An Epicurean Argument in Cicero, De Fato XVII-40

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The De Fato is an unsatisfactory work, not only because it has come down to us incomplete, but also because Cicero wrote it in a perfunctory way, at a time when he was again thinking of taking an active part in politics after the death of Julius Caesar. It is sometimes possible, however, to see what has gone wrong, and I believe this can be done at XVII-40, and that we have here an argument used by Epicurus.

At 39, Cicero distinguished two opinions held by the old (veterrum) philosophers, the first that everything happened by necessity (omnia ita fato fieri, ut id fatum vim necessitatis adferret), which he attributed to Democritus, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and, strangely, Aristotle, the second that there are voluntary movements of the mind which are not controlled by fate (sine ullo fato esse animorum motus voluntarii). He does not say who held this view. Between these opinions, Cicero says, Chrysippus tried to strike a mean, but leaned towards those who believe in freedom. However, he fell into difficulties and, in spite of himself, supported necessity. In 40 Cicero brings in the notion of assent, which he says he has treated at the beginning of his speech/now lost. Acts of assent, he says, were said to be determined by necessity by those old philosophers who thought that everything happened by fate (omnia fato fieri), but their opponents tried to free these acts from fate (fato assensiones liberabat), and argued like this: – “If all things happen by fate, all things happen with an antecedent cause; and if this is true of desire (appetitus), it is true also of what follows desire, and therefore true of assent. But if the cause of desire is not within us, desire itself is not in our power: and if this is so, then those things which are brought about by desire are not within us. Therefore neither assent nor action is in our power. And from this it follows that neither praise nor blame are just, nor honours nor punishment.” But, Cicero continues, since there is something wrong here, they think it right to conclude that not all things that happen happen of necessity.

In 41 Cicero shows at length how Chrysippus tried to answer this argument by making distinctions between various kinds of causes.

One difficulty here is that Cicero seems to connect the notion of
assent with the views of some 'old' philosophers, of whom the latest named is Aristotle. But the theory of assent was introduced by Zeno, and cannot have been familiar to any earlier philosopher. The detailed argument given in 40, therefore, must be by someone contemporary with, or later than, Zeno, but earlier than, or contemporary with, Chrysippus. Epicurus is an obvious possibility not only for his dates but also because he wrote on similar problems. Indeed the argument given would fit very well into his mouth. In the fragments of one of the books on free will from his Περί Φύσις there are several passages where he seems to be arguing that if all actions are determined, then reproach and punishment cannot be justified (e.g. frag. 31. 27. Arrighetti). (A very similar argument is also to be found in Diogenes of Oenoanda, 32 Chilton). It is also relevant that in the preceding columns of this fragment of the Περί Φύσις (22-26) there seems to be implied, in spite of their obscurity, an analysis of the psychological process that intervenes between sensation and action which, though expressed in Epicurus’ own terms, is very similar in general form to that of Zeno (as Arrighetti remarks, p. 578 note [28]).

As we have them, Epicurus’ arguments are directed solely against Democritus. He is named by Diogenes of Oenoanda and must be the man praised as “much superior both to those who came before and to those who came later” in the Περί Φύσις (31.30 9-11). But this concentration on Democritus could be due to the fact that much of Epicurus’ work was written before Zeno came into prominence. He was some years younger than Epicurus and set up his school some years later. Once established, and making almost literally a song and dance about assent (Cic. Acad. Priora ii 144) he must surely have become a target for the prolific and polemical Epicurus.

If we accept this argument, Cicero’s passage may throw some light on the puzzling term τὸ ἀπογγεγεννημένον used so freely by Epicurus in the fragments. This appears to be his technical term for that stage in the psychological process which is in our power (frag. 31.24 and 26). But its meaning – effect, reaction, or something similar – makes it by no means an obvious choice for something that is spontaneous and in our power. In the argument given above Cicero speaks of illa... qua adpetitu efficiuntur, and these are probably to be identified with, or at least include, the assensiones and actiones of his next sentence. Assensio is of course a Stoic term, and we need not suppose that Epicurus used it in his own psychological analyses, but he seems, like