immune to all outside force or hindrance, wise, happy, eternal, and perceptive. Diogenes Laertius paints an even more vivid picture of the cosmos as a single atom: the cosmos is one, limited, a sphere surrounded by infinite void; inside cosmos is no void; the cosmos is god, an animal, immortal, rational, perfect in happiness, immune to everything bad. ¹⁹

18 DL 10. 59.

19 Re: 'single and continuous' cf. DND 2.84; 'spherical' 2.116; 'immune to all outside force' 2.35; 'immune to hindrance' 2.36; 'wise, happy, eternal' 2.21; 'perceptive' 2.22. Diogenes Laertius paints an even more vivid picture of the cosmos as a single atom: the cosmos is one, limited, a sphere surrounded by infinite void; inside cosmos is no void (DL 7.140); the cosmos is god, an animal, immortal, rational, perfect in happiness, immune to everything bad (7.147).

While the idea of the cosmos as an atom might seem strange, there is in fact some basis for comparison. As Konstan suggests, Epicurus seems to have imagined that the number of minima in any atom is, while not infinite, incalculably large.²⁰ Thus the internal complexity of the atom's minimal parts could easily rival that of the Stoic cosmos.²¹ As far as the objection that *psychicity* would involve change, we can see that the Stoic cosmos is a finite plenum in an infinite void, a plenum which admits of internal activity, but activity which does not affect the spherical exterior, i.e., its size and shape. From the outside, the perceptible, external qualities of the Stoic cosmos would remain atomic, despite its rich, even tumultuous, inner life.²²

THE ARGUMENT FOR PANPSYCHISM FROM EPICURUS' ETHICS

Premise (5) is stated plainly by Epicurus: "when we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe... but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul."²³ The Epicurean notion of pleasure is perhaps best expressed by Merlan's paraphrase of Diogenes of Oinanda: "this painless condition in and of itself means not only the absence of pain, but a feeling of *hedone sui generis viz., a hedone the source of which is no longer any external stimulus, but the organism itself.*"²⁴

Premise (6) is derived primarily from the *Letter to Menoeceus*, but also draws upon remarks in the other letters which make clear that our ethical end is achieved when we make ourselves physically and psychologically impassible and self-

Finally, Plotinus invokes this Stoic atomic cosmos in *Ennead* IV.5.8.

20 Konstan 1982: 66.

21 Indeed, according to this account of the number of minima, any individual atom would be more complex than almost any compound formed by atoms.

22 A related idea, of the impulse of the swerve in the Stoic cosmos, is explored in Phipps-Burton 2017.

23 *DL* 10.131.

24 Merlan 1990: 2.

sufficient.²⁵ Being unmoved by fear (of the gods and death) and being self-sufficient and as invulnerable as possible (to hunger, thirst, heat, cold) brings freedom from disturbance.

Premise (7), the association of continuous contemplation with *ataraxia*, is found in all three letters,²⁶ but is formulated most clearly at 10.82, where Epicurus writes, “freedom from disturbance... involves a continuous recollection of the general and most important points [of the system],” and at 10.116, where he commands Pythocles to “devote [himself] to the contemplation of the basic principles [i.e., atoms] and the unlimited [i.e., void]” in order to “acquire the [goal] for the sake of which these things should be contemplated.”

The conclusion, (8), follows from premises (5), (6), and (7) taken together with (4). For Epicurus there is a correlation between the physical arrangement of atoms that compose the soul and the state of the soul;²⁷ this arrangement can be ameliorated by contemplative activity; and there is a correspondence between thinking and its object. Vlastos’ interpretation of Democritus, which takes “‘well-being’ to refer to the soul’s atomic configuration”²⁸ and identifies well-being with “the order and integrity of the atomic soul-cluster,”²⁹ is echoed in Konstan’s account of Epicurus:

The theory is essentially this: the body and soul feel pain or perturbations, respectively, when their healthy constitution, that is, the natural coherence of their atoms, is disrupted, and pleasure rises from the return of the body to its healthy state or else consists simply in the experience of well-being.³⁰

He continues, noting that “the relative stability of the soul, the atoms of which, like those of every other physical structure, exhibit a certain resistance under collision and tend to preserve their

25 DL 10.123; 10.124; 10.127; 10.128; 10.130; 10.132; 10.135. Cf. Mitsis 1998:1 “Perhaps the most characteristic, albeit problematic, element of Hellenistic ethical thought is a deeply held conviction that individuals can banish all contingency from their lives and, with the help of reason alone, aspire to a condition of divine invulnerability, self-sufficiency, and happiness.”

26 DL 10.37; 10.85, 10.122; 10.135.

27 Akin to the contemporary discussion of the ‘neural correlates of consciousness.’

28 Vlastos 1945: 590.

29 Vlastos 1945: 583.

30 Konstan 2009: 131.

natural coherence, defines the soul's *diathesis* or disposition."³¹ Vlastos notes that "the distinctive purpose of Democritean *sophie*" is "to heal the soul directly through reasoning (*logismos*)."³² This principle is explicit in Epicurean philosophy, but perhaps best expressed in the *Letter to Menoeceus*.³³ Finally, according to Laursen, the "identity of mind and thing thought is...probably Epicurus's doctrine as much as it is that of Aristotle, or even more."³⁴

The idea that the mind acquires the character of the objects of thought (found in Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4, Marcus Aurelius *Med.* 5.16, Seneca *ep.* 95) is uncontroversial if the object is the gods or nature (the gods are blessed and indestructible, nature herself is always 'safe' and 'secure'), but it would seem to be a problem if the object is an inert and lifeless particle of matter. Indeed, the Cyrenaic criticism reappears: if the absence of pain sought by the Epicureans is the condition of a corpse, then the mind that has taken on the character of the atom by contemplating it will have become free from disturbance by becoming free from experience. This would be akin to the Epicurean idea of death, i.e., the complete cessation of sense experience.

However, as I have argued in the first part of this paper, the atom must have some fundamental idea of self, it must have some self-relation. I argue that this is some form of contemplation, similar to that found in Aristotle. For Aristotle continuous contemplation does not involve an object external to thought. Thus for Aristotle and for Epicurus, continuous contemplation makes us invulnerable and issues in a divine life, a life that is unwearied, pleasant, and blessed in virtue of its indestructibility. It is not difficult to see the similarities between the life of *theoria* in Aristotle and Epicurus. For Aristotle,

the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and

31 Konstan 2009: 133. Laursen points out that, "Sometimes, it seems, the mind has 'stiffened up' and almost nothing will affect you," (Laursen 2001: 135).

32 Vlastos 1945: 588.

33 DL 10.32.

34 Laursen 1995: 60-61.

to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for a man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man.³⁵

What is more difficult to see is the fact that Aristotle and Epicurus agree on *theoria* as the essential character of the divine life. Of course, for Aristotle, “the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative.”³⁶ My argument is that, for Epicurus, the life of the gods, characterised by blessedness and indestructibility,³⁷ is still only a likeness of the life of the atom. The atom is by nature the divine *theoria*, imperfectly reproduced by the intermundial gods and by men. For Epicurus the ideal object of thought is the embodiment of being and thinking in the atom. The Parmenidean identity of being and thinking in the atom makes it the most thinkable thing in nature.

CONCLUSION

Hegel concludes that “Epicurus banishes thought as implicit, without its occurring to him that his atoms themselves have this very nature of thought; that is, their existence in time is not immediate but essentially mediate, and thus negative or universal.”³⁸ Hegel does not attribute mind to Epicurus’ atom, but discerns in the relation between the atom and the void described by Epicurus the elements of thought that he makes explicit in his own work. While Hegel detected an unrecognized resemblance, Marx articulated (in Hegelian terms) the explicit identification of the atom with abstract self-consciousness. My view is that Epicurus understood that blessedness and indestructibility both depend upon mind, and that true blessedness attends true indestructibility. The gods make this *visible* to us (via the *eidola* we receive from them), but there

35 EN 1177b 18-23.

36 EN 1178b 22-23. Cf. *Met.* 1072b 13-30.

37 DL 10.123.

38 Hegel 1983: 292.

is also a more fundamental grasp of the imperceptible, the non-evident, by thought, which reveals the divine nature of the atom.

Reale quotes Alfieri on the failure of Epicurus to ground our own individuality in the unity of the atom. Alfieri concludes that, "that unity which is the atom is the lower limit of being...not the concrete, rich, and individual kind of being."³⁹ The contrast is also affirmed by Hegel, who remarks, "mind indeed, is also an atom and one; but as one within itself, it is at the same time infinitely full."⁴⁰ But it is not necessarily the case that the Epicurean atom is the *lower* limit of being. There is no reason to think that the atom, with its incalculably large number of non-corporeal minima, does not have a rich but tranquil inner life. Indeed, Epicurus suggests that our tranquillity is merely an adumbration of atomic *ataraxia*.

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39 Reale 1985: 153.

40 Hegel 1983: 304. Cf. Leibniz, *Monadology* 19, on monads as soul-like.

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