
The format of the book is simple. The introductory chapter, after defending Epicureanism as a political philosophy, sets out the reasons for the book: mainly that despite the great influence Epicureanism has had on the development of modern political philosophy, it is now nearly ignored. In this chapter Nichols says, 'In one way the entire De rerum natura has a political character, in that as a whole it is directed against customary religious beliefs, and the genesis and existence of religion are intimately associated with political life' (p.17), an important connection for the book as a whole. The second chapter, 'The Poetic Presentation of the Teaching', is really a summary of some of the most important points which have been raised by Lucretian and Epicurean scholarship. Although this must be aimed at those unfamiliar with the Classical approach, it is by no means merely a list of who thought what. Nichols manages to sort out those crises of Lucretian scholarship most relevant to his purpose and often to add his own view, all too briefly. The reader is now adequately prepared to deal with what follows.

The following two chapters, which between them account for two thirds of the book as a whole, are an analysis of the poem. This part of the work is no doubt invaluable for the non–Classicist because not only does Nichols set out in sections the 'meat' of Lucretius' work, but he also shows, as he goes, how the arguments fit together and in which direction they are leading. He then sorts out from them, again at the conclusion of each section, what can be deduced to build up our concept of any political philosophy Lucretius may be expounding. For a Classicist, however, this is the most frustrating part of the book. Knowing the story already, so to speak, it becomes only too easy to begrudge the author the time he devotes to telling it, when he often mentions tantalizing snippets of ideas with too much brevity for one not conversant with the ins and outs of modern political science. This method of presentation also has the disadvantage that no idea is ever developed completely in one place, but several ideas, not necessarily unrelated, may be developing at once. As I said above, the author makes a very good job of showing what relates to what, but this is a task which he has imposed upon himself.

The analysis of the books is disrupted by the fact that one part of the poem is outstandingly more important for a discussion of political philosophy than the rest, namely Lucretius' description of the development of man from prepolitical society to the present. Accordingly, Nichols divides his two chapters between Books I - IV and Books V - VI. The first of these is prefaced by a brief outline of the overall organisation of the poem, the second is split into three sections: the rest of Book V, the development of man, and Book VI.
Chapter 3 claims only to be an analysis of the first four books, after the initial remarks on the poem as a whole. Each book is given roughly equal space. What is remarkable about this chapter is that Nichols' comments are concerned almost entirely with Lucretius' frequent references to and arguments against traditional religion. Although he has already explained, at least in the sentence quoted above, the link between this and political life, he does not reiterate this and one is left wondering if perhaps the book has abandoned its original purpose altogether. And, indeed, this chapter, and the following, do hold some interesting points for those interested in Lucretius' idea of religion. For example, Nichols discusses the advantages of a traditional State religion, advantages which Lucretius ignores, such as its influence on the individual not to commit crime, and its comforting dogma in the face of an uncertain Universe, and discusses how Epicureanism meets or fails to meet the problems which adherence to a religion can solve.

Finally in the fourth chapter we come to the political scientist's discussion of the Epicurean's discussion of man's development towards political society. This makes the chapter rather lopsided with this section taking the bulk of the space, and Book VI being edged out into three pages at the end. However, this is the crux of the discussion of the De Rerum Natura. Nichols' treatment of the passage is well-ordered and convincing. He is troubled not so much to draw overall conclusions as to look carefully at the validity of Lucretius' premises here and to fully explore the potential of his conclusions. The one disappointment of this chapter is that the author takes so little time over the plague of Athens which ends the poem.

The final chapter, all too short, compares what we have learned of Lucretius and Epicureanism with three more modern political philosophers, Hobbes, Montesquieu and Rousseau, both showing what influence the ancient philosophy had on them and using their development of its ideas to point up the strong and weak points of the earlier thought. Nowhere is there a conclusion which draws together all the various lines of thought which the author has instigated throughout his essay. Everything is dealt with as far as it will be when it occurs for the last time, leaving the final chapter free to move forward rather than recapitulate.

The author of this work is a political scientist, not a classicist, and while I have no argument with his understanding of Lucretius' Latin verses, yet this fact does have a bearing on one's consideration of the book. In his final conclusion the author makes explicit what has been apparent throughout, that this book is not designed as a contribution to Classical scholars' understanding of the De Rerum Natura, but as a clear analysis of the work that is designed primarily for the non-classicist, followed by a concluding paragraph which ties in what has been said with more modern and indeed more 'political' philosophies. This means, in the end, that Nichols has not really discussed Epicurean political philosophy in a systematic way: Epicurus is referred to as a point of comparison
rather than considered in his own right, and other Epicureans are completely ignored. Perhaps, as I have suggested, the title of the book is misleading to a classicist, but it is still unfair to criticise the work for not dealing with what it never intended to discuss: as it stands there is yet a great deal we can learn from it.

Susan Hope


Many will be familiar with some of the works of Plutarch of Chaeronea, Galen the medical writer, and Apuleius of Madaura, without having the slightest clue that they could all be grouped with a large number of other known thinkers under the heading ‘Middle Platonists’. This title is generally given to those who professed the Platonist (or in some cases Pythagorean) faith in the 1st century B.C. and the first two centuries A.D. during which period Platonism gradually became the dominant philosophy, having important influences on popular religion and early Christianity.

Philosophically the Middle Platonists — or rather the scant remains which they have left us — are not of great importance, but one’s assessment of them is vital for determining one’s attitude to problems in both Plato and Plotinus. Historically they should be studied by all who are interested in the cultural life of the early Roman Empire as well as by all students of early Christian history and doctrine.

Up to this point we have had no thorough account of Middle Platonism in the English language, indeed no adequate account at all, and for this reason alone Dillon’s book must be welcomed. Its uniqueness has also presented the author with a serious problem, since the book must fulfil the role of a ‘specialist contribution’ as well as being a readable account of the thought of the period which will serve as an introduction to the non-specialist. It is perhaps more satisfactory in the former role, which is in part the result of the nature of Dillon’s subject matter and partly a consequence of his approach.

Dillon has decided to depart from the theory of two major schools within Middle Platonism, concentrating on individuals rather than on ‘movements’ or common attitudes. Indeed, by abandoning the slightly unsatisfactory term ‘eclectic’ as applied to Middle Platonists, he has excused himself from discussing a feature which forms a key link in the understanding of both Platonists and other philosophers of the time. There was a compelling trend towards reconciling the philosophers of the past with each other, explaining their differences as ones of terminology or context, and so uniting philosophy (or two