

Paul McMenemy: 'Epicurus in the Scottish Enlightenment'

Epicurus is an anomalous figure in the history of thought, at once influential and marginal. His thought is probably more agnostic than atheistic, but either way was seen as incompatible with Christianity. From the end of the Classical period to the 18th Century the term Epicureanism is little more than a crude synonym for atheism. This begins to be re-evaluated first by the French philosophes, and less daringly by the Scottish literati. David Hume is the only Scottish philosopher to identify with Epicurus, even as an imaginative exercise, most notably for a whole chapter of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. However Hume's Epicurus is not strictly the historical one, inasmuch as we know anything about him. Nonetheless this "Epicureanism", as much as anything else, brought upon Hume the wrath of James Beattie. Beattie's extreme piety could see only atheism in Epicurus or Hume. He continues the tradition of using the terms Epicureanism and atheism interchangeably. Other Scottish philosophers took more nuanced views but generally steered clear of the controversy. The only other Scottish writer to seriously discuss Epicurean ideas, and the one with the most complex attitude towards them, was James Burnet, Lord Monboddo. Yet he does his best to avoid the association, citing Horace rather than Lucretius as the source of his extremely Lucretian (and thereby Epicurean) views on human origins. Beattie, despite his personal relationship with Monboddo, was revolted by his arguments and attacks Monboddo as he had earlier done Hume. In Hume's case Epicureanism was only one of many criticisms; for Monboddo, Beattie uses it as his main weapon, perhaps because he was aware of Monboddo's aversion. Epicureanism remained disreputable but this eighteenth century discussion may mark a move towards its re-admittance to the philosophical mainstream.