

Thomas Carnes - Keeping the Friend in Epicurean Friendship

Post by “warjuning” of July 9, 2023 at 7:07 PM

Thank you for your feedback! Sorry for the late response.

I concur with your assessment of Epicurus' ontology. Atomic configurations are irreducible to the quantitative magnitudes of atoms (size, shape, weight, solidity), as qualities arise from the ways atoms relate and structure themselves. The reality of these relations guarantee the reality of what emerges, as atoms are not merely juxtaposed to each other without genuine unity, but are truly organized and conjugated. Maybe I am mistaken, but when atomism posits the reality of "atoms and atoms/atoms and void", the "and" is just as real as atoms and void. It signifies that they do not just stand next to each other, but they are in some sense "together".

For reasons of utility, this could be mapped onto the modern distinction between internal and external relations. Internal relations constitute the being of a thing, like building blocks. They are inseparable from it. If they cease to be, the object ceases too. External relations exist **between** the terms they relate and conjugate without constituting them. They allow their subjects to remain intrinsically independent from them. Take for example the following proposition:

i) Warjuning is sitting on his bed

The relation between me and my bed does not constitute either of us as objects. If I choose to stand up, I will still be quite human and my bed will still be a bed. Nonetheless, I am truly on my bed, and my bed is truly supporting my body. There is a real, non-constitutional relation between us.

I believe something similar is happening within Epicurean cosmology:

- Atoms do not constitute one another, as they exist in their own unique, indivisible unity. Yet, they give rise to real organization and structures. Similarly, atoms move within the void and the void yields to atoms, but both interact without constituting one another. None of those elements just stand side by side, juxtaposed to one another. Yet, they are not each other's building blocks either.
- Epicurus, by virtue of his realist epistemology, posits objects with genuine organization. If relations between atoms are non-constitutive and external to them, and if the unity they establish is genuine and real, then they must be also ontological and fully real. This means that atoms are not merely moving next to each other, but the "and" has real force. It is equivalent to concrete wholeness and structure.

If the "and" is primordial in such a way, then it makes sense to see it throughout Epicurean cosmology. To return to our initial subject, I may appreciate a friend because of their virtuous, and thus pleasant character. For instance, I appreciate my best friend because we are very like-minded, which makes me feel safe and carefree in being myself and striking all kinds of discussions. She possesses spontaneity, creativity, humour and numerous other good qualities, that she expresses in her own singular way. When I am confronted by this genuinely pleasant uniqueness of my friend, they gradually become valuable for me. Our relation is wholly inter-subjective. It cannot be reduced to "intrinsic value" that my friend possesses before I grew to appreciate her, nor is it reducible to my opinion of her. We are both causally responsible for it, and yet, it is not reducible to our constitution as beings. If we would stop being friends, we would still be individuated, atomic beings. It is fully external. Nonetheless, we are both truly affecting each other, maximizing our individual and shared pleasure, have developed a positive disposition towards one another and have agreed to be friends. There is real causal force exchanged being two atomic objects, which are also normative subjects. Yet both can still "break" from the relation between them, without this making the relation in any sense unreal. This only points towards the contingency of affairs, which permeates everything apart from atoms and void themselves.

My thoughts and beliefs are still being formed, but I am glad to share them here.