



I Spit Upon the Noble: The Epicurean Critique of Love of Honor and the Origins of Modernity

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I Spit Upon the Noble:
The Epicurean Critique of Love of Honor and the Origins of Modernity

A dissertation presented

by

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to

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Abstract

Modern liberal democracies regard “pursuit of happiness” as one of the fundamental rights that governments are instituted to protect—but modern political thought has comparatively little to say about happiness itself. The modern view seems to suggest that happiness is something we ought to pursue in private, which would demote politics to an instrumental role. To understand and critique this view, I study one alternative—the philosophy of Epicurus, the ancient theorist of happiness in private life.

Epicurus taught that the life of *hēdonē* or “pleasure” was the life of *eudaimonia* or “happiness.” He advised his followers to “live unnoticed”—that is, to shun political participation on account of its coercive, unpleasant character. Epicurus’ philosophy is often thought to be plainly anti-political. I argue—based on my study of Epicurean fragments and of the poem of Lucretius—that Epicureanism is, in fact, intensely political. Its hedonistic theory of the good is designed so as to deprecate love of honor and desire for public recognition: “I spit upon the

noble,” Epicurus declares, “when it provides no pleasure.” Similarly, his physical theory describes a universe offering no support and no guidance for human politics. “Justice” has no intrinsic connection to the human end; it is a word we use to describe agreements for the sake of mutual advantage. Gone is the splendor of moral virtue, as depicted in Plato and Aristotle.

I argue that early modern thought is in constant dialogue with Epicurean political philosophy. The moderns can, in general, be said to share Epicurus’ hostility to “the noble”—which they disparage as “pride” or “vainglory.” The more radical among them entertain Epicurus’ notion of an indifferent universe, and his account of human political origins. This is not, however, in order to advocate a return to an Epicurean policy of philosophic withdrawal. The modern strategy, as epitomized by Hobbes, is to attempt to solve the problems associated with political justice by advocating for the general adoption of a democratized form of hedonism.

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Epicurus claimed to have been self-taught. It is my happy duty to go against his example, by acknowledging the many intellectual debts I owe—and particularly those I owe to the following individuals. Without their assistance, this project would not have come to fruition.

The ideas put forward in this dissertation were, in many cases, developed or refined in conversations with my colleagues. To give a complete accounting would be almost impossible, but I would like to specifically recognize Adriana Alfaro, Jonathan Bruno, Susan Hamilton, Gladden Pappin, Rory Schacter, and Alex Wall. I also owe thanks to Daniela Cammack, Matt Landauer, and Will Selinger, with whom I read and discussed Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* in Greek. Additionally, I would like to thank those who commented on the excerpts of this project which I presented at meetings of the Harvard Political Theory Workgroup and the New England Political Science Association.

I owe a great deal to each of my committee members. Eric Nelson provided invaluable commentary at every stage of the writing process. His critiques were incisive and bracing; I felt myself thinking at a higher level after each of our meetings.

Richard Tuck was consistently generous with his time and knowledge, particularly during a decisive stage in the formulation of my thesis. It was during one of our conversations that I first

began to appreciate the political significance of what I have come to call “the critique of love of honor.”

My understanding of Epicureanism, and of much else, has benefited from the instruction and example of Harvey Mansfield. It was he who first called my attention to the political dimensions of Lucretius' text. He helped to guide me through the maze of early graduate school, and he has now seen this project through to its completion. I cannot adequately express the debts I owe to him as a teacher, and as an exacting—but unfailingly constructive—critic of my work.

As should go without saying, any omissions or errors are the full responsibility of the author.

PART ONE:
EPICUREAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Chapter I: The City and the Garden

Epicurus was one of the most important philosophers of the Hellenistic period, and the school of philosophy he founded—the Epicurean—was one of the most influential and enduring schools of Greek and Roman antiquity.¹ Epicurean philosophy provides a systematic account of many of the topics traditionally addressed by the ancient schools: what we know and the conditions of our knowledge; the physical world and our place within it; life's purpose and the way to attain happiness; the soul, the afterlife, and the nature of the gods. The Epicurean school is not, however, generally thought of as having made an important contribution to *political* philosophy.

The purpose of this essay will be to argue that it has—that Epicurus and his followers put forward a distinctive political philosophy of considerable intrinsic interest and real historical influence. In the course of making this claim, I will analyze the dismissive arguments against Epicurean political philosophy, and offer my own interpretation of the surviving texts of the Epicurean school. I hope to show that these texts need to be understood against the background of ancient political thought—and the Socratic tradition, in particular. I will highlight significant areas of agreement between Epicurus and Socrates, while showing exactly *where* and *why*

¹ Where available, quotations from the fragments of Epicurus are derived from the translations and texts provided by A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (hereafter LS, with section and text numbers indicated). I note cases in which I depart from Long and Sedley's translations. I also supply references to the Greek text and translation of R.D. Hicks' Loeb edition of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (hereafter DL). Quotations from Lucretius are taken from Cyril Bailey, *Titi Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (hereafter DRN). I note cases in which I depart from Bailey's translation. I have consulted the selections from Lucretius' poem provided in LS and provide references where available. I have also consulted W.H.D. Rouse's Loeb edition of Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (revised by M.F. Smith), and Walter Englert's verse translation.

Epicurus departs from the Socratic consensus and proposes an alternative way of understanding the political things.

To give an overview of my interpretation: I find that Epicurus makes important contributions to political philosophy in two general areas. The first follows from his ethics, the second, from his physics. In ethics, Epicurus attacks “love of honor” with a vigor and comprehensiveness which were unparalleled in ancient thought. The attack on love of honor provides the context for the vehement denunciation of “the noble” (*to kalon*) which I have taken for the first part of my title: Epicurus once declared, “I spit upon the noble, when it provides no pleasure.” He furthermore appears to have devoted substantial effort to the task of showing that “the noble” as such *never* provides authentic pleasure. This—much more than outright hedonism—is what distinguishes Epicurus from Socrates and the Socratic tradition. It is his first major contribution to political thought.

In physics, Epicurus rejects any account of “purpose” in the natural world. His opposition to teleology leads him, in particular, to reject any attempt to find in nature a “guide” for human political affairs. There is no “plan laid up in heaven” which we can use as a paradigm for understanding politics or for ordering political life. In essential agreement with the pre-Socratics, Epicurus regards currently existing political arrangements as products of a long process driven by chance and necessity. He denies that any “political exercise of reason” could shake the grip of chance and necessity on human affairs—even in the best of circumstances. The only “freedom” that can truly be said to exist in this world is the freedom of the solitary philosopher.

I will explore these arguments in detail in later chapters. For the time being, it is important to note that, for all the intrinsic interest of its arguments, Epicurean philosophy would

have been little more than a historical footnote, if it had not been for the rediscovery of a manuscript of the Epicurean poem of Lucretius by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 A.D. This Latin poem, composed in the mid-1st century B.C. and entitled *De rerum natura* or “On the Nature of Things,” remains our best surviving resource for Epicurean philosophy. In my essay, I will show how the history of this poem’s reception helps to elucidate many of the claims I am making regarding the political character of Epicurean philosophy. It is a remarkable fact that many of the humanists who encountered Lucretius in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries took interest in DRN as a *political* text, and Epicureanism as a *political* system of thought.

In the writings of humanists such as Lorenzo Valla, Desiderius Erasmus, and Thomas More, one finds a generally favorable reassessment of Epicurean ethical hedonism. I contend that there are important reasons for this sympathetic “revival” of Epicurean ethics. The humanists perceived that Epicureanism could be brought to bear on what was arguably the central intellectual issue of the renaissance: Is it possible—or even desirable—to revive an ancient, pagan account of virtue within the contemporary Christian religious and moral context?

The humanists seem to have taken seriously an idea once suggested by Augustine: there may be potential for agreement and common cause between Christians and Epicureans, particularly as regards the critique of “love of honor”—that is to say, what the Christian might call “the vice of pride.” To be sure, there are many tenets of Epicurean philosophy—just as there are many tenets of *every* ancient school of philosophy—to which no orthodox Christian believer could give his assent. Even so, it seemed possible to contemplate a narrowly *political* revival of selected Epicurean ideas as part of an eclectic strategy to counter some of the worst—but most appealing—elements in pagan political thought.

The definitive example of this strategy, I contend, is Thomas More's *Utopia*. I read More's playful dialogue as a serious attempt to grapple with important questions of political philosophy. The Utopians have constructed a beautiful commonwealth—and though they initially lack Christian revelation, they are not unreceptive to it. Furthermore, the Utopians are emphatically “Epicurean,” in the sense of pursuing an openly hedonistic ethical philosophy—albeit one constrained by a few very important articles of faith. Most importantly, the Utopians disdain the “false” pleasures of wealth, conquest and glory. In this way, *Utopia* seems to test the notion that Epicurean and Christian ideas might make limited common cause against a “pagan”—but all too popular—account of virtue which places undue emphasis on material success and worldly honor and glory.

Epicureanism has a second important role to play in the history of political thought. The Epicurean denial of purposive nature found willing ears among the radical thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who envisaged a break, not only with the mainstream of classical political thought, but with orthodox Christianity as well. The key figures in this movement—foremost among them, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes—demonstrated a real and sustained interest in the poem of Lucretius, and in Epicurean philosophy more generally. Perhaps Epicurus' account of an indifferent universe seemed to them to provide a credible alternative to the well-ordered cosmos of Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy. In any case, they were clearly inclined to agree with Epicurus' denial of the classical view that “man is by nature a political animal.” But the practical conclusions that Machiavelli and Hobbes drew from the *denial of nature as guide* were contrary, in most respects, to those envisaged by Epicurus.

Nature's silence does not justify a policy of moderate hedonism and withdrawal from political life. Rather, it seems to empower us to impose our own vision on the formless chaos.

As the preceding brief overview may suggest, I view Epicureanism as a philosophy which contains significant internal tensions. The most important of these is the tension between a moderate ethical hedonism on the one hand, and the infinite and purposeless physical universe on the other. At the very least, the history of the divergent ways in which pieces of the Epicurean system were recovered and appropriated should prepare us to anticipate the following questions: What *are* the fundamental premises of Epicurean philosophy? Does Epicurus' ethics imply his physics? Does his physics imply his ethics? Are the two even *compatible* with one another? In what sense is Epicurean philosophy a “system” at all?

The only fair way to begin to explore these questions is to start with Epicurus himself. Epicurus was a citizen of Athens, born to Athenian parents in 341 B.C. He spent his childhood in the Athenian colony of Samos. He appears to have exhibited an early interest in philosophy. At the age of eighteen he was sent to Athens for the obligatory two-year term of military service. Subsequently, he traveled the Aegean. At this time, he established philosophical communities at Mytilene and Lampsacus. He would remain in contact with some of his early converts for the rest of his life. In 307-306 B.C. he returned to Athens, where he established a community known as “the Garden” (*ho kēpos*), a short distance outside the city walls.² He lived and taught in the Garden for the rest of his life, dying in 270 B.C.

² See LS vol. I, p. 4, for a diagram showing the likely location of the Garden in relation to other philosophical schools and familiar Athenian landmarks.

Epicurus possibly intended to impart a deliberate lesson by situating his school outside the walls of the city. The choice stands in contrast to Socrates' preference for the Agora, and the Stoics' preference for the bustling Porch. The practice of Epicurean philosophy seems from the beginning to have been associated with a policy of withdrawal and nonparticipation in political life. Epicurus told his followers to "live unnoticed" (*lathē biosas*), and advised them "do not engage in politics" (*mē politeusthai*). This seemingly "apolitical" stance makes it possible to doubt whether he really *had* a political philosophy. I argue that he did; but the best arguments against this view deserve to be considered. The philosophical roots of Epicurean nonparticipation will be discussed in chapter two; for the time being, I will limit myself to the observation that Socrates, too, avoided any sort of political participation, and seems to have thought that political participation was *incompatible* with political philosophy—except, perhaps, in the best of all regimes.³

The deeper objection to my argument is that the Epicurean system appears to lack any account of the best regime—or even "the regime" as such. This, more than any other feature, is what distinguishes Epicureanism from the various schools of Socratic political philosophy. Still, the mere fact that Epicurus was silent on the regime does not prove that he was *not* a political philosopher—only that he was *not* a political philosopher on the same model as the Socratics.⁴

³ For example, see Socrates' statement in Plato, *Apology*, 31c-32a: "if someone who really fights for the just is going to preserve himself even for a short time, it is necessary for him to lead a private rather than a public life." For further discussion of this issue, see chapter two.

⁴ To take a modern example, Hobbes also expresses indifference to important parts of classical regime theory. See, for example, *Leviathan* XIX.

I argue that Epicurus is a political philosopher in the sense that he places a high value on the proper understanding of political things. His surviving writings—scanty though they may be—show a clear interest in many of the traditional themes of political philosophy. The *Kuriiai doxai* or “Principal Doctrines” —a collection of maxims—contains more entries referring to “justice” than to any other single topic.⁵ Furthermore, Epicurus’ surviving *Letter to Herodotus* contains an account of the origin of language and of other cultural innovations.⁶ The origins of political community appear to have been a major area of interest for the school: the subject is discussed in the surviving portions of Epicurus’ *Peri phuseōs* (*On Nature*), book XXVIII, as well as in fragments of a book by Epicurus’ student Hermarchus, and in the second half of DRN, book V.⁷ Nor should we be surprised that the Epicureans devote this level of attention to politics. Epicurean philosophy is essentially concerned with the question of how we as human beings can acquire lasting happiness—and the *pursuit* of happiness, even if it does not require politics, is nonetheless deeply influenced by the fact that virtually all of us reside in political communities. So long as we define “political philosophy” sufficiently broadly, it would seem that Epicurus *is* a political philosopher.

A different sort of objection to my thesis can be made. Perhaps “physics,” or the study of nature, is the primary element in the Epicurean system. Cicero’s famous account of the “Socratic

⁵ As is noted by James H. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius*, p. 16 n.4.

⁶ See the *Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.75-76 (LS 19A).

⁷ See David N. Sedley, “Epicurus, *On Nature*, Book XXVIII,” *Cronache Ercolanesi* 3 (1973), pp. 5-83; see also Hermarchus, *Against Timocrates*, quoted in Porphyry, *On Abstinence* I.7.1-I.9.4 (LS 22M) and I.10.1-I.12.7 (LS 22N); and DRN V.925-ff.

turn” in philosophy credits Socrates with “bringing philosophy down from the heavens and into the city.”⁸ Perhaps the pre-Socratic and Socratic approaches are opposed. At any rate, there are some indications that “inquiry into nature” is the overarching goal of Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus titled his magnum opus *Peri phuseōs*, or “On Nature.” Similarly, Lucretius titled his poem *De rerum natura*, or “On the Nature of Things.” Do these works represent a return to a pre-Socratic model in which philosophy is preoccupied with “the heavenly things,” but indifferent to the human ones?

Such an interpretation finds little support in the content of surviving Epicurean texts. The Epicurean account of the physical world is rife with political implications, as I shall show in chapters three and four. Furthermore, Epicurus situates his physical theory within the context of the human end, which is pleasure. This leads him to take a seemingly mercenary attitude towards scientific truth. He declares that he is willing to accept multiple explanations for a single physical event. “Exclusion of myth,” he declares, “is the sole condition necessary.”⁹ In fact, multiple explanations may be *preferable*, in the sense that, taken together, they are more likely to persuade than any single explanation would be. This means, however, that Epicurus is concerned with physical inquiry, not so much for the sake of discovering physical truth, as for the effects of physical inquiry upon our quality of life.¹⁰

Epicurean philosophy is *therapeutic* in character and intention. Epicurus described philosophy as “[the] activity which by arguments and discussions brings about the happy life.”

⁸ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V.4.

⁹ *Letter to Pythocles*, DL X.97. See also *Letter to Pythocles*, DL X.85 and 104.

¹⁰ For further discussion, see Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, pp. 13-20.

This is not—or not primarily—because philosophy is *itself* pleasant, but rather because our natural state as human beings is characterized by a pervasive anxiety which is the result of unfounded fears. The purpose of philosophy is to investigate the sources of these fears: the false opinions most people conceive regarding death, the afterlife, and their own natural needs. These false opinions are a sickness of the mind, for which Epicurean philosophy provides the cure—by showing that they are groundless. This extinguishes the deep-seated feelings of anxiety that Epicurus regards as the proximate cause of most, if not all, human suffering. When false opinion is eliminated, we can enjoy the *ataraxia* or “tranquility”—more literally, perhaps, the “absence of disturbance”—which Epicurus describes as the greatest of all pleasures

As befits a therapeutic philosophy, Epicurean teachings are easily memorized, and can be easily recalled in times of need. The best example is the famous “fourfold cure,” or *tetrapharmakon*, that subsequent generations of Epicureans learned by heart: “God presents no fears, death no worries. And while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable.”¹¹ This simple formula may have been composed by Epicurus. In any case, it reliably transmits the core of his system of thought.¹²

The first part of the *tetrapharmakon* is, “God presents no fears.” The Epicureans believe that the first and greatest source of human suffering is fear of the gods, but philosophy can show that the vengeful, jealous gods of Greek and Roman mythology have no basis in fact. The most important proof begins from Epicurus’ conception of the divine nature:

¹¹ LS 25J. For Epicurus’ views on memory-aids, and concerning the importance of a “comprehensive overview,” see the *Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.35 and 83.

¹² Compare KD 1-4, DL X.139-140 (LS 23E4 and 21C). The progression of ideas mirrors what is found in the *tetrapharmakon*.

A blessed and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness.¹³

The *true* gods of philosophy are characterized by an immovable self-sufficiency. They have no reason to meddle in human affairs. Thus they truly “present no fears”—but we must also add that they present no grounds for hope.¹⁴

The second part of the *tetrapharmakon* is, “death presents no worries.” This article complements and extends the point made in the first part. “Death presents no worries,” because there is no prospect of reward or punishment in the afterlife. This possibility is altogether excluded; the soul perishes along with the body. The Epicureans offered numerous arguments in support of this point. They were well aware that most human beings would resist the idea that the soul’s eternal death could be a consoling truth. Still, Epicurus taught, our annihilation at death should not frighten us: our nonexistence after death is no more intrinsically troubling than our nonexistence before birth—and who is disturbed by that?¹⁵

¹³ KD 1, DL X.139 (LS 23E4).

¹⁴ Two things should be noted here. First, gratitude and vengeance are excluded, but what about caprice? Could the gods aid (or hinder) man simply on a whim? Would the Epicurean understanding of the divine nature exclude caprice as a motive? Consider Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, pp. 77-78, 99-100. Additionally, Epicurus would seem to commit himself to the view that happiness is can be achieved *without* divine benevolence—*i.e.* to tacitly assume the self-sufficiency of the “happy man” or Epicurean wise man (*ho sophos*).

¹⁵ This is the famous “mirror argument” of Epicurus. For a critical response, see Thomas Nagel, “Death,” in *Mortal Questions*, pp. 7-10. Can the belief in an afterlife be consoling, rather than troubling? Epicurus might seem to presume, as a matter of human psychology, the preponderance of fear of punishment over *any* hope of reward. Alternatively, he might contend that fear and hope are *both* disturbances of the soul—*i.e.* *both* lead us to do things which we would not have chosen to do on a straightforward pleasure vs. pain analysis.

The third and fourth parts of the *tetrapharmakon* are best taken together: “while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable.” Again, the purpose of the formula is to eliminate the sources of human anxieties. Men think that they need to acquire great honors or wealth or political office—difficult things!—in order to be secure. Their lives are filled with constant worry while they try to obtain these empty “goods” and avoid the corresponding “evils.” But *true* good and *true* evil are much closer at hand. In fact Epicurus says that the infant will know what they are: the good is pleasure, and the evil is pain.¹⁶

The strategy of Epicurean philosophical propaedeutic is to eliminate the false beliefs about good and evil which cause us unnecessary anxiety and suffering. The infant may intuit the basic character of the good, but philosophy is needed before that intuition can flourish into “happiness” or *eudaimonia*. The infant does not realize that some pleasures are accompanied by greater pains—just as some pains open the way to experiencing greater pleasures. What we need is a *calculating* approach that selects pleasures and pains as necessary with a view to maximizing the long-term preponderance of pleasure over pain. Philosophy facilitates this calculating approach by making distinctions among our desires. It reveals—perhaps surprisingly—that many of the things people most eagerly struggle to obtain are in fact neither natural nor necessary.

At the same time, we attribute to temporary and minor pains a significance that they do not deserve. Epicurus argues that physical suffering, on its own, is unlikely to disrupt the happy life. If the pains are not too intense, it may even be possible to bear them happily. On the other

¹⁶ This is known as the “newborn argument,” or “cradle argument.” See DL X.137, and Cicero, *De finibus*, I.29-32 (LS 21A). See the discussion in Jacques Brunschwig, “The Cradle Argument in Epicureanism and Stoicism,” in *The Norms of Nature*, M. Schofield and G. Striker, eds., pp. 113-144, as well as my discussion of how this argument relates to specifically *political* philosophy in chapter two.

hand, if they *are* intense, they are certain to be over soon. In this context, he cited his own experience. While suffering from the kidney-stones which would eventually end his life, he wrote this note to his friend Idomeneus:

I wrote this to you on that blessed day of my life which was also the last. Strangury and dysentery had set in, with all the extreme intensity of which they are capable. But the joy in my soul at the memory of our past discussions was enough to counterbalance all this. I ask you, as befits your lifelong companionship with me and with philosophy: take care of the children of Metrodorus.¹⁷

Was Epicurus really able to enjoy “joy” on his deathbed? The question is almost irrelevant. The purpose of the note is to reiterate his claim that physical suffering, on its own, is nothing to fear or worry about. The danger, he thinks, is that we will attach to our suffering a *mental* significance which magnifies it out of proportion. Rather than doing this, Epicurus chooses to turn his mind to the memory of past discussions, while exhorting his friend to look after the children of his deceased student Metrodorus. Making proper arrangements for what will happen after his death provides a tangible pleasure to the philosopher during his remaining hours of life.

It was characteristic of Epicurus to have been writing, even on his deathbed. He was a notoriously prolific author, and he left behind a philosophical corpus almost unparalleled in the ancient world.¹⁸ An ancient catalogue of his works has been preserved. It amounts to roughly three hundred scrolls. None of these works survive in anything approaching a state of completion. Still, it is possible to learn something by reviewing the list of titles. Of all the works of Epicurus,

¹⁷ DL X.22 (LS24D).

¹⁸ DL X.26-28. Only the Stoic Chrysippus is said to have written more—allegedly out of a desire to surpass Epicurus.

the longest and most important was, as I have mentioned, *Peri phuseōs*, which ran to a remarkable thirty-seven scrolls in length.¹⁹

The Garden prospered after Epicurus' death, becoming a model for similar Epicurean communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean. At some point—perhaps during the late second or early first century B.C.—the Epicurean school began to acquire adherents in the Roman world. Cicero reports that Epicurean philosophy had become very popular during the waning years of the Republic. Archaeological discoveries confirm his account of the school's widespread popularity, and suggest that it made a lasting contribution to Roman and Greek intellectual life. More than a century after Cicero's death, an Epicurean library in the town of Herculaneum was buried in volcanic ash during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The charred scrolls of the so-called "Villa of the Papyri" were rediscovered in the eighteenth century, and have since become an important resource for scholars working to understand the Epicurean school. Halfway across the Mediterranean, at Oenoanda, in modern-day Turkey, the text of a monumental Epicurean inscription dating from the mid- to late-second century A.D. is gradually being reconstructed. This inscription was commissioned by a wealthy man named Diogenes who wished to leave his fellow-citizens a lasting testament to the philosophy which had enabled him to enjoy true happiness. All in all, the available literary and archaeological evidence suggests that Epicurean philosophy flourished for approximately five hundred years.

Little survives of *Peri phuseōs*, or of the rest of Epicurus' once-voluminous body of writings.²⁰ We have three long letters, reportedly by Epicurus, which summarize the different

¹⁹ Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, pp. 94-133, provides a summary of what is currently known about the structure and content of *Peri phuseōs*.

parts of his philosophy. These are preserved in a biography by Diogenes Laertius—which also contains the list of maxims that has been collected under the title *Kuriai doxai*. Everything else that survives is fragmentary. Recent work has greatly expanded our collection of Epicurean fragments. In the ashes of Herculaneum, several scrolls containing individual books of *Peri phuseōs* have been found. The chapter beginnings, which were placed on the outside of the rolls, are without exception illegible; they were carbonized during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Portions of the insides of the rolls have been recovered, however, and, bit by bit, they continue to be edited and published.

For the most part, the works of Epicurus' followers fared little better. There is only one work of significance that survives in anything like a state of completion. Fortunately, it is not only almost complete, but also, indubitably, a masterpiece. This is the Latin poem of Lucretius. Because of its completeness and intrinsic merit, DRN will be for us, as it was for thinkers from the renaissance onward, the single most important resource for understanding Epicurean thought.²¹ This is true despite the difficulties in taking Lucretius as a source for Epicureanism;

²⁰ Sedley estimates that we possess less than one percent of what Epicurus wrote. See *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, p. 86, n. 108.

²¹ Leo Strauss calls DRN, “[t]he greatest document of ancient conventionalism and, in fact, its only document available to us that is both authentic and comprehensive.” See *Natural Right and History*, pp. 111-112. Others have raised the question of Lucretius’ possible source—or sources. Did Lucretius work from a single text? For opposing views, contrast Diskin Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, pp. 13-53, with David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*. For a recent attempt to arbitrate the dispute, see Joseph Farrell, “Lucretian Architecture: The Structure and Argument of the *De Rerum Natura*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, S. Gillespie and P. Hardie, eds., pp. 73-91. To summarize, the defenders of Clay’s position can point to some clear rearrangements of the order of *Peri phuseōs*—if this is indeed the source text that Lucretius is working from. Sedley’s side-by-side comparison, on the other hand, does seem to suggest fruitful hypotheses regarding the rationale of these rearrangements. Neither side has a conclusive argument; barring further discoveries, the

although Lucretius wrote a poem (which Epicurus never did, and advised against), wrote it in another language than Epicurus, and wrote almost two and a half-centuries after Epicurus' death, there is still good reason to think that Lucretius was, in spirit, very faithful to Epicurus' vision.²²

There are other reasons to value DRN as a textual resource. It is my belief that much of the existing literature is insufficiently concerned with the threat of persecution faced by the Epicureans—or, indeed, by any ancient thinkers who might plausibly be associated with atheism or religious heterodoxy. Lucretius directly confronts this threat. At the beginning of book I, he explicitly responds to the charges of impiety he expects to face. Furthermore, Lucretius addresses his poem to a non-Epicurean, Memmius, with the stated intention of converting him to Epicureanism. Because of the poem's attention to the threat of persecution, and the project of conversion, it appears more attuned to the *political* dimension of speculative and theological matters than any other Epicurean text. Hence it directly addresses many of the concerns of the present study. The somewhat paradoxical corollary is that DRN, read judiciously, may contain more that is unsettling and heterodox than the works of Epicurus themselves.²³

debate will remain unresolved. Regardless of the debate's conclusion, however, scholars seem increasingly inclined to view Lucretius as a faithful and comprehensive expositor of Epicurean doctrine.

²² At one point, Lucretius speaks of himself as planting his feet in the footsteps Epicurus had left for him, and he contrasts himself as a “swallow” or “kid” to Epicurus’ “swan” or “horse.” See DRN III.1-ff. In keeping with these images, Sedley, in *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, argues that Lucretius can be seen as a defender of Epicurean orthodoxy, and finds that the text of Lucretius’ poem tracks very closely to what we now know about the structure and content of Epicurus’ magnum opus. For further discussion of the question of the relation of Epicurus and Lucretius, see chapters two and three, below.

²³ Strauss’s “Notes on Lucretius” and Nichols’s *Epicurean Political Philosophy* are good guides to the political implications of Lucretius’ esoteric text. The present study is deeply indebted to both. If more of Epicurus’ writings had survived, we might find that he was no less

The fragments of Epicurus serve as vital supplements for my reading of Lucretius, but they must be taken with some degree of caution, for they lack the context that is often required to distinguish shades of meaning. Likewise, the letters are explicitly said to be synoptic and are often incomplete in important respects.

It is fortunately possible to supplement the paucity of ancient Epicurean sources with a fairly substantial ancient literature *on* Epicureanism. The works of Cicero, for example, contain a great deal of information on various aspects of Epicurean thought. As a young man, Cicero studied in Athens with the Epicurean scholarch Zeno of Sidon.²⁴ His friend, Atticus, was a follower of Epicurean philosophy. And, for what it is worth, Cicero is reported to have edited DRN for publication after Lucretius' untimely death.²⁵ Cicero had ample acquaintance with Epicureanism, and it shows in the philosophical discussions that appear in his dialogues. The most prominent for our purposes are the discussion of hedonism in *De finibus* (*On Moral Ends*), the discussion of utility in book II and III of *De officiis* (*On Duties*), and the discussion of Epicurean religion and the Epicurean account of the gods in *De natura deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*). Cicero's position in these dialogues is generally critical or anti-Epicurean (just how

concerned with esotericism. The surviving portions of *Peri phuseōs* appear to be substantially devoted to the private concerns of the Epicurean school and seem to recount Epicurus' own wanderings and changes of position—characteristics which are certainly compatible with some degree of circumspection. See Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, p. 57.

²⁴ See the reference to Zeno of Sidon in *De natura deorum*, I.21; also compare *Tusculan Disputations*, III.17.

²⁵ *Ad Quintum*, II.10 is one of our very few ancient sources which mention “the poem of Lucretius.”

critical—and whether *unfairly* critical—is a matter for scholarly debate) but it is not plausible to argue that Cicero was ill-informed.²⁶

Plutarch discusses Epicurean philosophy in a number of his moral essays. Again, his position is critical—at times harshly polemical—but he remains an important source for many aspects of Epicurean thought. For example, his essays are the only source to preserve Epicurus' maxim “live unnoticed” (*lathē biosas*)—a phrase with important political implications.

Various other fragments of Epicurus and Epicureans survive. Perhaps the most significant for our study is a long excerpt from Hermarchus' lost work *Against Timocrates*, which has been quoted in Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Animal Flesh*. In this passage, Hermarchus discusses the Epicurean theory of human social origins, a topic which, as we shall see, plays a considerable role in our understanding of Epicurean political philosophy.²⁷

A final category of Epicurean texts is comprised of those unavailable until recent times. These include the inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda, which is still being transcribed and translated, as well as the large number of texts being recovered at the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum—among them, several damaged scrolls containing portions of Epicurus' *Peri*

²⁶ For defenses of Cicero's overall reliability and accuracy, see Philip Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability*, pp. 7-8, 73; and Walter Nicgorski, “Cicero, Citizenship, and the Epicurean Tradition,” in *Cultivating Citizens*, D. D. Allman and M. D. Beatty, eds., pp. 3-28. The opposing view is taken by Brad Inwood “*Rhetorica Disputatio*: The Strategy of *De Finibus* II,” in *The Poetics of Therapy*, M. Nussbaum, ed., pp. 123-164. For a critical discussion of Cicero's treatment of Epicurean justice, in particular, see Paul A. Vander Waerdt, “The Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man,” *The Classical Quarterly* 37.2 (1987), pp. 402-422. I respond directly to Vander Waerdt's specific claims in chapter four.

²⁷ The best discussion of this fragment of Hermarchus is found in Paul A. Vander Waerdt, “Hermarchus and the Epicurean Genealogy of Morals,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 118 (1988), pp. 87-106.

phuseōs, as well as fragments of works by later Epicureans such as Zeno of Sidon and Philodemus. These will not figure very prominently in the present study, since they were unavailable to the early modern thinkers responsible for the recovery and revival of Epicurean philosophy during the renaissance. Still, I will point out some cases in which they seem to support my interpretation of Epicurean philosophy.

We do not know when the Epicurean community in Athens was finally dissolved. After the second century A.D., there is little evidence of a continuing Epicurean tradition. As Christianity spread across the Mediterranean, Epicureanism seems to have gradually disappeared. But it was not forgotten. For thinkers such as Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine, Epicureanism served as a philosophical foil, and as a reminder of the dead-end character of classical philosophy. To the extent that Christian thinkers gradually came to an accommodation with the ancient philosophical tradition, it was a tradition purged of almost any remnant of Epicureanism.

In some respects, this particular animus against Epicureanism appears unjustified. Augustine, especially, seems to have recognized that *all* ancient schools of philosophy were deeply problematic from the Christian point of view—but that, within this context, there were large swaths of Epicurean philosophy were no *more* unacceptable than the Stoic or Platonist alternatives.

Augustine's insight would not be fully fleshed out for roughly one thousand years. In 1417 Poggio Bracciolini, Florentine and papal secretary, discovered a manuscript of DRN in the library of a German monastery, and had a copy made for himself. At around the same time, a complete Greek text of DL was brought to Florence. These materials would facilitate a centuries-

long reassessment of Epicurean philosophy, in which (or so I shall claim) Epicurean political philosophy gained new regard—in part because its teachings regarding “love of honor” were recognized as being harmonious with Christian skepticism regarding worldly glory.

Outline of the argument

For many outside observers, one of the distinguishing features of Epicurean school was its success at preventing breakaway movements and defections. Arcesilaus, head of the Platonic Academy, was once asked why other schools lost members to the Epicureans, but it was very unusual—virtually unheard of—for an Epicurean to become a Stoic or a Platonist. His reply was: “You can turn a man into a eunuch, but you can’t turn a eunuch into a man again.”

An amusing witticism—but is it, in any sense, more than just a witticism? One of the goals of the present study is to explore the possibility that Arcesilaus’ reply represents a superficial manifestation of a serious and sincere critique of Epicurean political philosophy. This critique will be explored more thoroughly in later chapters, beginning with chapter two; setting it aside for the time being, I return to the observation that Epicureanism seems to have been uniquely resistant to internal change. It never produced a “second founder,” as the Stoics did with Chrysippus, or the Platonists did on several occasions. Lucretius, the philosopher and poet who is, in my view, the greatest thinker ever produced by the Epicurean school, notwithstanding his great art and great abilities, *does* seem to possess something of the character of a “fundamentalist”—to use David Sedley’s terminology. It would be misleading, however, to think that *because* Epicurean thought is so dogmatically consistent, or *because* the historical representatives of the school show such enduring doctrinal discipline, Epicureanism is therefore

a philosophy which lacks significant internal tensions, or significant potential for differences of opinion—which, after all, might be developed either within or outside of the “official” Garden-tradition. As I hope to show in this study, there *are* significant fault lines in the Epicurean account of man and the world—although many of them were not clearly articulated until long after the Garden’s end, when humanist thinkers of the renaissance began to grapple with Epicurean ideas in a changed theologico-political context.

The major claims of this study can be summarized as follows: I argue that *Epicureanism has a political philosophy, but not a political theory*. By this I mean the following: Epicureanism puts forward a comprehensive view of human nature, of the nature of politics, of the good life, justice, the common good, and of the relationship of politics to philosophy—in other words, a political philosophy. On the other hand, Epicureanism puts forward no theory of the best regime, no account of the regime as such, no prescriptive theory of citizenship, no positive account of *paideia* or political education—in short, no political theory, narrowly construed.

Epicurus divides philosophy into three major parts: ethics, physics, and canonic—with canonic, or theory of knowledge, generally being regarded as a subcategory of physics. The interesting thing about Epicurean *political* philosophy is that it appears to derive from both sides of the ethics-physics boundary. To put it somewhat differently: the core teaching of Epicurean ethics is hedonism—a eudaimonistic form of hedonism, which distinguishes between pleasures, and regards as life’s ultimate objective the sustained preponderance of pleasure over pain over the duration of one’s life as a whole. The question for Epicurean *political* philosophy is whether justice and concern for the common good can be defended on these hedonistic grounds. Epicurus

asserts that they can, but later thinkers, including Cicero, would challenge his claim. These attacks, while not indisputably successful, would prove to be highly influential.

On the other side, the core teaching of Epicurean physics is that we have nothing to fear—or, to be more precise, *that we have nothing to fear from the gods*. Religious fear is the most distressing of all human fears, and Epicurus, who discovered the only effective remedy for religious fear, is thus the greatest of all the benefactors of mankind. Epicurus has sometimes been accused of being an atheist. This is misleading, in my view; he seems to have been willing to grant the existence of a *multitude* of gods—but he insisted that they would never take an interest in human life for any reason. The universe as a whole is infinite and purposeless, and within this framework Epicurean political philosophy must again consider the question of whether justice and concern for the common good can be defended. Political philosophy must also consider the question of how human communities came to be in the absence of—what had traditionally been assumed—a divine creator and legislator. Epicurus and his followers attempted to answer these questions, and, again, later thinkers such as Cicero put forward influential criticisms of their efforts.

This brief overview leads me to the second major claim of my study: that *Epicureanism cannot be reduced to ethics or to physics simply*. It is a comprehensive system of philosophy with at least two irreducible and coequal premises—the premises which I have already identified, namely, eudaimonistic hedonism, and the critique of religious fear. Interpreters have sometimes suggested that Epicurean ethical hedonism can be *derived* from Epicurean atomistic physics. But I believe that any attempt to actually do so will fail. Pleasure and pain are not *themselves* inherent in the atoms or their motions—no more than color is. They exist on the level of human

consciousness, and this, Epicurus insists, is the level we are most immediately concerned with. The goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain are immediately apparent facts, on the Epicurean view—and as such, they stand prior to any inquiry into the natural world, and into their own physical bases.

On the other side, an interpreter *might* argue that the Epicurean account of physics—which reaches its final culmination in the critique of religious fear—could be derived from the demands of Epicurean eudaimonistic hedonism. On this view, the full account of the natural world, from blind atoms to indifferent gods, is designed so as to console our fears, and *not* because it represents the truth of things. This argument—or so I would claim—also fails to persuade. The poem of Lucretius teaches that the Epicurean account of the nature of things is not sweet *simply*, or even *primarily*. It is *bitter medicine*, to use Lucretius' most famous image. Furthermore, as Lucretius would have been quick to note, consoling fictions lose their power to console, after they have been recognized and admitted to be fictions.

These are the brief arguments for the claim that the Epicurean system cannot be reduced to ethics or to physics simply; I will present longer arguments over the course of this work as a whole. To prepare the way for this longer discussion, I will here observe that ethics and physics both interact, in differentiable ways, with the Epicurean account of politics. In other words, it is possible to distinguish an *ethically-derived political philosophy* and a *physically-derived political philosophy*, and the two can be usefully drawn out and contrasted. One sign of this can be seen in the fact that Epicurus discusses politics once in his letter concerning ethics, and again—rather differently—in his letter concerning physics. The twofold character of Epicurus' teaching concerning politics provides me with a justification for taking a twofold approach in the body of

this essay: in chapter two, I will consider politics from the perspective of eudaimonistic hedonism. Then, in chapter three, I will begin again from the perspective of atomistic materialism, and the Epicurean critique of religious fear. This line of inquiry continues on into chapter four, which will consider the second aspect of physically-derived political philosophy: the Epicurean and Lucretian account of the origin of political communities.

This two-sided framework sets up the next major claim of my study: that *political philosophy makes its own distinct and irreducible contributions to the Epicurean system*.

Epicurus is said to have declared, “I spit upon the noble and all those who vainly admire it, when it produces no pleasure.” The odd thing about this statement is that many of us would be inclined to say that performing, or even witnessing, a noble action produces a pleasure all its own. The “noble which produces no pleasure,” in other words, seems to be an empty category. According to those of us who hold this view there is—or can be, for a properly educated human being—a certain pleasure in knowing that one has done something fine and noble, *even if this deed produces no other advantage*. The point is a subtle one. Epicurus is intent on separating the noble from the pleasant—apparently in order to show that the noble *as such* is without intrinsic value. In his view, the desire to perform noble or praiseworthy deeds is an “unnatural, unnecessary desire,” and, as such, should be minimized or even extinguished.

There is, I think, no obvious hedonistic reason to do this. Epicurus regards the most abstruse intellectual pleasures and the most earthly sensual pleasures as genuine, but he dismisses the pleasures associated with performing or witnessing noble and praiseworthy deeds as “empty.” As I will suggest in chapter two, this is because Epicurean hedonism borrows

important premises from an implicit anti-Platonic political psychology. Epicurus' deprecation of the noble is tied to his deprecation of *thumos*—the spirited part of the human soul.

This line of inquiry is taken up again in chapter four, where I consider the Epicurean account of human political origins, and the virtue of justice. Readers who are not yet acquainted with the Epicurean system of philosophy may be surprised to learn that Epicurus reasons his way from eudaimonistic-hedonistic premises to a full-blown defense of the traditional virtues—wisdom, justice, moderation and courage. On the face of things, there seems to be a tension between the hedonistic roots of the system, and Epicurus' practical advocacy of a classical roster of virtues. Critics of Epicureanism found the account of justice, in particular, to be problematic. Can a calculating self-interested hedonist *really* reason his way to a consistent adherence to the virtue of justice—even in cases where the virtue of justice appears to require self-sacrifice?

Thus my argument, which begins by drawing theoretical and conceptual distinctions, ends by looking at the practical problems associated with the virtue of justice. As many commentators have noted, Epicurean philosophy is *more* than just a systematic account of the world and of man's place within it. It is also *a way of life*—and Epicurus was admired by his followers as much for the example he left, as for the system of thought he propounded. For this reason, I think we need to take the dismissive remark of Arcesilaus very seriously. He recognizes that Epicurus' living example compels many of his students to a powerful obedience, but warns us that if we take up his philosophy we may in the end be robbed of our *thumos*—and left truncated in spirit.

Plato, in his *Republic*, connects the problem of justice to the problem of death and the fleeting character of worldly goods. Glaucon's formulation of the problem in book II is

remembered for good reason: he wants Socrates to show that justice is something worth dying for. The conventionalist, as represented by Plato in the person of Thrasymachus, fails to take Glaucon's desire into account. Epicurus is vulnerable to a similar criticism. The desire for transcendence through the practice of great deeds of self-sacrificial justice has no place in his philosophy—he soothes the potential “Glaucos” among us by denying it.

At this point in the argument, we have come to the end of my chapter four, and the account of Epicurean political philosophy is now fully conceptualized. In the last two chapters I will consider the partial revival of Epicurean ideas in renaissance and early modern political philosophy. My reasons for doing this are, first, to test the idea, recently reasserted in a book by Stephen Greenblatt, that the recovery and dissemination of Epicurean texts—and particularly the text of Lucretius—helped to bring about the modern world. Second, I find that the history of the appropriation of Epicurean ideas may help us to identify some of the fault lines which I assert are present in the Epicurean system.

I consider several historical attempts to “pick and choose” among Epicurean doctrines. Somewhat surprisingly, I show that the first Epicurean doctrine to be seriously reconsidered within a Christian moral and political context is eudaimonistic hedonism. Beginning with Lorenzo Valla, Epicurean hedonism is given a thoughtful and generally sympathetic reappraisal. This is not, I think, part of an effort to subvert Christian morality. Rather, it is an attempt to *shore up* Christian morality against new threats posed by the growing admiration for classical political models. Epicurean eudaimonistic hedonism offers a ready-made critique of these models—that is to say, of politics based around concern for the praiseworthy and noble.

For Christian thinkers such as Thomas More, Epicureanism is not Arcesilaus' target, that is, "philosophy for eunuchs." It is, instead, a plausible remedy for a moral problem of real contemporary urgency. The vanity and glory-seeking which More saw all around him, and which he feared might be exacerbated by the turn to classical—and especially *Roman*—political models, could be countered by a measured revival of Greek eudaimonism, in which Epicurean arguments play a prominent role.

In the second half of chapter five, I turn to Machiavelli's rather different response to Epicureanism. He can hardly be said to have internalized Epicurean ethical attitudes, with their heavy emphasis on withdrawal from politics. But he *does* appear to have been aware of them as an alternative—and, I argue (in agreement with recent work by Paul Rahe) he puts forward a sort of "internal critique" of them. In essence, Machiavelli finds that the Epicurean critique of religious fear does not *inevitably* lead to moderate ethical hedonism. In fact, the infinite and purposeless universe, as depicted in the poem of Lucretius, could just as easily motivate a policy of conquest and self-aggrandizement.

Chapter six begins by considering a favorite charge of Hobbes's contemporary critics: that he was an atheist and an "Epicurean." These charges, though sometimes spurious, are shown to have a core of truth. The guiding intention of Hobbes's scientific writings and scriptural interpretations—namely, the relief of man's fear of "powers invisible"—is thoroughly Epicurean in character, and Hobbes's quotations from Epicurean sources show that he was well aware of this connection. Hobbes was not a slavish follower of Epicurus, however. The second part of the chapter shows how, in his hands, Epicurean *hēdonē* became political. The transformation of ancient apolitical hedonism into modern "political hedonism" is most clearly seen in Hobbes's

philosophy. On the one hand, he critiques moderate Epicurean hedonism; on the other hand, he replaces the self-regulation of the Epicurean wise man with the *political* regulation of unregulated appetites. Austere Epicurean *hēdonē* is replaced by a demotic “felicity,” and politics is given a necessary role in the realization of this felicity.

Why does this matter?

Why study Epicurean philosophy? The question is an especially pointed one for a political scientist. It cannot be on account of *political influence*, if we understand that to mean *influence on political practice*, ancient or modern; there is *no* evidence that Epicurus ever failed to observe his stringently apolitical policy of “living unnoticed” and “staying out of politics.” Nor is there any clear record of a member of his school, Greek or Roman, applying Epicurean teachings to the practical problems of political action.²⁸ To this one might contrast the Platonists, the Peripatetics, and even the Roman Stoics under the principate. In sum, Epicurean philosophy does not appear to contain any material of interest for the working politician—unless we consider his advice to “take early retirement” to be an example of such material.

So why, then? One response is because of the strength of its philosophical claims. Epicurus’ account of human life, which subsumes his account of human politics, is so intrinsically compelling that it remains worthy of consideration even today—more than two millennia after he lived and wrote. Epicurus tells us that he has found the secret of human happiness. It is worth studying his philosophy, on the chance that he may have been right.

²⁸ The case of Cassius, co-assassin of Caesar, is a difficult one, as is shown by David Sedley, “The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997), pp. 46-47.

Epicurus teaches us that there would not be any need to study philosophy, if we (that is to say, “we humans” or mankind generally) were not troubled by fears regarding cosmic and meteorological phenomena and by our failure to recognize the natural limits of our human needs. For Epicurus, philosophy is good because of what it produces—namely, peace of mind. It is *not* possible to attain peace of mind without investigating and answering the central questions of philosophy; but a further point must be noted: and that is, that, on this view, philosophy is not intrinsically desirable. For the true Epicurean, there is nothing good about the activity of philosophy in itself; it is, rather, the peace of mind that philosophy provides that is good and indeed, *the* good.

A second response points to the striking similarities between Epicureanism and some modern theories and ways of thinking—for example, atomism, skepticism, the notion of philosophy as therapy, and so on. Such similarities doubtless exist—but one pitfall of this approach is that it encourages us to assimilate Epicurus to more familiar ways of thinking, and in doing this, we run the risk of leading ourselves astray. Worse, we lose touch with what is perhaps most valuable about reading Epicurus’ works (or, indeed, “old books” more generally) the opportunity that they provide to step outside—however briefly and imperfectly—our parochial opinions and the prejudices of our own time.

A final response comes to light as we examine modern appropriations of Epicurean ideas. This project is worthwhile for the perspective it offers on the “theologico-political problem.” The term itself has come to prominence in recent years as a major theme—arguably *the* major theme—in the works of Leo Strauss. The “clash between reason and revelation,” with its all its political concomitants, constitutes a subject of great intrinsic importance. Epicurean philosophy

conceives of itself as a participant in this clash, engaged on the side of reason, against what Lucretius terms “*religio*.” Epicurean ways of framing this clash are always pointed, and always interesting. The Epicureans can be thought of as “reason’s” most radical ancient partisans. As a consequence, the close study of Epicurean philosophy has a small but significant role to play in furthering our understanding of the thought of Leo Strauss. Furthermore, the close study of the Epicurean reception, in Christian (or ostensibly Christian) thinkers of the early modern period contributes to the filling of a gap in the “theologico-political problem,” as Strauss himself presented it. Scholars have noted that Strauss rarely, if ever, devotes sustained close attention to the specific claims of the Christian revelation. The study of Christian appropriations of Epicurean philosophical thought thus makes a major contribution toward broadening the scope of our understanding of the “theologico-political problem.”

Chapter II: Politics and Pleasure

In this chapter, I will show that Epicurus' endorsement of a policy of nonparticipation and withdrawal from public life should not be taken as an indication that he and his school failed to reflect on political matters. To the contrary, the Epicurus' system can be seen as an attempt to address important questions of political philosophy. The Epicurean account of pleasure is, at bottom, a *political* doctrine, and deserves to be read alongside the accounts of pleasure found in more overtly "political" thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. If this is done, the distinctiveness and originality of Epicurus' contributions become readily apparent. The Epicurean school's members—and many of its harshest ancient critics—were aware of the political underpinnings of the school's philosophy of pleasure.

My argument in this chapter has three main parts. First, I summarize the generally accepted view of Epicurus' ethics, and show why his philosophy of eudaimonistic hedonism leads him to endorse nonparticipation and withdrawal from public life. This is politics viewed as a sort of "applied ethical hedonism." Second, I introduce a complication: I argue that the widely accepted distinction between Epicurean hedonism and "vulgar" hedonism is misleading. On strictly Epicurean grounds there is no reason to distinguish between "higher" and "lower" desires—with one important exception. Epicurus claims that the desires relating to politics are "empty," which leads him to advise that they not be satisfied. This stands in contrast to his general advice to satisfy the basic desires of sense, as well as the more refined desires of philosophy. In the chapter's final part, I argue that the political psychology of Plato's *Republic* suggests a satisfying explanation for the otherwise puzzling character of Epicurean hedonism. Epicurus rejects political desires because he is apprehensive of *thumos*, or "spiritedness,"

regarding it as a threat to political and philosophical *ataraxia*. Parts two and three of this chapter suggest that Epicurean politics must be seen as *more* than just “applied ethical hedonism.” Considerations of political psychology play an important role in the overall structure of Epicurean ethical philosophy, and contribute to Epicurus’ rejection of politics as a realm of “empty desires.”

Live unnoticed

Epicurus repeatedly and unambiguously asserts that pleasure is the good. In the *Letter to Menoeceus* he states that it is “the beginning and end of the blessed life,” and our “primary and congenital good.” It is the beginning of “every choice and avoidance,” and after we engage in any activity “we come back to [pleasure], using the feeling as the yardstick (*kanōn*) for judging every good thing.”²⁹ This means that, for him, pleasure has not only a *practical* priority in our everyday decision making, but a *cognitive* priority in all of our reflections on good and bad. The cognitive priority, in particular, makes pleasure the proper starting point for any inquiry into Epicurean views on politics.³⁰ The priority of pleasure is similarly evident in the first words of Lucretius’ poem. The poet invokes the goddess Venus, naming her the “mother of Aeneas’ race,” and the “pleasure of men and gods.” It would seem that, just as the mythic Venus, mother of

²⁹ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.128-9 (LS 21B2).

³⁰ Compare A.A. Long, who states that it is not possible for “the two sets of texts [*i.e.* Epicurean teachings on pleasure and society]” to be “adequately studied in isolation from one another.” Nor can an “Epicurean achieve his goal of equanimity independently of [Epicurus’] social prescriptions and theories.” See LS vol.I, p. 134.

Aeneas, is “the link between Romanism and Epicureanism,” so too Venus, personification of pleasure, is the link between the concerns of human life and the truths of Epicurean philosophy.³¹

What is pleasure, exactly? Epicurus sometimes describes it in remarkably austere terms: “When we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time . . . [but rather] freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul.”³² In Epicurus’ view, freedom from pain (*aponia*) and freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*) are not a middle state between pleasure and pain, but rather the very peak of pleasure.³³ With respect to *aponia* and *ataraxia*, the Epicurean philosopher is said to approach the “self-sufficiency,” or *autarkeia*, of the gods themselves.³⁴

Pleasure is the good—but there are good reasons not to pursue every passing pleasure. Epicurus observes that some pleasures, if indulged, lead to greater long-term pain, and some pains, if endured, leads to greater long-term pleasure. As a consequence not every pleasure ought to be chosen, nor every pain avoided. The optimal strategy, he thinks, is one which weighs pleasures and pains—an activity which he calls “prudence” or *phronēsis*—with a careful eye to ensuring maximum pleasure over the course of one’s life as a whole.³⁵ The resulting position can be thought of as *eudaimonistic* hedonism, or, even, *virtue* hedonism, since Epicurus asserts that

³¹ DRN I.1-2 (with changes). See Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” p. 77. For Venus as the personification of specifically *sensual* pleasure, see Lucretius’ claim, “*Haec Venus est nobis*,” at DRN IV.1058-ff.

³² *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.131 (LS 22B5).

³³ KD 3, DL X.139 (LS 21C1); KD 18, DL X.144 (LS 21E1).

³⁴ KD 1, DL X.139 (LS 23E4). Compare *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.123 (LS 23B1). For philosophical *autarkeia*, see *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.130 (LS 21B4), and DL X.135 (LS 23J).

³⁵ *Letter to Menoeceus* DL X.132 (LS 21B); KD 5, DL X.140.

one must practice the traditional virtues of courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice in order to enjoy the greatest long-term pleasure:

[Prudence] teaches the impossibility of living pleurably without living prudently, honorably, and justly, <and the impossibility of living prudently, honorably, and justly> without living pleurably. For the virtues are naturally linked with living pleurably, and living pleurably is inseparable from them.³⁶

Living pleasantly requires living virtuously, and living virtuously ensures living pleasantly. Thus, although on Epicurus' view pleasure *alone* is intrinsically desirable, the prudent hedonist has good reason to practice justice and refrain from injustice in any conceivable circumstances.

The critique of political participation follows directly from these first principles. Epicurus acknowledges one plausible hedonistic justification for engaging in politics, namely, the desire for *asphaleia* or "security."³⁷ He believes, however, that political participation is a demonstrably ineffective means of achieving security. In KD 7 he declares:

Certain people wanted to become famous (*endoxoi*) and admired, thinking that they would thus acquire security (*asphaleia*) out of other men.³⁸ Consequently, if such people's life was secure, they did obtain nature's good; but if it was not secure, they are not in possession of the objective which they originally sought after on the basis of nature's affinity.³⁹

³⁶ Letter to Menoecus, DL X.132 (LS 21B6).

³⁷ Thus Malcolm Schofield, "Social and Political Thought," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, K. Algra, et. al., eds., p. 749, writes that security "supplies the clue to the motivation of all [Epicurus'] social and political thinking."

³⁸ The phrase "out of other men" is the preferred translation of *ex anthropōn*. Long and Sedley have translated it as "from other men." For discussion of this point, see Geert Roskam, "Live Unnoticed" (*Lathe biōsas*): *On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine*, pp. 37-38.

³⁹ KD 7, DL X.141 (LS 22C1).

Epicurus intends the conditional to be understood as a counterfactual: “If such people’s life was secure [which it was not], [then] they did obtain nature’s good [which they did not].”⁴⁰ Still, it is significant that he frames the question as one of determining the lifestyle best suited for obtaining security.

The surviving discussions of the Epicurean account of political origins in DRN book V and the lengthy fragment of Hermarchus preserved by Porphyry confirm that the desire for security is the driving force in the origin and development of human political communities.⁴¹ Furthermore, these political communities *do* succeed, at least in some measure, in answering the human desire for security—albeit *not* for those who “wanted to become famous and admired.”⁴² Epicurus’ student Colotes makes our debt to these individuals explicit:

Those who drew up laws and customs and established monarchal and other forms of government brought life into a state of much security (*asphaleia*) and tranquility (*hēsuchia*) and banished turmoil; and if anyone should remove these things, we would live a life of beasts, and one man on meeting another would all but devour him.⁴³

Thus it would seem that even the Epicurean philosopher, whose pleasure could in no way be increased by becoming famous and admired, might still obtain substantial benefits from living within a well-functioning political community.

⁴⁰ See Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, pp. 69 and 76, on Epicurus’ frequent employment of this mode of proof, and the “dogmatic urgency” of his conditional sentences, “whose conclusions,” Clay observes, “are vivid threats.”

⁴¹ See DRN V.925-1027 (LS 22J-K), and V.1105-1157 (LS 22L); as well as Hermarchus, *Against Timocrates*, quoted in Porphyry *On Abstinence*, I.7.1-I.9.4 (LS 22M), I.10.1-I.12.7 (LS 22N).

⁴² As Lucretius notes, “to solicit power, an empty thing, which is never granted,” is to endure the punishment of Sisyphus. See DRN III.995-ff (LS 24F4-6).

⁴³ Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes*, 1124d (LS 22R).

The best-known piece of political advice with which Epicurus is associated is the maxim *lathe biōsas*, or “live unnoticed.” Plutarch was inspired to write an anti-Epicurean polemic literally entitled, “On Whether ‘*Lathe Biōsas*’ is a Wise Precept.”⁴⁴ This essay gives valuable context for understanding Epicurus’ practical approach to politics. Plutarch’s most interesting criticism of Epicurus is that he “dishonestly”—literally, “unjustly”—courts fame and notoriety (*doxa*) with his advice to “live unnoticed.” In other words, Epicurus seeks fame by disparaging fame.⁴⁵ This may seem frivolous, but one does not have to accept Plutarch’s argument in its entirety to agree that there is something conspicuously odd about Epicurus’ way of dealing fame—a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

One of the *Vatican Sayings* gives an indication of Epicurus’ broader ethical outlook: “We must liberate ourselves,” he says, “from the prison of routine business and politics.”⁴⁶ Here, not only politics is condemned, but also “routine business”—which includes activities in the public sphere which are not strictly speaking “political.” One thinks of the business of the Athenian Agora—and of Epicurus’ decision to locate his philosophical Garden outside of the city walls; a tacit rejection of Acropolis and Agora alike. Furthermore, Epicurus’ description of “routine business and politics” as a “prison” has surprising resonances: The word he uses for “prison,” *desmōtērion*, recalls Plato’s “prisoners” (*demōteis*), who are said to be “bound from an early age”

⁴⁴ The issue is complicated by the fact that later philosophers adopted *lathe biōsas* as their own slogan. Roskam discusses the phenomenon in *Live Unnoticed*, p. 152.

⁴⁵ Plutarch, *Is “Live Unknown” a Wise Precept?* 1128b.

⁴⁶ *Vatican Saying* 58 (LS 22D1).

to the walls of the cave in *Republic* book VII.⁴⁷ It would appear that, like Plato, Epicurus envisions the world of the *polis* as a prison, and all those inside it as prisoners. Philosophy—just as in Plato—can be thought of as “liberation” from involuntary captivity.

To be sure, fundamental differences remain between Plato and Epicurus. While Epicurus announces in a passage from the KD that politics supplies crucial preconditions for the philosophic life, he does not suggest that the philosopher can (or should) return the favor by using his knowledge for the benefit of the community:

When tolerable security out of other men⁴⁸ is obtained, then on a basis of power sufficient to afford support and of material prosperity arises in most genuine form the security of a quiet private life withdrawn from the multitude.⁴⁹

The “security of a quiet private life withdrawn from the multitude” is meant to be associated with the life of philosophy, and it is portrayed as something good for its own sake, apart from any benefit it may provide to the political community. Indeed, any attempt to harness philosophy and use it for political ends will annihilate the security which serves as the philosophic life’s principal justification. One suspects that Epicurus would not acknowledge the incentive which, for Plato, serves to convince the best men to rule: the penalty of “being ruled by a worse man, if one is not willing to rule oneself.”⁵⁰ The Epicurean philosopher accepts the rule of a worse man, in order to enjoy the fruits of his ability and willingness to rule himself.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Republic* VII, 514a-b.

⁴⁸ Again, the Greek expression is *ex anthropōn*.

⁴⁹ KD 14, DL X.143.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic* I, 347c.

The Epicurean teaching's emphasis on the philosopher's benefiting from a less-than-full participation in public life has a precedent in Socratic thought. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Aristippus, the student of Socrates, takes the position that it is better to live detached from the political community as a foreigner. Aristippus begins his argument by stressing the connection between private life and necessary needs on the one hand, and civic life and unnecessary needs on the other: "[I]t is quite senseless," he says to Socrates, "that it not be enough for a human being to furnish himself with what he needs, although it is a lot of work, but instead to take on the additional task of procuring also for the rest of the citizens what they need." Socrates responds that in choosing private life Aristippus is in fact choosing slavery. Aristippus, however, believes that there is a third option. "In my opinion," he says, "there is a certain middle road between [master and slave], which I try to travel, neither through rule nor through slavery, but through freedom; and this road especially leads to happiness." He goes on to explicitly associate this "middle path" with the life of a stranger or foreigner.⁵¹ Here, once again, the topic of freedom as "liberation from politics" is emphasized.⁵²

The life of a foreigner, who lives under the laws and benefits from them, but does not participate in the regime, matches quite well the narrowly circumscribed political participation endorsed by Epicurus. To quote from a collection of Epicurean opinions compiled by Diogenes Laertius:

[The Epicurean wise man will not] make fine public speeches . . . He will marry and have children . . . but he will not engage in politics . . . or rule as a tyrant, or live as a Cynic . . .

⁵¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II.1.8-13.

⁵² Compare Socrates' statement in Plato, *Apology*, 32e; as well as the choice of the shade of Odysseus in *Republic* X, 620c-d.

[He will] bring lawsuits . . . He will be concerned about his property and the future . . . He will be concerned about his reputation, up to the point of ensuring that he will not be disparaged. He will set up statues but be indifferent about having one . . . He will make money, but only by his wisdom, if he is hard up. He will on occasion pay court to a king.⁵³

It is too simplistic to claim that Epicurus' practical political advice reduces to non-participation.⁵⁴ As we see here, Epicurus in fact endorses a life that is a careful mixture of public and private. The best parallel is the "way of freedom" or "middle path" of the itinerant foreigner. The wise man willingly accepts the benefits provided by the city—namely, security, provision of resources, and legal process (including protection of private property)—but he eschews the harmful (albeit, for many, attractive) temptations of rule, tyranny, or (in sum) any sort of engagement in the regime.

Lucretius gives a poetic presentation of the Epicurean teaching in DRN, book II. In what may be the poem's most memorable image, he praises the state of the observer who gazes down upon the tribulations of others—an observer who sees, but is not touched by the tumults taking place below.

Sweet it is, when on the great sea the winds are buffeting the waters, to gaze from the land on another's great struggles; not because it is pleasure or joy that anyone should be distressed, but *because it is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free*.⁵⁵

The concluding qualification is crucial. The philosopher's distinctive "pleasure" or "joy"—the pleasure which he *uniquely* enjoys—is the pleasure of gazing on others caught up in great

⁵³ DL X.117-120 (LS 22Q).

⁵⁴ Compare LS vol. I, p. 137. Epicureanism is "a radical but selective critique of contemporary politics, rather than the apolitical posture with which it is frequently identified."

⁵⁵ DRN II.1-4 (LS 21W1).

struggles, while being himself at rest. It is an *intellectual* pleasure insofar as it depends upon the philosopher's certain knowledge that he, in contrast to others, stands secure upon dry land. It is a *reflective* pleasure insofar as it requires not just the *visibility* of others, but an act of *comparison* with others in order to be savored. *Ataraxia* cannot shine forth as a true liberation if the "struggles"—the *tarakhai*—of other human beings are not conspicuously available for purposes of comparison.

Lucretius' image of a storm suggests that there is a *natural* source for the tumults that cause human struggles. This is, at least in part, true, as the poem's account of physics in its relation to human life demonstrates. The necessary culmination of Lucretius' materialist atomism is the bitter realization that, as Leo Strauss put it, "nothing lovable is eternal, and nothing eternal is lovable."⁵⁶ Epicurean physics shows that the things we care for are evanescent, and the natural order is vastly indifferent to, and ultimately destructive of, all human intentions and efforts.

Lucretius, however, soon turns his gaze to the *human* causes of the tumults: the great conflicts of war and of politics. "Sweet it is too," he writes, "to behold great contests of war in full array over the plains, when you have no part in the danger." Given his frequent analogizing of the atomic microcosm to a clash of armies, it is fitting that this, the central image of the poem of DRN II, depicts the "great contests of war." War, for Lucretius, is the middle term connecting natural reality and human reality. It is in *terms* of war that his intended audience first comes to see something of the ultimate character of nature.⁵⁷ As Lucretius here implies, and later makes much more explicit, we have little ground to claim that we "take no part in the danger." The

⁵⁶ Strauss, "Notes on Lucretius," p. 85.

⁵⁷ DRN II.40-ff. and 323-332.

image here is different from the one Lucretius presents later in DRN II. “Mock conflict” may accurately characterize the clashes from the perspective of the atoms. They truly “have no part in the danger,” since they are indivisible. We, on the other hand—along with the world of human meaning in its entirety—constitute the stakes of the “great contests of war.” Even the Epicurean philosopher must expect to be consumed and destroyed in the atomic tumults—but Lucretius delays exploring this sad and sobering thought.⁵⁸

Lucretius concludes his discussion of Epicurean pleasure with an image which may be his clearest illustration of philosophic bliss. The greatest and most surpassing sweetness is not gazing down upon struggling ships or clashing armies, it is gazing upon men wandering, embroiled in the conflicts of politics.

[N]othing is more gladdening than to dwell in the calm regions, firmly embattled on the heights by the teachings of the wise, whence you can look down on others, and see them wandering hither and thither, going astray as they seek the way of life, in strife matching their wits or rival claims of birth, struggling night and day by surpassing effort to rise up to the height of power and gain possession of the world.⁵⁹

These are the men who wanted to become “famous and admired” in Epicurus’ KD 7. But this passage from Lucretius has the virtue of raising a question which might not have appeared obvious to the reader of KD 7. What desires could possibly persuade men to pass their days and nights in fruitless struggle? Is it really *security* that political men are striving to obtain? If not, where did they get the false opinions that led them to participate in politics?

⁵⁸ Lucretius’ definitive attempt to explore the human significance of the tumults is the poem’s concluding account of the plague of Athens. See DRN VI.1138-1286.

⁵⁹ DRN II.5-13 (LS 21W1-2).

Extremes against the mean

It is customary to distinguish Epicurean hedonism from so-called “vulgar” hedonism, and to deplore the centuries of hostile misrepresentation which have successfully muddled the two in the minds of most non-specialists.⁶⁰ But scholarly readers and interpreters sometimes have trouble articulating this important distinction. The problem they face is that Epicurus’ own statements on the subject of pleasure do not always clearly distinguish him from a vulgar hedonist. We have already looked at Epicurus’ definition of pleasure as *aponia* and *ataraxia*. He expands upon the point in the immediately following passage.

[Pleasure] is not continuous drinking and parties, or the sexual enjoyment of boys and of women, or the enjoyment of fish and the other dishes of an expensive table, but sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance, and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion.⁶¹

This seems to show that the Epicurean hedonist is not the vulgar caricature associated with the phrase, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” One wonders how this passage could be compatible with Epicurus’ notorious statement in a treatise entitled *On the End*:

I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through

⁶⁰ Most recently, Stephen Greenblatt writes, “Epicurus’ enemies seized upon his celebration of pleasure and invented malicious stories of his debauchery.” See *The Swerve*, pp. 76-77. For some additional examples of authors asserting the Epicurean hedonism-vulgar hedonism distinction, see David Sacks, “Epicureanism,” *A Dictionary of the Ancient Greek World*, p. 90; Michael Erler, “Epicurus,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, M. Gagarin and E. Fantham, eds., vol. I, p. 89; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Greek Philosophers of the Hellenistic Age*, p. 5. The list is far from exhaustive. The only authors I am aware of who deny the existence of an Epicurean hedonism-vulgar hedonism distinction are Walter Nicgorski, “Cicero, Citizenship, and the Epicurean Tradition,” in *Cultivating Citizens*, D.D. Allmann and M.D. Beaty, eds., pp. 3-28, and Eve Adler, *Vergil’s Empire: Political Thought in the Aeneid*, pp. 41-76. I am deeply indebted to both of their discussions.

⁶¹ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.131-132 (LS 21B5).

beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in a man as a whole.⁶²

The tension between the “sober reasoning” of the *Letter to Menoeceus* passage, and the “crude sensualism” of the *On the End* passage has not been overlooked; Long and Sedley, for example, note the “defensive” and “attractively shocking” style of the latter, and of many of Epicurus’ other statements on the subject of pleasure. But while they suggest that Epicurus “anticipated opposition and misunderstanding from rival philosophers,” and imply that he deliberately placed “bait” which was eagerly accepted by his critics (especially the Stoics), I contend that it is possible to take Epicurus’ sensualist claims quite seriously—but only if we are willing to abandon the distinction between Epicurean hedonism and vulgar hedonism as it is traditionally understood.⁶³

The distinction dates back to Epicurus’ own lifetime. The biographer Diogenes Laertius reports that Timocrates, a onetime student of Epicurus, had a falling out with his teacher and subsequently accused him of vulgar hedonism in the extreme—for example, vomiting twice daily through overindulgence, consorting with prostitutes, and so on. Diogenes Laertius finds these accusations ridiculous. As he points out, the surviving accounts of Epicurus and his followers strongly suggest that the Epicurean notion of the pleasant life was *not* unrestrained consumption.⁶⁴ Still, the possibility remains that, as Cicero argued, Epicurus lived better—more

⁶² Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.41-2 (LS 21L1), citing a lost treatise *On the End*. The same passage is quoted in DL X.6 and in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XII, 546e.

⁶³ LS vol. I, pp. 121-125.

⁶⁴ DL X.3-12.

moderately and more virtuously—than his philosophy entitled him to.⁶⁵ Is there an intellectually rigorous way to distinguish the vulgar hedonist from the Epicurean? Does Epicurus put forward an idea of pleasure that is consistent with itself?

Let us return to first principles. Epicurus repeatedly and unambiguously asserts that pleasure is the good.⁶⁶ This means that pleasure alone is intrinsically desirable and all other things are desirable only through pleasure. It is an important consequence of this position that Epicurus must oppose any suggestion that the goodness of pleasure can be established by argument. Cicero's Epicurean spokesman Torquatus explains the point:

[T]here is no need to prove or discuss why pleasure should be pursued and pain avoided . . . these matters are sensed just like the heat of fire, the whiteness of snow and the sweetness of honey, none of which needs confirmation by elaborate arguments; it is enough to point them out.⁶⁷

The concern seems to be that, if Epicurus were to grant that the goodness of pleasure could be established by argument, he might also find himself conceding that “argument,” or reason, stands prior to pleasure. He might even find himself conceding that the *good* stands prior to pleasure.⁶⁸ Epicurus wishes to deny these claims. Thus, he consistently asserts that sensation provides the *only* standard of judgment, stating: “If you fight against all sensations, you will not have a standard against which to judge even those of them you say are mistaken.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Cicero, *De finibus* II.99: “[Epicurus] is, then, refuted by himself. His very character and probity rebut his theories.”

⁶⁶ See, for example, *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.127-132 (LS 21B).

⁶⁷ Cicero, *De finibus* I.30 (LS 21A2). Note the alternative position adopted by some Epicureans at I.31 (LS 21A4).

⁶⁸ Plato, *Republic* VI, 505c.

⁶⁹ KD 23, DL X.146 (LS 16D).

The consequence, ethically speaking, is that Epicurus is opposed any attempt to judge the goodness of pleasure from a perspective extrinsic to pleasure. He grants that it is possible to weigh pleasures and pains against one another, but not that one could ever weigh pleasures and pains against other “goods” or “ills”—because on his view there are no other “goods” or “ills.”

The goodness of pleasure cannot be demonstrated, but it can be *illustrated* through the use of examples—and it is in this context that Epicurus cites what has sometimes been known as the “newborn argument.” The name is somewhat misleading. Epicurus insists it must not be understood as an argument, but rather as a sort of illustration.⁷⁰ All living creatures, before having any experience of life or of “the good,” seek pleasure as their first and innate good. Nature, so long as it has not been set astray by its upbringing, gives testimony to the truth of the Epicurus’ statement that the pleasant is the good. This is a truth which stands prior to any demonstration.

The scholars who attempt to distinguish Epicurean hedonism from vulgar hedonism are right to suspect that Epicurus does, at bottom, admit of distinctions between different kinds of pleasures. However they are looking for distinctions in the wrong place. Epicurean pleasure is *both* austere *and* sensual. To speak of “higher” and “lower” pleasures is misleading, because the essence of Epicurean hedonism is the *union* of higher and lower pleasures against what may be termed the “middle” pleasures—that is to say, the pleasures relating to political recognition and honors. Only with regard to the pleasures of recognition does Epicurus unambiguously and categorically speak out *against* the satisfaction of desire.

⁷⁰ DL X.137. See also Cicero, *De finibus* I.30. Epicurus was not the first to cite the behavior of newborns. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.13, 1153b25. See also *Nicomachean Ethics* X.2, 1172b9, where the views of Eudoxus are described.

In KD 29, Epicurus divides the desires (*epithumia*) into three classes. Some are “natural and necessary. Others are “natural, but not necessary.” Still others are “neither natural nor necessary but are due to empty opinion (*kenēn doxan*).”⁷¹ It is not clear which desires make up each class; perhaps this is why the following scholion is added to our manuscripts:

Natural and necessary [desires] according to Epicurus, are ones which bring relief from pain, such as drinking when thirsty; natural but non-necessary are ones which merely vary pleasure but do not remove pain, such as expensive foods; neither natural nor necessary are ones for things like crowns and the erection of statues.⁷²

The point of the tripartite categorization of desires is the demotion of “unnatural unnecessary desires.” Epicurus claims that the longing for such things is “easily got rid of,” and there will be “no pain when they fail to be gratified.”⁷³ The phrase “empty opinion” appears to suggest the absence of any natural basis for these desires; it may echo the image of “full vessels” and “leaky vessels” in Plato’s *Gorgias*: since members of the third class of desires have no natural basis, they prove in practice to be insatiable.⁷⁴ In the same vein, Epicurus states that what is natural is easily obtained, but what is empty is hard to procure.⁷⁵

Should the “desires due to empty opinion” be identified with the desires for political recognition and honors? This is what the example given by the scholiast, namely, “crowns and the erection of statues,” implies. This interpretation would be in harmony with Epicurus’ advice

⁷¹ KD 29, DL X.149. Compare *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.127 (LS 21B1).

⁷² Scholion on KD 29, DL X.149 (LS 21I).

⁷³ KD 30, DL X.149 (LS 21 E3); KD 26, DL X.148.

⁷⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*, 493a-494b.

⁷⁵ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.130 (LS 21B4). The image of the leaky vessel appears again in DRN VI.1-42 (LS 21X), where Epicurus’ teaching is represented as plugging the leaks by “putting a limit to desire and fear.”

to “live unnoticed,” which takes on additional resonances when it is understood that “living unnoticed” means eschewing fame or “opinion” (*doxa*). Plutarch’s attack on Epicurus for courting *doxa* may seem a bit less frivolous in this light. If he were to show that Epicurus had written because of a desire to achieve fame, this would be truly damaging. It might suggest that Epicurus was a hypocrite whose actions were not consistent with his openly stated principles. One does not have to agree with Plutarch’s polemic, to agree that it works better, *as polemic*, if one assumes the account of Epicurean hedonism that is given here.

Starving the lion, feeding the beast

Epicurus regards the desire for political recognition as an “unnatural, unnecessary desire.” Some men are persuaded to seek recognition because they think it will provide them with security; these men are mistaken about the *true* sources of security. Other men seek recognition for its own sake, because they imagine that things like “crowns and the erection of statues” are choiceworthy in themselves; these men are in the grip of a dangerous and insatiable “empty opinion.” The desire for recognition is not natural, and no one suffers any pain if it fails to be gratified. When Epicurus tells his students to “live unnoticed,” he is not just giving them good practical advice—he is showing them how to properly order their souls. If they want to be happy, they must shun the realm of reputation or opinion (*doxa*). His ethical psychology teaches them to take pleasure in the moderate enjoyment of sensual things, and to apply their intellect to the job of debunking the false pleasures of recognition.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, especially pp. 102-139, and Voula Tsouna, *The Ethics of Philodemus*, pp. 195-238.

Book IX of Plato's *Republic* offers a very different view of the proper ordering of the soul. Socrates presents an "image of the human soul in speech," divided into its gain-loving, spirited, and calculating parts. These parts are likened, respectively, to a many headed beast, a lion, and a human being. Each of the parts is said to experience a pleasure which is intrinsic to it.⁷⁷ For the "lion"—*i.e.* the spirited or "thumotic" part of the soul—this pleasure comes from being awarded honors, winning victories, or expressing anger.⁷⁸ On this model, the pleasures of recognition are not "unnatural" or "empty," but the intrinsic pleasures of a distinct part of the human soul. To be sure, if the thumotic soul is given free rein, Socrates thinks it will run awry and fail to achieve what it desires.⁷⁹ Still, he takes a more positive view of the lion than he does of the many-headed beast. This is part of a larger psychic strategy. Socrates contends that the just man ought to do and say those things from which the human being within "will most be in control," and that this requires him to "take charge of the many-headed beast—like a farmer, nourishing and cultivating the tame heads, while hindering the growth of the savage ones." Reason's rule over the desiring soul is not quite as simple as this: the many-headed beast is larger and stronger than the human being, and in order to succeed in this project an alliance must be struck between reason and *thumos*. The human being must "make the lion's nature an ally."⁸⁰ Only when the man and lion are united do they possess the strength to take charge of the many-headed beast.

⁷⁷ Plato, *Republic* IX, 580d.

⁷⁸ Plato, *Republic* IX, 586c.

⁷⁹ Plato, *Republic* IX, 587a.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Republic* IX, 589a-b.

Epicurus' political psychology can be contrasted with this model. In Platonic terms, we could say that he is chiefly concerned with asserting the human being's rule over the lion, rather than over the many-headed beast. The thumotic desire for receiving honors, winning victories and expressing anger must be starved. This desire is unnatural, and it will cause no pain if we fail to feed it. In agreement with Socrates, Epicurus argues that reason must exercise some degree of control over the many-headed beast; but he appears to think that the strategy of enlisting the lion as an ally is dangerous or unnecessary. The human being and the many-headed beast should instead unite against the lion. Epicurean psychology promotes a distinctive form of hedonism; we might call it "hedonism minus *thumos*"—or hedonism minus the distinctive pleasures of the thumotic part of the soul.

This interpretation comports with Lucretius' invocation of Venus in the opening lines of DRN. Lucretius appeals to the goddess (who must be understood in her higher and lower senses) for the specific purpose of calming Mars and causing his "wild works of warfare" to be lulled to sleep. Lucretius prays for "gentle peace for the Romans," because it is the precondition for engaging in his own poetic task "with mind undistressed," and also the precondition for his addressee Memmius to listen without the distraction of political exigencies.⁸¹ Again, this is human being and many-headed beast united against the lion.

In sum, a distinguishing feature of Epicurean philosophy is the way in which it regards *thumos* with suspicion. The desire for political recognition is seen as a greater threat to

⁸¹ DRN I.29-43.

philosophy than the uncurbed sensual desires. If reason can determine a limit (*peras*), it would seem quite capable on its own of controlling the many-headed beast.⁸²

I have argued previously in this chapter that Epicurus is opposed to any attempt to judge the goodness of pleasure from a perspective extrinsic to pleasure. If so, then Epicurus' categorical rejection of thumotic pleasures is surprising. It is only by stepping outside the experience of pleasure that he can stigmatize the pleasures of *thumos* as "unnatural and unnecessary." Why would he think it necessary to starve the spirited part of the soul, instead of arguing, as Socrates does, that the spirited part of the soul can be put under reason's control? I do not have a good answer to this question. Instead, I suspect that Epicurus' rejection of thumotic pleasure functions as a sort of ethical axiom—an instance in which political philosophy supplies a foundational premise for Epicurean ethics.

Conclusion: The splendor of moral virtue

The reputed density and intricacy of *Peri phuseōs* notwithstanding, Epicurus had an easy way with words, and a controversialist's sense for finding a provocative way to summarize his view. He once declared, "I spit upon (*pros-ptuō*) the noble (*to kalon*), whenever it produces no pleasure." As this saying's raw imagery would seem to imply, whatever is "noble," "fine," or "beautiful" is rejected or "spit outside" of his moral philosophy, unless it can justify being retained on strictly hedonistic grounds. Epicurus was critical of "the noble," in part, because he recognized that noble actions and nobility of character, might seem to be choiceworthy for their

⁸² For the Epicurean idea of the limit, as it relates to the desires, see KD 2, DL X.139; and KD 18-21, DL X.144-146 (LS 23E1, LS 24C). For examples of the intellectual strategies for controlling the appetites, see DRN IV.1058-1287.

own sake, regardless of any increase of pleasure or diminution of pain they may procure for us. He understood that there seems to be a certain “splendor” to moral virtue—or to the willingness to make great sacrifices and endure great hardships for the sake of some higher end. If Aristotle is to be believed, this splendor of virtue can be depicted so compellingly as to inspire young and well-born characters to dedicate their lives to the pursuit of it.⁸³

Epicurus’ response is deflationary. To those who are inclined to be moved by depictions of great sacrifices and great acts of endurance, his imagery recalls the fickleness and conventionality of all human expressions of esteem. What is today reputed “noble,” may tomorrow be spit upon. The pursuit of virtue’s “splendor” is just another empty activity, like the pursuit “of crowns and the erection of statues.” Nor, as Epicurus would remind us, is there any pain, if these desires fail to be satisfied.

To be sure, a little space remains for virtue, in the Epicurean account. The philosopher will practice all of the virtues, because he knows that being wise, just, moderate, and courageous is the prescription for maximum pleasure, considered over the span of his life as a whole. Indeed, awareness of his own virtuousness, and of the many enjoyments secured by that virtuousness, forms a not inconsiderable part of his happiness, considered generally. This, however, is virtue pursued on the basis of calculation, and there is no reason to think that anyone would be inspired by its splendor.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9, 1179a33-b20.

A final wrinkle remains: Epicurus and his followers devoted considerable attention to the speculative account of human social and political origins.⁸⁴ If what I am saying is correct, this should come as no surprise. The accounts of human political origins found in classical political philosophy place great emphasis on the role of *thumos*.⁸⁵ A primary object of the Epicurean account is to show how political society can come to be through *pure calculation of interest*, without undue reliance on *thumos* as an explanatory factor. Furthermore, the speculative account of human social and political origins might help to show how the desire for honors—“unnatural, unnecessary desire,” in the Epicurean schema—could come to implant itself in so many human souls.

⁸⁴ See Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.75-76 (LS 19A); DRN V.925-1457, and VI.1-42 (LS 21X); Hermarchus, *Against Timocrates*, quoted in Porphyry *On Abstinence*, I.7.1-I.9.4 (LS 22M), and I.10.1-I.12.7 (LS 22N).

⁸⁵ See, for example, Plato, *Republic* II, 372c-ff.

Chapter III: The Indifferent Universe

Many of the tenets of Epicurean physics have an identifiable prehistory in prior Greek thought.⁸⁶ The most important—the notion that our universe is composed of atoms and void—was originally proposed by Democritus (460-370 B.C.) and Leucippus (c. 5th century B.C.). Cicero would make this the subject of one of his most influential criticisms: the valuable parts of Epicurus' philosophy, he claimed, are not original, but stolen—with some modifications for the worse—from Democritus.⁸⁷ Many later thinkers agreed with Cicero's assessment. In fact, one factor motivating early modern interest in DRN and other Epicurean texts seems to have been the desire to get back to the allegedly superior, but fragmentary, atomism of Democritus. The persistence of this view is shown by the fact that it was still current in 1841, when Marx wrote his doctoral thesis, entitled *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. Marx challenges the prevailing view—with the ultimate goal of vindicating Epicurus by showing his modifications to Democritean physics are, in fact, for the better.⁸⁸

The dismissive attitude toward Epicurean physics is sometimes tied to the notion that Epicurus' system can be reduced to *phusiologia*—in other words, that Epicurus' system is, in its entirety, derived from premises supplied by natural science. I believe that this view is mistaken, and that it provides an incomplete account of the sources of the Epicurean system. I have

⁸⁶ For Epicurus' claim that he was self-taught, see DL X.13; for accusations that he was influenced by Democritus, see DL X.2-3. Epicurus is said to have been a student of Nausiphanes, who was himself student of Democritus (see DL X.7-8 for Epicurus' alleged harsh assessment of his teacher); for the claim that Epicurus plagiarized Democritus, see DL X.4.

⁸⁷ *De finibus* I.21, 73. The claim appears to antedate Cicero. See DL X.2-4.

⁸⁸ See Karl Marx, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*.

presented some of my reasons in the preceding chapters; additional reasons will be presented in the current chapter. Still, I want to acknowledge at the outset that Epicurean natural science *does* have significant implications for human life and for political philosophy. One purpose of this chapter will to draw out some of these implications.

Because the tenets of Epicurean natural science have an easily identifiable prehistory, it is possible to regard them as a revival of pre-Socratic views against certain “cosmological innovations” introduced by Plato and Aristotle. As Friedrich Solmsen puts it:

With regard to . . . issues [such as the nature of the Soul and the eternity of the Universe], Epicurus would think of the Platonists as committing something like intellectual treason by taking their stand on the side of popular misconceptions and superstitions and giving them vigorous support in the form of elaborate theories and arguments.⁸⁹

This seems to me correct—but potentially misleading. Epicurean natural science must be supplemented by an Epicurean account of the *purpose* of natural science. It is true that Epicurus thinks of the Platonists as committing “something like intellectual treason,” but this is *not* on account of his own belief in the integrity of the scientific enterprise—quite the contrary.

Epicurus instructed his followers to take a mercenary attitude toward scientific “truth.” I have already pointed out his principle of “multiplicity of possible explanations”—his belief that providing several explanations for a single physical event was preferable to providing just one, since it was more likely to compel persuasion. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, he suggests that it would be better to “believe the false myths about the gods” than to be “enslaved to the determinism of the physicists.” The problem he perceives is that a rigorous necessity (*anankē*) or “determinism”—of the sort associated with Democritus—undermines human freedom, and with

⁸⁹ Friedrich Solmsen, “Epicurus and Cosmological Heresies,” *American Journal of Philology* 72.1 (1951), p. 2.

it the grounds for praise and blame of actions. The myths of the gods at least “hold out some faint hope that we may escape if we honor [them], while the necessity of the physicists is deaf to all entreaties.”⁹⁰

The principle, generalized, is that the conclusions of natural science ought to be rejected if they undermine human happiness conceived as *ataraxia*—we would be better off believing the “myths of the gods.” But, as he does elsewhere, Epicurus states his point as a counterfactual. As it so happens (or so Epicurus believes) the conclusions of natural science support *ataraxia*—by showing, for example, that our apparent freedom is real, and that the alarm we feel at strange and unexpected celestial phenomena is unjustified. In Epicurus’ view, it is not the truth *as such* that sets us free, but the *particular* truth that there is no reason for fear.⁹¹

Stated differently, the philosopher engages in natural science not out of a “desire to know,” but out of a particular, felt need to relieve “fears of the mind.” Epicurus describes these as, “the fears inspired by celestial phenomena, [the] fear of death, [and the] fear of pain.”⁹² Only by means of natural science can these fears can be conclusively refuted.⁹³ Epicurean physics is consequently dogmatic—in contrast to the skepticism of Democritus or Protagoras. It is necessary to have *secure* knowledge in order to achieve *ataraxia*. It is not sufficient to say, “I

⁹⁰ Letter to Menoeceus, DL X.133-134 (LS 20A).

⁹¹ See Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 41.

⁹² KD 10-11, DL X.142 (LS 21D3, 25B1).

⁹³ KD 12, DL X.143 (LS 25B2).

reserve judgment,” or, “I cannot make up my mind.” Uncertainty about life, death, and the fundamental character of the universe provides an inadequate basis for peace of mind.⁹⁴

Thus it is wrong to read Epicurean physics as a straightforward revival of pre-Socratic *phusiologia* against the “cosmological heresies” introduced by Plato and Aristotle. To the extent that Epicurus *revives* the tenets of pre-Socratic physics, he *transforms* them by putting them to use in the service of an ethical outlook which is motivated by happiness conceived as *ataraxia*. For this reason, Ludwig Edelstein is right to describe the Epicurean system as the “entelechy” (we might say, the “being-at-work-staying-itself”) of pre-Socratic ideas.⁹⁵ Epicurus extends and completes the physics of Democritus and the pre-Socratics by “putting it to work” within a project of human liberation via philosophy. It is with an eye to these matters that Benjamin Farrington defines Epicureanism as “a refurbishing of the atomism of Democritus by a follower of Socrates.”⁹⁶

One may detect in this the influence of the Socratic question: “how ought one to live?” This question is at the very heart of Epicurean philosophy, just as it was at the heart of Socratic philosophy. From this it follows that Epicurus’ criticism of Plato and Aristotle—his judgment

⁹⁴ Note Lucretius' awareness of his audience's vulnerability to religious arguments, and his response: dogmatic philosophy. See, for example, DRN I.102-135; III.41-54.

⁹⁵ Ludwig Edelstein, “Primum Graius Homo,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 71 (1940), p. 85. The passage is quoted in Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, p. 97. On the translation of *entelecheia* I follow Joe Sachs. For a discussion of the relevant issues, see his *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study*, p. 245.

⁹⁶ Benjamin Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus* p. xi. See also p. 14, and Farrington's reference there to the “revolt against the city.” Farrington perceptively concludes: “In his attitude to politics, [Epicurus] followed Socrates with a fidelity which Plato lacked,” and quotes Socrates' statement in the *Apology* that “any genuine champion of justice . . . must remain a private individual.”

that they commit something like “intellectual treason”—must be referred back to his disagreement with the mainstream of Socratic thought as regards the right way of life. Epicurus does not take issue with classical political philosophy because it defends “popular misconceptions and superstitions.” He takes issue with classical political philosophy because the *particular* misconceptions and superstitions which it defends prevent men from achieving *ataraxia*. Socrates is “zetetic” or constantly inquiring; Epicurus is dogmatic—because he judges that only certainty can eliminate fear and unease. And while Socrates is animated by a desire for wisdom that is in some sense “erotic,” Epicurus is animated by a desire for *ataraxia*—a state of being which exists only when the desire for wisdom, along with all other desires, has fallen silent.

The Socratic turn

In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates gives us an intellectual autobiography of sorts. He says that as a young man he was “wondrously desirous of that wisdom which they call ‘inquiry into nature’ (*historia peri phuseōs*).” He wished “to know the causes (*aitiai*) of each thing and why each thing comes to be and why it perishes and why it *is*.”⁹⁷ As Socrates indicates, the search for the causes and origins (*archai*) of things was a well-established field of inquiry. The first Greek “inquirer into nature” or *phusikos*, was the semi-legendary figure, Thales—who was best known for having predicted a solar eclipse.⁹⁸ Thales showed that an unusual and spectacular event was predictable, and in fact followed a regular, foreseeable schedule. On the same model, the young

⁹⁷ Plato, *Phaedo* 96a.

⁹⁸ See G.S. Kirk, et. al., *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, pp. 81-84. The eclipse occurred in 585 B.C., a little less than two hundred years prior to the death of Socrates.

Socrates sought to understand the phenomena of heaven and earth, but he found instead that his inquiry into nature produced “blindness,” and caused him to unlearn things he once thought he knew. His curiosity seems particularly to have pertained to living beings, in their organization, perception, and capacity for knowledge. The difficulties he faced seem to have pertained to these same questions. Socrates says that he used to think, in his simple-minded way, that a human being grows by eating and drinking. But now, he says, “I do not even persuade myself that I know why . . . [anything] comes to be or perishes or *is* by this way of proceeding.”⁹⁹ Pre-Socratic inquiry into nature appears to have reached a skeptical dead end.

It was at this point, Socrates recounts, that he overheard somebody reading a book by Anaxagoras, in which it was written that “Mind” (*nous*) puts the world in order and is responsible for all things. At first, Socrates was pleased with this sort of argument. He imagined that the causality of Mind would “order all things and position each thing in just that way which was best.”¹⁰⁰ But when he read the book for himself, Socrates found that Anaxagorean Mind—contrary to his initial assumption—had no place for an account of the best: “I saw a man who didn’t employ Mind at all and didn’t hold any causes responsible for putting things in order, but instead put the blame on air and ether and water and other things many and absurd.”¹⁰¹ To

⁹⁹ Plato, *Phaedo* 97b.

¹⁰⁰ Plato, *Phaedo* 97c.

¹⁰¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 97c-d.

borrow the terminology of Aristotle, Anaxagoras describes Mind as an *efficient* cause, but neglects to describe a *formal* or a *final* cause.¹⁰²

Once again, Socrates judges the failure of pre-Socratic “inquiry into nature” to specifically pertain to its failure to account for living, purposeful beings: it is, he claims, as if someone were to say that Socrates sits in his jail cell on account of muscles, bones and sinews—material causes—instead of on account of his “Mind” or intelligence.¹⁰³ Socrates’ allusion to his imprisonment adds an element of moral seriousness to what might have seemed a lighthearted mockery of the obtuseness of pre-Socratic inquiry into nature: the failure of Anaxagorean Mind to account for Socrates’ decision to remain and face his sentence is not only laughable—it is also, in this particular context, deadly serious.

It is the failure of Anaxagorean Mind that leads Socrates to embark on what he calls his “second sailing in search of the cause.”¹⁰⁴ No longer will he risk “soul-blindness” by looking directly at beings with his eyes and “attempting to grasp them by each of the senses.” To do so would be to risk suffering “the very thing those people do who behold and look at the sun during an eclipse.” Just as it is safer for them to look at the sun’s “likeness in water or some other such thing,” so Socrates will “take refuge in accounts (*logoi*) and look in them for the truth of beings.”¹⁰⁵ It is the turn to “accounts” or *logoi* that Socrates identifies as the specific difference

¹⁰² See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 985a. The fragments of Anaxagoras cited in Kirk, et. al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 362-4, establish that Anaxagorean Mind is material, albeit the “finest of all things and the purest.”

¹⁰³ Plato, *Phaedo* 98c.

¹⁰⁴ Plato, *Phaedo* 99d.

¹⁰⁵ Plato, *Phaedo* 99e.

between his own, mature mode of inquiry, and the mode of those before him who had inquired into nature.

From this perspective, Epicurean physics may seem to be the final and definitive statement of pre-Socratic inquiry into nature: a return to the “first sailing” of Anaxagoras and the young Socrates. It too is concerned to know “the causes of each thing and why each thing comes to be and why it perishes and why it *is*,” and it begins by asserting things which are not evident (*to adēlon*), but which have a respectable history in pre-Socratic physiology: that nothing comes to be out of nothing, that nothing perishes into nothing, and that the totality of things (*to pan*) was always and will be such as it is now.¹⁰⁶ From these first principles, Epicurus derives his account of the causes of each thing and of its generation and destruction and why it *is*. This account can be briefly summarized. The whole (*to pan*) is infinite, and unchanging with respect to generation and destruction. The “simple bodies” or atoms are infinitely hard, unchanging, and imperceptible. Void exists between the atoms—for how else could motion be possible? Everything that *is*, is either atoms, or void, or some property or accident of atoms and void. All motion is the consequence of the atoms’ three intrinsic tendencies to motion: to descend at a constant rate, to rebound from collision, and—only occasionally—to “swerve” with respect to a straight-line path.

Every case of generation and destruction can be referred to motion and to a material principle: the “seeds” (*spermata*) or “indivisibles” (*atomoi*) which together comprise the basic “elements” (*stoikheia*) of all things. Knowledge of atoms and atomic compounds is –or is

¹⁰⁶ *Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.38-9 (LS 4A). Compare Lucretius’ elaboration on this first principle: he states, “nothing comes out of nothing *by divine agency*,” at DRN I.149-ff.

asserted to be—the consummation of the “wisdom” that young Socrates sought under the title “inquiry into nature.”

According to a lost biography by Apollodorus the Epicurean, Epicurus was first led to philosophy by the inability of his schoolteacher to explain the meaning of “Chaos” in Hesiod.¹⁰⁷ The reference is to line 116 of the *Theogony*, where Hesiod states “verily first of all did Chaos come into being.” It is not clear what the word “Chaos” means in this context; etymologically, it may derive from a root meaning “gape,” “gap,” or “yawn,” and thus might be understood as a sort of gulf or void. In Hesiod’s account the opening of this gulf is accompanied by the appearance of earth and sky, day and night, and the gods and the titans. It is possible to read this passage as a pre-philosophic cosmogony. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield discuss the cosmological significance of this creation-story and of Hesiod’s other references to “Chaos” and conclude that Hesiod is likely describing “the first stage in the formation of a differentiated world, [that is to say,] the production of a vast gap between sky and earth” (though why, in this case, would Chaos be said to come-to-be *prior* to earth and sky?); they reject (among other things) later philosophical interpretations of “Chaos” as “place” (Aristotle’s account in *Physics*, book IV) and “disorder” (a later view, they contend, perhaps “Stoic in origin”).¹⁰⁸ The fact that Epicurus’ question led him to philosophize suggests that he was not merely concerned with determining Hesiod’s authorial intentions—or that he was interested in determining Hesiod’s authorial intentions to the extent that they cast light on the problems of cosmogony and theogony.

¹⁰⁷ DL X.2.

¹⁰⁸ Kirk, et. al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 34-41. See also Aristotle, *Physics* IV.1 208b29.

Apollodorus' story may not be authentic. We possess it through Diogenes Laertius, who probably wrote his biography some five centuries after Epicurus' death. It is possible that this charming tale is a bit of later biographical invention. But even if this were the case, it would be an interesting and potentially astute bit of biographical invention. Whether or not one takes Apollodorus' story as truth—indeed whatever one takes “Chaos” in Hesiod to mean—it is clear that Epicurean physics is concurrently a meditation on the beginning (*archē*) and causes (*aitiai*) of things, and a meditation on the character of the All (*to pan*) out of which individual things are formed. Furthermore, it may be, like Hesiod's *Theogony*, a meditation on the origin and the nature of the gods.

In this last vein, Epicurus denies that Mind (or anything else for that matter) “orders things” and “positions each thing in just that way which is best.” There is no cosmic order, and no divine providence. The infinite universe (*to pan*) reflects no overarching plan. Within it, a multiplicity of worlds or *cosmoi*—some just like our own—are constantly being generated and destroyed. All of this purposeless activity is due to atomic collisions. Even if a god took concern for the order of things, there would be good reason to doubt his power to impose a plan on the infinite (of which he is necessarily a part, in the Epicurean conception).¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Epicurus would instruct us to deny the premise: as the first part of the *tetrapharmakon* seemed to imply, it runs contrary to the very nature of divinity to take concern for the order of things.

¹⁰⁹ DRN II.1095-1104 (LS 13D).

First principles

The starting point of Epicurean physics is faith in the veracity of the senses. This faith is justified by Epicurean “canonic,” or the account of the criteria and conditions of knowledge. Canonic will only figure briefly in our discussion of Epicurean philosophy, so it would be good to say something about it here. It seems to have considered the question, “How do we come to know things?” Here an important distinction must be made between the Epicurean theory of knowledge and any modern “scientific” theory of knowledge. Epicureanism is *naïve*: it takes the testimony of our senses as true, and it argues that there is no way one sense impression can serve as a check on another—for that would require one impression to be “more true” than another.¹¹⁰ The world really *is* more or less as it appears to us. Modern natural science, in contrast, is “reflective.” It allows one sense impression to serve as a check on another sense impression because it does not take *any* sense impression as the primary object of knowledge. Instead, the knowledge of modern natural science is *knowledge of mathematical models*, which can be used as a check on our sense impressions.

According to Epicurus, our senses are basically reliable sources—the world is, more or less, as we see it. The interesting thing is that, while Epicurean phenomenology is self-professedly naïve, the arguments Epicurus adduces to defend naïve sensualism are reflective and sophisticated. Further, the naïveté of Epicurean sensualism is used to reach surprising and subtle conclusions. Epicurean physics applies the truth of our sense impressions to prove the existence of things unmanifest and thoroughly obscure. The best example is the void (*to kenon*). It should

¹¹⁰ See DL X.31-32 (LS 16B), and KD 23-24, DL X.146-147 (LS 16D, 17B). Also compare Cicero, *De finibus* I.6.

go without saying that none of us have experience of the void, given Epicurus' mechanist model of sense-perception, in which atomic collisions—atomic *touches*, to put it more bluntly—are responsible for all sensation. Whatever else one may say about the void, it is clear that it is not “touchable” in any sense. Indeed, that is what defines it, for Epicurus. The existence of the void, however, is required if we are to avoid being caught denying the testimony of our senses—and for this reason we might say that the void is proven through a reflective application of naïve sensualist first principles.¹¹¹

Epicurean phenomenology can be thought of as post-skeptical and post-Socratic in the most important respects. Greek thought appears to have undergone a skeptical period in the late 4th century and early 3rd century BC. The manifestations of this skepticism include Democritus' claims that “truth is in a well,” and that we cannot know the things in themselves, but only our perceptions of the things¹¹²; Protagoras' moral and epistemological relativism; Prodicus' “linguistic turn;” the Socratic turn away from inquiry into nature and toward inquiry into man and the good life; finally, Pyrrho and the school of radical skepticism to which he gave his name.

The first principles of Epicurean physics are “nothing comes into being out of nothing” and “nothing passes into nothing.” The denial of these principles is tantamount to the denial of nature, and indeed Epicurus often criticizes rival physicists for their failure to adhere to rigorous philosophical naturalism. The “swerve” is Epicurus' most significant departure from Democritean atomism, and in his view, it is necessary for two reasons. First, it jump-starts the process of atomic aggregation; the paths of atoms would never intersect if all were falling in

¹¹¹ Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, pp. 66-67.

¹¹² DL IX.72.

parallel straight-line paths. Second, it explains the existence of a capacity for free choice; choice would be impossible or illusory if our lives took place entirely within a deterministic chain of causation.

The swerve does not apply equally to all atoms at all times. Rather, it occurs “at times quite undetermined and at undetermined spots.”¹¹³ It was perhaps inevitable that subsequent writers of virtually every philosophical bent would turn the tables on Epicurus and criticize the swerve as an *ad hoc* device inconsistent with rigorous philosophical naturalism. Even if the existence of the swerve is granted, it is unclear how random breaks in the chain of causation could provide a physical explanation for human freedom. But, be that as it may—it is clear that the dogma of the swerve is obligatory for the true follower of Epicurus: “it would be better to subscribe to the legends of the gods than to be a slave to the determinism of the *phusikoi*.”¹¹⁴ In the Epicurean perspective, a poor account of nature—if it is ethically salutary—may be preferable to a superior account of nature that is ethically harmful. If this is the case, we have some reason to suspect the strictly physical grounds for introducing the theory of the swerve.¹¹⁵

All perceptible things and many that extend beyond our perception—for example, the cosmos itself—are “mixed bodies” produced by atomic collisions and interactions. Being conglomerates, they are weak and subject to disruption by any wandering atom that collides with them. It is in the nature of every mixed body to eventually perish from these disruptions. As

¹¹³ DRN II.218-219 (LS 11H1).

¹¹⁴ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.134 (LS 20A2).

¹¹⁵ Context amplifies Epicurus’ rejection of any deterministic physics: in all antiquity there was no harsher critic of “legends of the gods.” See below for more on Epicurus’ criticism of religious belief. His only potential equal in criticism was Theodorus the Atheist. See DL II.97-ff.

human beings, you and I are no different. Our death is inevitable, and the human soul, being a particular structure of atoms within the body, is just as fragile—or even more fragile—than the shell of the body which encloses it. Our cosmos, too, will one day die. In fact, the whole contains innumerable such *cosmoi*, scattered in an infinite sea of atomic flux. The ceaseless hail of atomic projectiles will annihilate them all, while others randomly emerge from chaos to take their places. In all the entirety of existence, no object of human attachment will survive forever. As Leo Strauss memorably put it, “nothing sempiternal is lovable, [and] nothing lovable is sempiternal.”¹¹⁶

Epicurus claims that happiness is the ultimate end of human life. Knowledge—even knowledge of nature—is subordinate to an ethical teaching which paves the way to happiness, for, as Epicurus writes in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, “when happiness is present we have everything, while when it is absent the one aim of our actions is to have it.”¹¹⁷ It is important to recall that Epicurean *eudaimonia* is described not in terms of presence but in terms of absence, particularly *aponia* or “absence of pain,” and *ataraxia* or “absence of disturbance.” As a result even philosophy, and particularly natural philosophy, must be rejected if it fails to alleviate pain and disturbances.

Empty are the words of that philosopher who offers no therapy for human suffering. For just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so too there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” p. 85.

¹¹⁷ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.122 (LS 25A3).

¹¹⁸ Epicurus, quoted in Porphyry, *To Marcella*, 31 (LS 25C).

Philosophy, then, is not to be pursued for its own sake. Nor is knowledge of nature. In fact, we might well imagine certain “truths” about nature which are a greater threat to *eudaimonia* than outright myth or delusion—such as the determinism proposed by certain natural philosophers. Epicurus’ view is that we fortunately do not have to choose between happiness and truth. As it happens, the correct understanding of the natural world is not deterministic, but rather leaves space for human freedom and responsibility. Yet the general principle still holds: in this regard philosophy and, in particular, natural philosophy or “physics” are at bottom bound to ethical considerations.

Physics is an adjunct to the pursuit of human happiness. And thus we find Epicurus stating that there would be no need to study physics if we were not “upset by worries that celestial phenomena (*ta meteōroi*) and death might matter to us, and also by failure to appreciate the limits of pains and desires.”¹¹⁹ This is an important statement, and we would do well to dwell on it briefly. Epicurus identifies three specific contributions that the study of physics can make to human happiness, and he goes so far as to claim that without these contributions true happiness is impossible.

The first thing that physics (and *only* physics) can do for us is “dispel worries regarding celestial phenomena.” The Greek word translated as “celestial phenomena” is *ta meteōroi*—literally the things “raised off the ground” or “unsupported,” from which we get the words “meteor” and “meteorology.” It just so happens that there is one letter, among the small number of writings of Epicurus still extant, which has as its subject *ta meteōroi*: the *Letter to Pythocles*.

¹¹⁹ KD 11, DL X.142 (LS 25B1); compare KD 12-13, DL X.143 (LS 25B2-3), and *Letter to Pythocles*, DL X.85-88 (LS 18C).

It follows that this letter is likely of special importance for understanding the relationship between Epicurean physics and Epicurean ethics. The *Letter to Pythocles* discusses what we might call “astronomical” phenomena like the movements of the sun and moon, as well as “meteorological” phenomena like clouds and rainbows—and even “terrestrial” phenomena like earthquakes. If it is permissible to make generalizations about this heterogeneous collection of things, it seems that there are two general classes into which these phenomena fall. On the one hand, some of them can be grouped together as phenomena which by their size, permanence, and regularity could be thought to imply the presence of a rational and divine creator. On the other hand, some of them can be grouped together as phenomena which by their infrequency, conspicuousness, and terribleness could be thought to imply the presence of fearful supernatural powers. Epicurus’ strategy is the same as regards both classes. He insists that there are several plausible naturalistic explanations. In the final analysis, it does not matter which of these explanations one chooses to believe, or indeed whether one chooses to believe any of them.¹²⁰ What is important is what the Epicurean account excludes. One must not believe that any concept of the “divine nature” is needed to explain these things: “exclusion of myth,” Epicurus writes, “is the sole condition necessary.”¹²¹ The reader who keeps these explanations in mind will “escape a long way from myth” and learn to properly interpret many other phenomena similar to these.¹²² We conclude that “worries regarding celestial phenomena” are associated

¹²⁰ *Letter to Pythocles*, DL X.85-88 (LS 18C).

¹²¹ *Letter to Pythocles*, DL X.97, 104. One suspects that “myth” is Epicurus’ idiosyncratic way of referring to *any* explanation by reference to divine involvement.

¹²² DL X.116.

with the notion of “divine governance.” Serious reflection on the conspicuous regularities and irregularities of heaven and earth will lead to the hypothesis of divine involvement—unless it is countered by Epicurean argument.

Not by design

An important extension of this argument can be found in Lucretius. Just as there is no order imposed “from on high” by a god or gods, so there is no order inherent in the atoms themselves:

For certainly neither did the first beginnings place themselves *by design (neque consilio)* each in its own order with keen intelligence, nor assuredly did they make agreement what motions each should produce.¹²³

The target here is the pantheistic vitalism that would identify the principles of cosmic order with some “design” or “compact” of the atoms themselves. We should pause here. The specific formulation that Lucretius uses is significant. I have translated the phrase *neque consilio* as “not by design.” It derives from the term *consilium*, which is notoriously difficult to translate. Besides “design,” it can mean “counsel,” “judgment,” “plan,” or “deliberation.” It is a term rife with political implications, and it takes on great significance in the works of Cicero. For example, in *On the Commonwealth (De re publica)* Cicero has Scipio declare:

Every commonwealth . . . needs to be ruled by some sort of deliberation (*consilium*) in order to be long lived. That deliberative function (*consilium*), moreover, must always be connected to the original cause which engendered the state; and it must also either be assigned to one person or to selected individuals or be taken up by the entire population.¹²⁴

¹²³ DRN I.1021-1023. The lines are repeated in a different context, and with strikingly different implications in DRN V.419-421.

¹²⁴ Cicero *De re publica* I.41-2, pp. 18-19.

One reason “apolitical” readings of Epicurus and Lucretius have been comparatively prevalent is the widespread failure to perceive the political aspect of Epicurean physics. Lucretius’ use of the term *consilium* is instructive in this regard. Twice, in books I and V, it occurs as part of the phrase *ne consilio*. In both cases it indicates Lucretius’ denial of *consilium* as a principle of cosmic order. By his conspicuous silence, Lucretius suggests that *consilium* has no role to play in the origin of political community. And in the five cases in which *consilium* is positively asserted, context shows that it is meant only in the sense of the “logical faculty” (*to logikon*) of the human mind.¹²⁵ Four of these cases occur in book III, in the context of arguments for the death of the soul. *Consilium*, then, is nothing but a mortal aspect of the mortal human brain.

Lucretius seems to twist the definition of *consilium* away from “deliberation in common” and towards “the logical faculty of the human mind.” The implications for political philosophy should be clear. What happens when men deliberate? Not, as Cicero would have it, the “shared exercise of reason.” Instead, deliberation is merely the working of “the logical faculty,” which one man (in principle) could do as well as any assembly. If the new definition of *consilium* is accepted, it becomes very hard, if not impossible, to make a Ciceronian defense of public deliberation and of oratory. How could anything be gained by calculating in common?¹²⁶

Further evidence of the redefinition of human rationality and demotion of deliberation is seen in the account of the origin of language found in Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* and in book V of DRN. Language is there presented as a human creation. The existence of language—or

¹²⁵ On *consilium* as *to logikon*, see Bailey’s comment in *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, vol. 2, p. 1007.

¹²⁶ Compare Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXV.

languages—is natural, but there is no natural connection between words and things. The natural connection is between human impulses and words. In essence, the Epicurean position amounts to a denial that we can come to a better understanding of things “through speeches” or dialectically. Instead, we are advised to attend to the customary meanings of words. There is no ascent from opinion. Rather, in the best case, there is a sort of “falling away” of opinion.

We return to the “*ne consilio*.” The problem, for the Epicurean, is to explain the existence of *consilium* understood as the human logical faculty, in a world which is characterized by the absence of *consilium* understood as cosmic order. In Epicurean philosophy, the philosopher’s own understanding begins to become a problem: the “vantage point, made secure by the teachings of the wise” of DRN book II threatens to topple over into a sea of atomic conflict. There are three considerations that serve to exacerbate this problem: First, the philosopher is characterized by his understanding (*consilium*) of that which is said to defy order or design (*consilium*). Second, the philosopher is limited; mortal. The universe is, in contrast, unbounded (*apeiron*). How could the limited comprehend the limitless?¹²⁷ Third, the philosopher’s knowledge is associated with knowledge of limit: “the limit of pleasures and pains,” or even, in Lucretius’ poetic presentation, “the flaming walls of the universe.” But the idea of “limit” itself becomes questionable in the Epicurean cosmos, in which “the All” is literally unbounded—and in which the philosopher knows the permeability and fragility of the “flaming walls of the universe.”

¹²⁷ Compare Lucretius’ argument that no being would be able to impose a plan on the unbounded whole: DRN II.1095-1104 (LS 13D3).

Epicurean philosophy has something of the character of a walled garden: a garden created by human reasoning and operating on principles which are opposed to—or, at any rate, in tension with—the surrounding infinite chaos. It is possible to draw an analogy with the *intermundia* which Lucretius describes as the true habitations of the gods. As with the gods, so too with the wise men of Epicurean philosophy—serious doubts remain about the security of these habitations.

The gods of the many

Nowhere in Socrates' intellectual autobiography does he suggest that he felt doubts about the possible impiety of his youthful decision to pursue inquiry into nature. Socrates does not seem to have been put off by the idea that the study of nature may be impious. But Epicureanism finds it necessary to respond to this idea. Lucretius makes it the subject of one of his first preliminaries to philosophy.

Herein I have one fear, lest perchance you think that you are starting on the principles of some impious reasoning, and setting foot upon the path of wickedness. Nay, but on the other hand, again and again our foe, religion, has brought forth criminal and impious deeds.¹²⁸

This is in spirit identical to Epicurus' response: "[t]he impious man is not he who denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to gods the beliefs of the many about them."¹²⁹ But why is this? The answer may be seen by revisiting KD 1, Epicurus' fundamental statement on the nature of the gods:

¹²⁸ DRN I.80-83 (with changes).

¹²⁹ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.124 (LS 23B3). The phrase "the gods of the many" points to the link between religion and public life—regarding which see below.

A blessed and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness.¹³⁰

Epicurean *psychagogia* requires that physics be discussed first, because only physics is able to respond to the objection that study of Epicurean philosophy is tantamount to impiety. The first and most weighty objection to philosophy is the objection that is made on behalf of religious belief.

The physics of the gods' divine existence is, to be sure, somewhat perplexing. Epicurus states that the gods are living animals (*zoon*), and they result from a continual influx of images having a human form.¹³¹ It would seem that, even if such gods avoid the particular cataclysm that will one day destroy our world, they are still in principle vulnerable to the same sort of disruptions as any other mixed body. The intermundia, too, may be disordered by a massive influx of atoms. And what happens if the constant stream of images one day ceases? In any case, the gods have a nature, and Lucretius suggests that we ought always to conceive of "nature" in association with a fixed span of existence.¹³²

But perhaps we are taking the physics of Epicurus' gods too seriously. It must be remembered that Epicurus and his followers were widely believed in ancient times to have been atheists. In any case, Epicurus was a tireless critic of traditional religious belief. He argues that

¹³⁰ KD 1, DL X.139 (LS 23E4).

¹³¹ KD 1, DL X.139 (LS 23E4) and scholion, DL X.139 (LS23G). If the gods are living animals, do they eat and drink? See Jeffrey Purinton, "Epicurus on the Nature of the Gods," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001), pp. 181-231 for discussion of this and other vexing questions.

¹³² DRN I.76-77.

the traditional view misrepresents the nature of the gods by presenting them as needy beings concerned with petty terrestrial existences like our own. As Lucretius wrote,

It must needs be that the divine nature enjoys life everlasting in perfect peace, sundered and separated far away from our world. For free from all grief, free from danger, mighty in its own resources, never lacking aught of us, it is not won by services nor touched by wrath.¹³³

In short, the gods—whatever they may be—are not such as to take interest in the affairs of men. They have no love for mankind. “Divine providence” is a contradiction in terms. There is nothing “divine” about constantly having to tend to a fragile and imperfect natural order.¹³⁴ True piety mimics divine indifference.¹³⁵ Piety is not faith or obedience, but rather “to be able to contemplate all things with a mind at rest.”¹³⁶ Particularly at stake in this Epicurean critique are all the specifically political and communal aspects of divine worship which follow from the traditional conception of the gods as interested participants in worldly affairs.¹³⁷

At this point, an objection could be made: to be able to look on everything with a tranquil mind would seem to be impiety—or at least, inhuman. What *should* one do when one sees an outrage? A temple profaned, for example? Consider Plato’s tale of Leontios and the criminals’

¹³³ DRN I.44-49, II.646-651 (with changes); compare *Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.78, as well as DL X.124.

¹³⁴ As LS vol. I, p. 63 point out, this seems to resemble Aristotle’s view in the *Physics*: because god’s activity is the best, it cannot include any concern for the sublunary world.

¹³⁵ Thus the references to the Epicurean wise man as “a god” or “divine,” see *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.135 (LS 23J), as well as DRN V.1-54.

¹³⁶ DRN V.1198-1203 (LS 23A4), compare DL X.123-124.

¹³⁷ Consider in this light his observation that the gods do not protect their temples from natural disasters. See DRN VI.417 and DRN V.308 on divine indifference; DRN VI.1272-1286 on the behavior of Athenians toward shrines during the plague.

corpses outside the walls of the city.¹³⁸ Epicurus would not criticize the desire to look on the ugly bodies. He would say that one should aspire to be able to look on them with a tranquil mind. Leontios, however, may seem to us more decent for not wishing to do this. Here we see evidence of just how much in the way of natural sentiment one must overcome in order to become an Epicurean. Epicurean philosophy demands that we wage a war against our own thumotic capacities for outrage and disgust.

As I have previously noted, the primary obstacles to *ataraxia* are, in the Epicurean view, twofold: first, fear of what may happen to us in this world or the next; second, *eros* or longing for unnecessary pleasures. Physics helps to relieve us of the former by dispelling the myths that hold men in terrified subjection. This in particular accounts for the anti-mythological character of much of Epicurean physics.

On account of this anti mythological character we ought to consider a possible hedonistic objection to Epicurean physics. Is not the traditional belief in providential gods and personal immortality more pleasant than Epicurean indifference and annihilation? Our response derives from the Epicurean notion of “unmixed pleasures.” Personal immortality may mean reward in heaven or the next life; but it may also mean eternal damnation—and one would be hard pressed to claim that the religious imagination focuses more on the former.¹³⁹ One cannot contemplate heavenly reward without some anxiety at the prospect of just or unjust punishment. Thus the traditional view is the very definition of a “mixed pleasure.” Reasoned acceptance of our

¹³⁸ Plato, *Republic* IV, 439e-440a.

¹³⁹ See, for example, Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 29-ff., pp. 294-ff. for Tertullian’s view of “the pleasures, the spectacles of Christians, holy, eternal and free.”

mortality (for example, the Epicurean saying, “death is nothing to us”) is the only possible basis for true peace of mind and unmixed pleasure.¹⁴⁰

Most traditional and philosophical views of the nature of the universe serve to exacerbate fear and longing. The conviction that gods, country, and family will abide forever encourages one to take interest in the state of the world after one’s death.¹⁴¹ The falsifying sense of gratitude binds one to desires that extend beyond the fleeting individual. One must be brought painfully to the realization that one lives in “an unwalled city.”¹⁴² Once this has been done, one can proclaim with perfect detachment that death and the end of the world are nothing. Now one possesses the wisdom of the first of men to “[pass] far beyond the fiery walls of the world.”¹⁴³ Like the Spartan, the Epicurean makes living without walls, in total vulnerability, the foundation of his ultimate security. “Life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly apprehended that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live.”¹⁴⁴

What does the Epicurean project of liberating man from his fears imply? First, the realization of such a project necessarily occurs on a person-by-person basis. The Epicureans, to the extent that they did proselytize, devoted all their efforts to persuading individuals. *Ataraxia* can be enjoyed individually, or within a circle of friends (see below) but not on the level of the

¹⁴⁰ KD 2, DL X.139. See chapter two for further discussion of the Epicurean analysis of the pleasures.

¹⁴¹ In this context, consider Epicurus’ advice against marriage and children: DL X.119 (LS 22Q5). Consider also the implications of his last will and testament: DL X.16-21.

¹⁴² *Vatican Saying* 31, (LS 24B).

¹⁴³ DRN I.73.

¹⁴⁴ *Letter to Menoecus*, DL X.125 (LS 24A2).

political community as a whole. Nor is it the sort of goal that, while being realized on an individual level, still implicitly ties the individual to his fellows, as, for example, glory. *Ataraxia* tends toward the view that the ultimate purpose of government is to “get out of the way.” Second, the Epicurean critique of the gods is implicitly a critique of all traditional politics as it was in the classical world. The gods of tradition were *political* gods, benefactors of a particular city or extended community. For further evidence that the Epicureans viewed politics and religion as intimately related, note the juxtaposition of Lucretius’ account of the introduction of laws and his account of the introduction of divine worship.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion: physics versus ethics?

It is helpful to contrast the critical—and, indeed, radical—view of politics implied by Epicurus’ physics-based teaching, with the more conventionally respectable view implied by his ethics-based teaching, discussed in the preceding chapter. If the Epicurean emphasis on moderate indulgence, practice of the traditional virtues, and political withdrawal is allowed to be *compatible* with his physics-based account of the indifferent universe, it nevertheless, does not seem to be directly *implied* by his physics-based account of the indifferent universe. In fact, as I shall argue in chapter five, there seems to be at least one *other* political teaching which is *equally* compatible with Epicurean physics. The mere fact of an indifferent universe is not sufficient on its own to determine one’s philosophy of life. Sufficient distance exists between Epicurean advocacy of moderation, and Epicurean cosmology, for later thinkers to attempt to appropriate the one but not the other. In extreme cases, they may even argue that moderate hedonism is more

¹⁴⁵ DRN V.1151-1160; DRN V.1161-1168 (LS 22L1).

at home in an alternative cosmology—say, the Christian—or that Epicurus’ indifferent universe in fact demands an alternative account of human life, in which the good may be defined, not as moderate indulgence, but as conquest.

Chapter IV: The Nature of Justice

The topic of justice is discussed in two general ways in the surviving works of Epicurus. First, it appears in the context of a general discussion of prudence (*phronēsis*)—a discussion which emphasizes the instrumentality of ethical virtue in general and justice in particular. Second, it appears in the context of a general discussion of the origins of justice in compact (*sunthēkē*), and the relation of justice to “things having been set down by law” (*nomisthētai*). The first approach is found in the *Letter to Menoeceus*. A hybrid of the first and second approaches is found in the KD. Further elaboration of the Epicurean account of human origins is found in the *Letter to Herodotus* and Lucretius’ DRN, book V. Together, these help to supply a more complete picture of Epicurean “justice as compact.”

The two general approaches are closely linked by the notion of the advantageous (*to sumpheron*). To begin with the former, Epicurus describes prudence as the calculation or “sober reasoning” (*logismos*) that a hedonist will use in order to determine what is choiceworthy—that is to say, the most pleasant or least painful option out of the range of choices available to him. Prudence, then, is nothing other than the careful consideration of the advantageous. Even justice, considered as an ethical virtue, is nothing more than a particular perspective on the advantageous—*i.e.* on the way of life most conducive to the individual’s pleasure. Summing up this view, Epicurus states, “It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, nobly and justly; nor to live prudently, nobly and justly without living pleasantly.”¹⁴⁶

On the other side—that of “justice as compact”—Epicurus states that the advantageous can be used as an analytic tool for deciding whether an agreement or compact *deserves* to be

¹⁴⁶ KD 5, DL X.140.

called “just.” Whatever is deemed just by law, *is* in fact just—so long as it is advantageous for mutual intercourse. But this of course means that, if circumstances change in such a way as to change what is advantageous, the “just” itself changes. The difficulty of setting down *any* universally applicable rule for the needs of human community suggests that justice, at least as it relates to the “things having set down by law,” is essentially changeable. Furthermore, we might wonder how the agreement-criterion and the advantage-criterion interact. Does justice have a nature—and if so, what is it?

Prudence and justice

Setting aside these puzzles for the moment, we return to Epicurus’ discussion of individual justice as a product of prudence. The best resource is Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*. Diogenes Laertius describes the content of the *Letter to Menoeceus* as “concerning life” (*peri biōn*).¹⁴⁷ Although Epicurus speaks to Menoeceus in the imperative, there is never a hint of his character. The *Letter* is curiously silent as regards its addressee. It gives no evidence of his age, but begins by exhorting old and young alike to study philosophy.¹⁴⁸ It mentions no specific question, or questions, which might have inspired its writing. Here one might contrast the *Letter to Herodotus* and *Letter to Pythocles*, which give evidence both of the questions which motivated their writing, and of the individual character of their addressees. It seems likely that the *Letter to Menoeceus* was not been written in response to *any* particular need—or *if* it was

¹⁴⁷ DL X.29

¹⁴⁸ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.122 (LS 25A).

written in response to a need, then it was written in response to the *general* human need for philosophy as a means to the pleasant life. Menoeceus' *personal* need for philosophy comes to represent the intrinsic *human* need for philosophy.

The part of the *Letter* that chiefly concerns us is its account of the virtues. This part begins by relating the virtues to the ethical end of pleasure, which is described as “absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul” (*mēte algein kata sōma mēte tarattesthai kata psuchēn*)¹⁴⁹—a state which is achievable only through prudence. Prudence selects the way of action most conducive to secure pleasure by measuring one pleasure against another (*summetrēzein*) and reasoning out the grounds of every choice and avoidance. From this activity of measuring and reasoning “spring all the other virtues.”¹⁵⁰ The question one must ask is, are these “other virtues” the received virtues of tradition and philosophy—*i.e.* the “cardinal virtues” of justice, wisdom, moderation, and courage—or are they “new” virtues, or modifications having little more than a name in common with the traditional virtues? Nowhere in the surviving works of Epicurus does one find listed the traditional four virtues; nor does one find listed the traditional four virtues plus piety.¹⁵¹ This is our first indication that the Epicurean account of virtue may be to some degree revisionist.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.131 (LS 21B5).

¹⁵⁰ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.132 (LS 21B5).

¹⁵¹ See A. A. Long, “Pleasure and Social Utility: The Virtues of Being Epicurean,” *Entretiens sur L'Antiquité Classique* 32 (1985), p. 301, n.16.

¹⁵² In support of this claim, Epicurus' account of the virtue of wisdom is clearly revisionist: Consider the mercenary account of wisdom implied near the end of the *Letter to Menoeceus*. Wisdom is *not* sought for its own sake. Nor is it sought because of a natural human “stretching oneself out towards knowing”—contrast Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.980a. One might say that

The details of Epicurus' treatment of virtue support a revisionist reading. Prudence is a sort of "ruling" virtue; from it spring all the other virtues. In a passage which mirrors KD 5, quoted above, Epicurus writes, "we cannot live pleasantly without also living prudently (*phronimōs*), nobly (*kalōs*), and justly (*dikaiōs*), nor live prudently, nobly, and justly without also living pleasantly."¹⁵³ This, we should note, is the *only* time that Epicurus gives a list of what he considers to be virtues; when he elsewhere mentions wisdom, moderation, and courage, he does not clearly state whether he regards any of these qualities as being "inseparable with the pleasant life." Of this triad, the primary virtue is prudence, since it teaches all the other virtues; the secondary virtues of nobility and justice are derived from prudence but in practice equally necessary if one is to be happy. In Epicurus' pithy formulation, the three have "grown into one (*sumpephukasi*) with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them."¹⁵⁴ We note that nobility and justice, which prior conventionalist theory tended to regard as "by convention" and not "by nature," are here given the gloss of nature or of "second nature."

In summary, the account of justice given in the *Letter to Menoeceus*—and which is repeated in the KD—is *instrumental*, in holding justice to be not in itself good, but good for the end to which it contributes, namely, "absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul." We might suspect that justice has rather more to contribute to the latter. The suspicion is confirmed

Epicurus does *not* find in *theōria* the perfection of man. "Prudence," he declares, "is a more precious thing even than philosophy." In this context note that knowledge of nature, if it were to undermine our belief in the importance of human choice and action, would be worse even than the ignorance Epicurus associates with the traditional "myths of the gods." See *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.134 (LS 20A2).

¹⁵³ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.132 (LS 21B).

¹⁵⁴ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.132 (LS 21B).

in the KD: Absence of trouble in the soul, or *ataraxia*, is said to be enjoyed in the greatest degree by the just man, while the unjust man suffers the greatest disturbances.¹⁵⁵ Justice is an inseparable part of, but instrumental to, *ataraxia*—since prudence shows that the only certain defense against fear of punishment is the confidence that one has never done injustice.

Cicero's critique of Epicurean justice

Perhaps the best and most concise summary of Cicero's critique of Epicurean justice is one found in *De legibus*, book I.¹⁵⁶ Speaking to his friend Atticus, Cicero's spokesman "Marcus" insists that Epicurus' ostensible "defense" of justice in fact uproots it completely:

[I]f justice is obedience to the written laws and institutions of a people, and if (as these same people say) everything is measured by utility, then whoever thinks that it will be advantageous to him will neglect the laws and will break them if he can. The result is that there is no justice at all if it is not by nature, and the justice set up on the basis of utility is uprooted by that same utility: if nature will not confirm justice, all the virtues will be eliminated.¹⁵⁷

This critique is compressed and needs to be unpacked. In the passage quoted, Marcus touches upon all the major themes of the Epicurean account of justice as expressed in the KD.¹⁵⁸ His

¹⁵⁵ KD 17 DL X.144 (LS 22B3). Compare KD 34 DL X.151 (LS 22A4), "Injustice is not in itself an evil, but only in its consequence"—namely, the fear of being caught. See also KD 35 DL X.151 (LS22A5).

¹⁵⁶ Cicero's critique of Epicurean justice is discussed in Paul A. Vander Waerdt, "The Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," *The Classical Quarterly* 37.2 (1987), pp. 402-422, and Walter Nicgorski, "Cicero, Citizenship, and the Epicurean Tradition," in *Cultivating Citizens*, D. D. Allman and M. D. Beatty, eds., pp. 3-28. I am in general agreement with Nicgorski as regards his assessment of Cicero's basic fairness and accuracy.

¹⁵⁷ Cicero, *De legibus* I.42-3.

¹⁵⁸ Nichols cites the following KD as dealing specifically with justice: 5-7, 13, 14, 17, 21, 29, 31-38 and 40. See his *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, p. 16 n.4.

summary begins with a reference to the *conventionalist* character of Epicurean justice: justice is nothing other than “obedience to the written laws and institutions of a people.” It is, in other words, a sort of pact or “covenant” (*sunthēkas*).¹⁵⁹ Epicurus seems particularly to wish to rule out the idea that justice is anything “in itself” (*kath’heauto*).¹⁶⁰ It is instead a “symbol of the advantageous” (*sumbolon tou sumpherontos*).¹⁶¹

At this point, a discordant note creeps into Marcus’ summary. He opposes the Epicurean theory to his own view that justice is “by nature.” Epicurus, however, seems to announce that there *is* a “natural justice” (*to tēs phuseōs dikaion*), which he equates with the aforementioned “symbol of the advantageous” What are we to make of this? Is Cicero mistaken? Is Epicurus in fact a kind of natural right theorist? There is no clear scholarly consensus on how to interpret the relevant KD.¹⁶² In my view, the only way to make sense of Epicurus’ oracular statement is to tie it to the subsequent KD and in particular, to his claim that “justice is nothing in itself.”¹⁶³ Epicurus then goes on to state that justice will vary according to particular circumstances.¹⁶⁴ To

¹⁵⁹ KD 32, DL X.150 (LS 22A2).

¹⁶⁰ KD 33, DL X.150 (LS 22A3).

¹⁶¹ KD 31, DL X.150 (LS 22A1).

¹⁶² See Thomas Cole, *Democritus and the Origins of Greek Anthropology*, p. 73 n. 7, and Vander Waerdt, “Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man,” pp. 419-422, for different interpretations of this important passage.

¹⁶³ KD 33, DL X.150 (LS 22A3).

¹⁶⁴ KD 36, DL X.151 (LS 22B1). Compare KD 37, DL X. 152 (LS 22B2).

be more specific, legislative enactments (*nomisthenta*) can be considered “just” for as long as they serve the common advantage, and become “unjust” when they no longer do so.¹⁶⁵

In other words, Epicurus’ position on justice seems to be roughly as follows. He affirms the existence of “natural justice” against those—including Cleitophon—who claim that “justice” is *whatever it is said to be*. This subjectivist account of justice is false. The *truth* about justice is that it *has* a fixed character or “nature,” and this “nature” consists in its being always and everywhere relative to some common advantage. Wherever there is *no* common advantage, or no prior covenant, there is no justice. Thus, on the Epicurean view, justice truly can be said to have a nature—*its nature is to be a particular kind of convention*.

On this reading, Marcus is not wrong to oppose Epicurean conventionalism to his own view that justice is something “by nature”—particularly if one recalls his earlier statement:

[T]he beginning of justice is to be sought in law . . . in establishing the nature of justice, let us begin from that highest law, which was born aeons before any law was written or indeed any state was established.¹⁶⁶

For Epicurus, there is clearly no “natural justice” in this sense of the term.

To return, then, to Cicero’s summary: the Epicurean account measures everything—including justice—by its “utility” or “advantage.” And this “advantage” is to be understood with reference to the hedonistic theory of the good. Epicurus’ account of justice therefore can be understood as a straightforward application of his particular variety of ethical hedonism.

This is the point where Cicero moves in for the kill: the true hedonist “will neglect the laws and break them if he can”—as long as the result is advantageous to him personally.

¹⁶⁵ KD 37-38, DL X.152-153 (LS22B2).

¹⁶⁶ Cicero, *De legibus* I.19.

Epicurean ethics *demand*s that he choose what is personally most advantageous to him—*i.e.* the greater over the lesser pleasure, or the lesser over the greater pain. But this is not the worst part. According to Cicero, not only does the Epicurean theory, rightly understood, demand lawbreaking—it also subverts any attempt to chastise lawbreaking as “unjust.”

Cicero’s point is that, if advantage supplies the only standard by which a law can be said to be “just,” then whenever a law works to someone’s personal disadvantage, it is vulnerable to being attacked as “no longer just [for me] . . . in consequence of a change in circumstances.”¹⁶⁷ If Epicurus evades this problem by restricting the meaning of “justice” to agreements in cases of *mutual* advantage, he loses the ability to speak of “justice” as a personal virtue. To act against personal advantage for the sake of some mutual advantage, would be to act against the “prudence” (*phronēsis*) which Epicurus calls the foundation of all the virtues.¹⁶⁸ Marcus concludes: “if nature will not confirm justice, all the virtues will be eliminated.”

The problems that Cicero identifies here become especially acute when no one is watching:

[Those] who are not moved by the idea of honor itself to be good men, but rather by some sort of utility or profit, are not good men, but crafty. What will a person do in the dark if he is afraid only of witnesses and judges? What will he do in some deserted place if he encounters someone from whom he can steal a lot of gold, someone weak and alone?¹⁶⁹

In essence, Cicero poses a version of the Ring of Gyges problem introduced by Glaucon in Plato’s *Republic*. The parallel is made even more explicit in a passage from *De officiis* in which

¹⁶⁷ Compare KD 38, DL X.153.

¹⁶⁸ KD 5, DL X.140. Compare *Letter to Menoeceus* DL X.132 (LS 21B).

¹⁶⁹ Cicero, *De legibus* I.41.

he directly references the Ring of Gyges.¹⁷⁰ There he argues that if an Epicurean hedonist were to obtain a ring of invisibility, his theory of the good would commit him to using the ring for selfish enjoyment, without regard for the strictures of justice. It follows from this, Cicero argues, that Epicurus' praise of the virtue of justice is either misguided or fraudulent. If the *true* hedonist were secure from threat of punishment, he *must* commit injustice when it is to his advantage. Let it be granted the biography of Epicurus shows he always observed the rules of justice; let it even be granted that he always taught that pleasure and justice were inseparable. Still—the inevitable tendency of his philosophy is to uproot justice, and Cicero argues it would be a strike against Epicurus *intellectually*, if he were shown to be unable to correctly draw the necessary consequences of his starting premises.

The Epicurean rebuttal

Contemporary scholars have tended to be suspicious of Cicero's argument. In a paper entitled "The Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," Paul Vander Waerdt observes that "it is no longer easy to reconstruct the controversy over the nature of justice in which the Stoics [as represented by Cicero, in his critique] and the Epicureans engaged." In fact, a single line of Horace seems to be our sole surviving example of a direct Epicurean response.¹⁷¹

Vander Waerdt argues that Epicurus' hedonistic theory of the good can be used to shore up any apparent weakness in his account of justice. The Epicurean will not exploit a ring of invisibility because he is categorically uninterested in the sort of pleasures a ring of invisibility

¹⁷⁰ Cicero, *De officiis* III.38-9. Compare Cicero, *De finibus* II.51-9, 70-1.

¹⁷¹ Vander Waerdt, "Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," p. 404.

might help him to obtain. He is just, in other words, because he does not desire any of the proceeds of injustice. On this reading, Cicero has misconstrued Epicurus' position; he and his fellow critics fail to appreciate the way in which Epicurus' teaching on justice is "parasitic on his doctrine of the human good."¹⁷² Cicero has failed to show that the Epicurean will perceive any *utility* in committing injustice. In fact, as Vander Waerdt summarizes, "there is abundant evidence that an Epicurean would have no interest in the kind of life praised by Glaucon."¹⁷³

Vander Waerdt makes a positive argument which is, I think, equally important. The Epicurean's justice—his "just disposition" or *dikaiosunē*—is in fact *constitutive* of the pleasant life: "Just conduct provides the psychic harmony necessary to lead a life of the highest pleasure."¹⁷⁴ This is accurate, but may be in need of clarification. It is necessary to distinguish *in what sense* the Epicurean's justice is constitutive of his happiness. Does he take pleasure in *regarding* himself as just? Does he take pleasure in the fruits of a just reputation? As I have argued in chapter two, the answers to these questions must be "no."¹⁷⁵ Rather, as Vander Waerdt rightly points out, the Epicurean wise man takes pleasure in justice as *harmonious ordering of the soul*, and his consciousness of freedom from the misfortunes that injustice would necessarily expose him to. The justice of the Epicurean wise man is a justice without splendor.

¹⁷² Vander Waerdt, "Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," p. 419.

¹⁷³ Vander Waerdt, "Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," p. 404.

¹⁷⁴ Vander Waerdt, "Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man," p. 415.

¹⁷⁵ This is precisely what makes Cicero's attack on Torquatus in *De finibus* II.51 so damaging. For Torquatus to take *pleasure* in defending Epicurus' praise of morality would be to indulge in a model "empty" pleasure.

Does justice demand self-sacrifice?

What is at stake in the Epicurean reinterpretation of justice becomes clear when we compare the *Letter to Menoeceus* to the account of justice that appears in books I and II of Plato's *Republic*. The question, we might say, is whether justice requires self-sacrifice. Both Socrates, as a defender of justice, and Thrasymachus and Glaucon in their roles as attackers of justice, maintain that it does. For Epicurus, in contrast, it could never be against one's own interest—rightly understood, of course—to be just. This is because Epicurean justice derives from prudence. In order to get a sense of how radical Epicurus' position is, and how it represents a departure from prior conventionalism *and* from prior natural right theories, we turn to the beginning of the *Republic*, in which Socrates elicits various attempts at a definition of justice from his interlocutors. In Plato's presentation, the basic problem of justice appears to result from the conflict between our intuition that justice is something good, and our intuition that justice involves sacrifice. The conventionalist response to this conflict, as represented by Thrasymachus and Glaucon, is to “deconstruct” the notion of justice, by arguing that justice represents a sort of confusion about the good. In Thrasymachus' formulation, we must ask *for whom* justice is good. The answer, he thinks, is *for another*—*i.e.* for the stronger who has made the laws. The response of natural right, as represented by Socrates, is properly the subject of the *Republic* as a whole, but may be summarized as a “raising up” of the idea of justice into a thing of transcendental beauty, good through its participation in the idea of the good, and worthy of motivating the greatest acts of self-sacrifice.

First, I set down this point for my interpretation: in conversation, the most revealing admissions are often those least intended to be. An unpremeditated remark may tell us more

about a character than any carefully crafted peroration. As in life, so in the dialogues of Plato: we would do well to pay close attention, not only to what an interlocutor *intends* to say, but to what he finds himself *compelled* to say. This principle is on full display in the first book of the *Republic*. Thrasymachus, for example, sets out his position multiple times and at great length; but if we attend to the argument we find that he shifts the basis of his position almost at will. His long speeches mostly serve to obfuscate the issue. What is chiefly interesting is what Thrasymachus finds himself *compelled* to say.

The same is true in other, less adversarial, situations. Socrates asks Cephalus, his wealthy host, to name the greatest good that he has enjoyed as a result of his great wealth. Cephalus replies that, due to his old age, he has begun to feel “fear and care” about things to which he had formerly given little thought. In particular, he has started to think about “tales told about Hades”—tales claiming that the one who does unjust deeds will have to pay a penalty there.¹⁷⁶ Cephalus says he now “reckons up his accounts and considers whether he has done anything unjust to anyone.” It is with great relief that he concludes that he has never been forced to cheat or lie to anyone on account of money—his ample fortune contributes in that way to his peace of mind

Cephalus *thinks* he knows what justice is. He gives his definition of justice in two parts: justice is “not cheating or lying to any man against one’s will,” and not “[owing] sacrifices to a god or money to a human being.”¹⁷⁷ We may call the concatenation of these two parts a “banker’s definition” of justice. Cephalus is scrupulous and concerned to pay back his

¹⁷⁶ Plato, *Republic* I, 330e.

¹⁷⁷ Plato, *Republic* I, 331b.

obligations, but he is also obviously self-interested. He focuses on the duty to maintain faith—as Socrates’ generalizes it: “to tell the truth and to give back what is owed.” We note that the question of what is owed to the gods is silently dropped. There is no hint of a general duty to benevolence in Socrates’ restatement of Cephalus’ definition.

But when Socrates then challenges Cephalus with the scenario of a friend who has gone crazy and comes back asking for his sword, Cephalus is forced to concede something about justice that he may have always known, but which he has not yet troubled to articulate even for himself. It is not right to return a weapon to a friend who has gone crazy. This reveals something about Cephalus’ idea of justice—something he may not have noticed or even been able to articulate before. He first conceived of justice as a means to a reward for himself, but now he adds something else in addition. Cephalus believes that justice cannot be something harmful. To put it another way, he believes that *justice must be something good*. Only under Socrates’ prodding does Cephalus realize this.

At this point, Cephalus announces that he is leaving in order to perform some sacrifices. We note that he still feels some degree of “fear and care” over what he owes to the gods. He leaves his share of the argument to his son Polemarchus, who dutifully takes up the task of defending his father’s definition of justice. With Polemarchus is introduced the question of how far justice is meant to extend. It was never clear whether Cephalus meant to assert that justice not be harmful as a general principle, or whether he was thinking only of the particular case of not causing harm to a friend. Polemarchus argues that it must be the latter. As Polemarchus later puts it: justice consists in giving back “what is owed”—that is to say, “good to friends and harm to enemies.”

At Socrates' instigation Polemarchus is led to analyze this "what is owed." Just what sort of a thing is it? Polemarchus offers his own gloss on what is owed: "friends owe it to friends to do some good and nothing bad."¹⁷⁸ At Socrates prodding, Polemarchus extends this principle to enemies: we must give enemies too whatever is owed. This would at first appear to be "some harm." But Polemarchus is gradually forced to concede this point. He concludes with Socrates that justice, if it is to be *truly* good, must consist in *doing* good, irrespective of the friend-enemy distinction.

It is this counterintuitive conclusion which provokes Thrasymachus to burst onto the scene. And, just as the position of Socrates and Polemarchus represents the logical extension of a familiar opinion about justice—namely, that justice is something advantageous or "good"—so too Thrasymachus begins from a familiar opinion about justice—namely, the opinion that the practice of justice involves sacrificing one's own interest to the interest of others. In Thrasymachus' own words, justice is the advantage of the "stronger"—that is to say, the ruling group who are responsible for setting down the laws.¹⁷⁹ And it is easy to see, not only why Thrasymachus would think this, but why he would feel such indignation. Experience gives many examples of injustice profiting at the expense of justice, or of justice working to benefit someone other than its practitioner.

The tension between the beneficial and self-sacrificial sides of justice is seen most vividly in Glaucon's speech in book II. Glaucon states that he wants Socrates to show him what justice is "in itself"—as opposed to what justice is said to be. He wants Socrates to prove that

¹⁷⁸ Plato, *Republic* I, 332a.

¹⁷⁹ Plato, *Republic* I, 338e.

justice is beneficial to the just man, and he sets up an example designed to remove all of the benefits that come merely from *seeming*, as opposed to *being*, just. Consider the wages of such a man: “Doing no injustice, let him have the greatest reputation for injustice, so that his justice may be put to the test to see if it is softened by bad reputation and its consequences.”¹⁸⁰ Could such a man live happily? Glaucon wants Socrates to show that he could, despite the great sufferings that he will surely undergo: “[he] will be whipped; he’ll be racked; he’ll be bound; he’ll have both his eyes burned out; and, at the end, when he has undergone every sort of evil, he’ll be crucified.” It seems to Glaucon that the just man, when put to the rack in this way, will confess that “one shouldn’t wish to be, but to seem to be just.”¹⁸¹ But he awaits Socrates’ vindication of justice. It is important to recognize that Glaucon is asking Socrates to *defend* justice in this example. He wants to be shown that it is better to be a just man, even one who is tortured and put to death, than to be an unjust man who enjoys every profit of his injustice accompanied by the sweet reputation of justice. Put in the terms stated earlier, Glaucon wishes to see justice defended as each person’s greatest good, while at the same time justifying even the greatest and most painful sufferings. He wants it to be shown that justice is “something worth dying for.”

A further point about Glaucon’s speech: Justice is a sort of mean, in the conventionalist account Glaucon proposes. In Glaucon’s “restoration” of Thrasymachus’ argument, he even uses the expression “the nature of justice” to describe a mean between the best (doing injustice and

¹⁸⁰ Plato, *Republic* II, 361c.

¹⁸¹ Plato, *Republic* II, 361e-362a.

getting away with it) and the worst (suffering injustice).¹⁸² What does this mean? Glaucon is suggesting that, if justice is natural, it is natural only insofar as it is the self-interested desire of an arbitrarily defined group of individuals to protect the private good of each.¹⁸³

The splendor of moral virtue, revisited

What, then, could Epicurus say to Glaucon? We note that Epicurus allegedly claimed that the wise man could be happy even under torture.¹⁸⁴ But he gave no indication that the wise man would take consolation from having suffered for a just cause. In fact, the opposite is true: Epicurus would seem to suggest that any such consolation is the very model of an “empty” pleasure. The plausibility of the Epicurean account of justice depends upon his audience’s willingness to concede that justice does not and could not justify suffering or self-sacrifice. Furthermore, it depends upon his audience’s willingness to scale back their wish to see justice defended as each person’s greatest good. Justice in the Epicurean scheme is instrumental and self-interested. This does not mean that the Epicurean philosopher would abuse his ring of invisibility—but it does mean that Epicurus tacitly avoids the question of justice, as Glaucon has posed it.

The noble and the just are said to be inseparable from the pleasant life, but choiceworthy only on account of their contributions to the pleasant life. They are “useful,” strictly speaking—

¹⁸² Plato, *Republic* II, 358c-e. Compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.7, *passim*.

¹⁸³ Is the good “having more than others and ruling others,” as vulgar conventionalism holds? Or is it based in “more solid pleasures than those deriving from wealth power and the like,” as the philosopher holds? See the discussion in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* pp. 114-117.

¹⁸⁴ DL X.118.

and not to be sought for their own sake. This means that Epicurus would criticize any traditional or philosophical conceptions of the noble and the just which go against calculation of advantage. He has closed off the way to any attempt to show the transcendence of justice. He concentrates on the status of the noble and the just precisely because he sees in them the most likely route for the importation of “transcendence” into ethical philosophy. This, I suggest, is what leads him to declare “I spit upon the noble (*to kalon*) and all those who vainly (*i.e.* “emptily”—*kenōs*) admire it, when it produces no pleasure.”¹⁸⁵

The conventionalist account of political origins

Scholarly research today connects the Epicurean account of the origin and development of language to a range of epistemic and anthropological concerns.¹⁸⁶ The context of DRN V.1028-1090 suggests, however, that Lucretius’ efforts to describe the origin and development of language are a component of his account of the origins of justice, and of political community more generally. Recent work on the Epicurean account of language fails to give this point adequate emphasis. In this section, I propose a new reading of DRN V.1028-1090, with an eye to what it teaches regarding the Epicurean account of human political origins.

¹⁸⁵ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XII, 547a. Quoted in Long, “Pleasure and Social Utility,” *Entretiens sur L’Antiquité Classique* 32 (1985), p. 299.

¹⁸⁶ See Philip H. de Lacy, “The Epicurean Analysis of Language,” *The American Journal of Philology* 60.1 (1939), pp. 85-92; Catherine Atherton, “Lucretius on What Language Is Not,” in *Language and Learning*, D. Frede and B. Inwood, eds., pp. 101–38; Alexander Verlinsky, “Epicurus and His Predecessors on the Origin of Language,” in *Language and Learning*, pp. 56–100; Brooke Holmes, *Daedala Lingua: Crafted Speech in De Rerum Natura*, *American Journal of Philology* 126 (2005), pp. 527–585; and Benjamin E. Stevens, “Symbolic Language and Indexical Cries: A Semiotic Reading of Lucretius V.1028-90,” *American Journal of Philology* 129 (2008), pp. 529–557.

Lucretius begins by mocking those who suppose an original name-giver: “to think that anyone then parcelled out names to things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is mere folly.”¹⁸⁷ The problem with this view is that there is no reason to suppose—as name-giver theorists invariably do—that one human alone should be able to make names and use them to indicate things.¹⁸⁸ The first students of the name-giver must be assumed, from the very beginning, to have a similar capacity to *make* and to *use* names; otherwise, they would not have been able to *learn* names—but this ability (or so Lucretius claims) would make them all name-givers as well. It might be objected, here, that individuals exhibit different degrees of proficiency with language, and that the original name-giver could be thought of as someone proficient in the extreme. In other words, the name-giver does not differ from others in kind, but only in degree. The Epicurean theory of language in fact has a place for such extraordinary individuals. They are the leaders of a second stage of the emergence of language, in which rudimentary language is expanded and refined through the addition of new terms and the elimination of ambiguities. The more acute are able to obtain preconceptions (*prolēpseis*) of concepts that remain unclear to the majority of men, until a term is introduced. In any case, Lucretius could still point to the baseline of ability that all members of a linguistic community—from the most able to the least able—must be presumed to share. This fact alone (he would assert) is enough to refute the sole name-giver hypothesis.

¹⁸⁷ DRN V.1041-1043 (LS 19B3).

¹⁸⁸ DRN V.1043-1045 (LS 19B3).

Lucretius' second objection is that no pre-linguistic human, even the *most* able, could foresee and plan for the emergence of language.¹⁸⁹ The problem with such a story—if it were true—is that the preconception (*prolēpsis*) of the advantage of language is acquired only through experience, and in keeping with Epicurean theory of knowledge, this experience must be the experience of beneficially using language. Where could the original name-giver have gotten such experience? By definition, he can be assumed to have no one capable of to collaborate with him. As Lucretius observes, it is language which grants the ability to “know and see with [one’s] mind what [one] wants to do.”¹⁹⁰ The claim that the original name-giver could have “planned it all out” is thus doubly absurd. He would have no notion of language prior to the experience of it—nor would he have the ability to make and execute detailed projects such as the institution of language.

Lucretius' final objection is that a single person could neither compel the multitude, nor even, by compulsion, teach so much as a single individual.¹⁹¹ If the audience is truly “deaf” to his entreaties, as the sole name-giver theory requires, then they will not respond to any of his attempts at persuasion. It seems reasonable to ask, at this point, why Lucretius would spend his time focusing on such an extreme—not to say implausible—version of the conventionalist account. Nichols concludes that Lucretius' goal is to emphasize the *naturalness* of language—which only can be done by pointing to evidence of an intrinsic, universal linguistic capacity, and demonstrating the incoherence of theories that assume there is no such capacity, or a capacity

¹⁸⁹ DRN V.1046-1049 (LS 19B4).

¹⁹⁰ DRN V.1049 (LS 19B4).

¹⁹¹ DRN V.1050-1055 (LS 19B5).

which is not universal. This explanation seems correct, and it has the benefit of casting additional light on Lucretius' intentions in subsequent verses, in which he describes the vocal abilities of animals. In Nichols's reading, Lucretius' account of language has the function of making human speech appear no more remarkable than the barking of dogs.¹⁹²

To this, I would add that Lucretius is likely responding to the specific version of the name-giver theory which had been advanced in Cicero's *De inventione*. In Cicero's version, the original name-giver is an orator. "There was a time," he writes, "when men wandered at random over the fields, after the fashion of beasts, and supported life on the food of beasts; nor did they do anything by means of the reasoning powers of the mind."¹⁹³ There is little difference, at this point, between this and the Epicurean account of man's initial state. Lucretius could have accepted this word-for-word as a description of the original condition of mankind. Cicero notes in particular the absence of law: "nor had any one [at this time] any idea what great advantage there might be in a system of equal law."¹⁹⁴

The turning point, on Cicero's account, comes when some exceptional individual identifies the latent powers of the human mind and sets himself the goal of developing them to their full fruition—in himself and in others.

At this time then a man, a great and a wise man truly was he, perceived what materials there were, and what great fitness there was in the minds of men for the most important affairs, if any one could only draw it out, and improve it by education.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, pp. 131-137.

¹⁹³ Cicero, *De inventione* I.2.

¹⁹⁴ Cicero, *De inventione* I.2.

¹⁹⁵ Cicero, *De inventione* I.2.

In order to do this, however, he must communicate his insight and persuade those around him of its value.

No wisdom which was silent and destitute of skill in speaking could have had such power as to turn men on a sudden from their previous customs, and to lead them to the adoption of a different system of life.”¹⁹⁶

The Epicurean account of the origins of language and of justice consciously opposes this view.

Not name-giving and persuasion, but expediency and fortuitous coincidence, led men to first organize themselves in societies. The rhetorical tradition represents original language as a product of one exceptional (human) intellect, thus showing some degree of sympathy with religious beliefs that represent language as the product of divine intellect; Epicureans, on the other hand, deny that any individual could have assembled and taught a “deaf” multitude. For them, the origin and development of language are transacted “in common.” In keeping with this,

¹⁹⁶ Cicero’s point had been previously made by Isocrates. See Isocrates, *Nicoles* III.5-ff., on the power of persuasive speech to raise man from the level of beasts to a civilized state:

[B]ecause there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things base and honorable; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another.

On the Epicurean view, the Ciceronian-Isocratean account is close to being the *reverse* of what we must suppose to have actually occurred. Primitive humanity escapes “the life of wild beasts” spurred by natural necessity. Then the weakest members of the community—children—are constrained to utter sounds which reason *retrospectively* associates with particular needs. Through a gradual process of bootstrapping, those with clearer conceptions of a thing utter words which can be used by others to refine their own conceptions. Speech, in every instance, follows upon natural necessity, rather than looking ahead (as in the Ciceronian-Isocratean account) to a new and better system of life.

the rhetorical tradition represents the origin of language as something wonderful, while Lucretius dismisses it as a straightforwardly natural consequence of man's inherent capacities. He attempts to dispel the wonder that may result when one contemplates the origins of a phenomenon as complex, articulate and finely-tuned as language. His account of the origins of language resembles his other polemics against design.

Lucretius argues that it would be folly to suppose the existence of an original "name-giver"—that is to say, a god or "culture-hero" responsible for giving names and teaching men the proper use of these names. The first objection that he makes against this hypothesis is that it does not explain why one individual alone would have the ability to give names to things, while the rest of humanity finds itself reduced to a position of passive receptivity. If the name-giver has the power to attribute names to things, then so does everyone else, and we have a multitude of "personal" languages with no ability to communicate with one another. The name-giver hypothesis thus fails to explain what was intended—that is, how it could have come to be that *multiple* individuals speak the same language.

One of the things we notice in Lucretius' description of the origins of language is the way in which the human power of language is analogized to animal capacities and, in particular, the natural weapons with which many animals are supplied. Thus the human "sounds of the tongue" are analogized to the horns of a calf, or the sharp claws and teeth of a panther kitten, or lion cub. In keeping with this point, Lucretius' account of human language is immediately followed by an account of the noises made by various animals; the first being the "growling" of "Molossian hounds." What is the purpose of these analogies? The first point Lucretius makes is that it is a

mistake to believe an animal's attributes or natural capacities are given with purposeful intent.¹⁹⁷

The lion does not have claws in order that it might hunt other beasts, rather the lion happens by chance to have claws, and happens by chance to find itself in circumstances where it might discover the claws' optimal use. The role of fortune is emphasized, teleology denied.

Unfortunate combinations of traits (a hermaphrodite, a sheep with lion's claws, a lion with sheep's *anima*) are winnowed out.¹⁹⁸ Some varieties ill-suited to protect themselves are preserved because they are useful to human beings; these become domesticated animals.

I suggest that Lucretius' presentation of the Epicurean account of human linguistic capacity is meant to be understood within a similar framework. We human beings do not have a tongue and vocal cords in order that we may speak with one another and thereby live politically; rather, we have a tongue and vocal cords by fortuitous coincidence, and it is fortuitous coincidence that led some men to happen upon a social use for the human capacity for vocalization. If primitive humans did not make use of their communicative capacity (and did not make use of it to a specific end—*i.e.* the protection of women and children) then the human race would have long ago gone extinct.¹⁹⁹ One might imagine that those early humans who did not have the capacity (or the inclination) to join together in bonds of friendship and equity were winnowed out just as surely as the lion with a sheep's *anima*.

¹⁹⁷ See DRN IV.835, "what is born creates its own use." Compare DRN V.1033 (LS 19B2), "each feels to what purpose he can use his own powers."

¹⁹⁸ DRN V.837-877 (LS 13I).

¹⁹⁹ DRN V.1026-1027 (LS 22K3).

A fundamental principle of the Epicurean account of human social origins is that nature is indifferent, or even hostile to human flourishing. This can be taken as a corollary of the assertion that the gods did not create the world for man: “the world (*natura rerum*) was certainly not made for us by divine power,” Lucretius writes.²⁰⁰ The defectiveness of this world is immediately apparent.²⁰¹ Lucretius’ favored principle of spontaneous generation is contrasted to purposeful divine creation: the former is capable of accounting for imperfection, while the latter is not.

What are the *political* implications of this account the origin of language and the origin of political society? Two in particular stand out. First, the parallelism between the origin of language and the origin of justice serves to emphasize justice’s essential character as *agreement for mutual advantage*, thereby helping to ensure that it will never “point outside itself” or toward something higher. No one could mistake Epicurean justice—or the Epicurean virtue more generally—as the perfection of man. Whether one regards this as a strength, or as a weakness of the theory is, of course, open to debate—and the debate is resumed in new and fascinating ways with the emergence of Christianity, as I will show in the next chapter.

Second, it fills in a gap in the Epicurean account of human social origins—a gap which is most obvious if we set it alongside the account of social origins found in Aristotle. If “man is by nature a political animal,” then, even if the first humans lived scattered like beasts, the foundation of the first political communities can be thought of as *deeply purposeful* in the sense of answering an innate human need. Epicurus, of course, would reject this teleological view. The alternative he proposes is more nuanced. Man is *not* by nature a political animal. The transition

²⁰⁰ DRN V.198-199 (LS 13F6).

²⁰¹ DRN V.156-234 (LS 13F).

from bestial origins to speech and to political life is indifferent or “accidental.” The Epicurean view, particularly in the form in which it is presented by Lucretius, has sometimes been mistaken for “primitivism.”²⁰² It is nothing of the sort. The transition, indifferent in itself, from savagery to community, acquires significance in light of the emergence of *the philosophy which liberates man from his bondage to fear and unnecessary desires*. Of course, this philosophy *then* teaches those men who comprehend it to turn their backs on political life as *the multiplier par excellence* of fear and unnecessary desires. Still, it is only with the aid of philosophy that men can order their lives properly according to the simple standard—pleasure—which had been available to them prior to philosophy and prior even to language. To be sure, the emergence of the city, and of the false philosophies which proliferate within it, throws additional obstacles in the way of our simple, unreflective adherence to pleasure’s commands. The paradoxical character of Epicurean political philosophy is manifest in the leap from the faceless city which concludes DRN book V, to the portrait of Epicurus which begins DRN book VI. The *polis*, on this account, is a detour nature takes in order to get to one or two great men.

²⁰² A misconception which has become increasingly rare. See Philip Merlan, “Lucretius—Primitivist or Progressivist?” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11.3 (1950), p. 358, who concludes, “[i]t would seem somewhat unfair to Lucretius to pin him down either as a progressivist or a primitivist; it seems too much even to say that his attitude towards the primitive past was ambiguous—because *it does not seem that he wanted to treat the problem at all*.” (Emphasis added.) Merlan’s final claim is mistaken, I think. Lucretius treated the problem quite deftly, and with an appreciation for the inherent paradoxes of the Epicurean position. His attitude only appears “ambiguous” or “evasive” if one assumes—as Merlan indeed does—that DRN book V is unfinished or “in the character of a draft or disconnected jottings.” Since there is *ex hypothesi* no “unity of composition,” the historical critic is free to impose whatever “unity of thought” makes the most sense to him.

PART TWO:
THE ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

Chapter V: The Epicurean Revival

Most scholarship on the recovery and reception of Epicurean ideas emphasizes the incompatibility of Epicurean and Christian worldviews. In this chapter, I will argue that, while comprehensive disagreement may form part of the background for the renaissance recovery and reception of Epicurean ideas, potential for common cause on narrow points of mutual agreement has been underappreciated. Building on the account of Epicurean political philosophy advanced in preceding chapters, I identify one area of potential agreement in political philosophy. The Epicurean and the Christian share a cautious, critical orientation toward *thumos*, and toward the all-encompassing claims of ancient politics. Nor is this area of potential agreement merely hypothetical. Humanist thinkers such as Valla, Erasmus, and More recognize the opportunity to appropriate Epicurean arguments for the sake of defending a distinctively Christian notion of the human good against dangerous excesses associated with the return to ancient models of virtue.

The first part of this chapter will give a brief overview of early Christian responses to Epicurean philosophy. The purpose of this is not to tell the “story” of the often fraught relations between Christians and Epicureans in late antiquity; indeed, it is one contention of this chapter that there is no such “story.” Christian responses to Epicurean philosophy are remarkably varied. To single out the political aspect of these responses, we see on the one hand Church Fathers excoriating the Epicurean project to abolish men’s fears of the afterlife on the grounds that this will undermine the fear of punishment which is a necessary support of the law. On the other hand,

we see parallels in Epicurean and early Christian suspicion of political virtue—and, occasionally, these parallels lead to common ground, and to open expressions of approval.²⁰³

The prevailing view is that Christianity is at odds with Epicureanism—arguably more at odds with Epicureanism than with any other school of ancient philosophy. An opposing view exists, however, in which Christianity and Epicureanism are viewed as sharing considerable common ground. The general question of Christianity's relation to Epicureanism is a larger one than can reasonably fit within the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it seems possible to shed light on the problem, by looking at the issue from a political perspective. My purpose in the present chapter is to describe the interactions between Epicurean and Christian political thought.

Augustine provides a model for the appropriation of ancient ideas when he comments on the Biblical “spoliation of the Egyptians.” Ancient philosophy contains within it valuable “gold” as well as useless “dross.” Given Augustine's own critical attitude toward *libido dominandi*—the political “lust for domination”—it would seem that Augustine himself should have been the first to discover the potential for Christian appropriation of the Epicurean critique of *thumos*. In the *City of God*, Augustine compares the differences between the Stoic and Epicurean schools. Surprisingly, the Stoics are subjected to criticism every bit as harsh as that faced by the Epicureans. Stoic pride is every bit as flawed—every bit as “according to the flesh”—as Epicurean indulgence of the senses.

²⁰³ In view of early Christian approbation of Epicurus' own modest and communal way of life, Norman W. DeWitt argues “it would have been singularly easy for an Epicurean to become a Christian.” See his *Epicurus and His Philosophy* pp. 31-2. This seems to me to go a step too far. See, for a contrasting view, Michael Erler “Epicureanism in the Roman Empire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, J. Warren, ed., pp. 60-64. I will argue (as many of the early Christians themselves did) that the speculative differences between Christians and Epicureans were, on many points, irreconcilable.

The question that developed during the renaissance was: could Christian humanists find the resources within ancient thought to counter the hazardous tendencies inherent in the ancient theory of virtue? To the Christian, thumotic ancient political thought inflamed sinful desires. The clash between ancient and Christian ideas during the renaissance meant that the problem was newly aggravated.

It is in this context that we see humanists such as Valla, Erasmus and More giving Epicurean moral philosophy its first serious reappraisal since antiquity. Earlier writers, hampered by the lack of source materials, retained some idea of “Epicureanism” but associated it with base sensualism. In the humanists, we see an appreciation for the nuances of the Epicurean conception of pleasure. For these thinkers, a significant part of the appeal of Epicurean thought was that it could inculcate the heart against a political conception of virtue. It might even serve as a corrective to the excesses of Christian prelates.

Epicureanism remained dangerous—particularly as regards its theology and cosmology. Still, the humanists could find some justification and even prior precedent for a sympathetic reappraisal of selected Epicurean ideas. The Church Fathers in general seem to have found specific features of Epicurean thought worthy of approbation. For this reason it has been claimed that there is virtually no Epicurean doctrine which was not appropriated or endorsed by some Church Father. As I will show, this risks overstating the case. In fact, there are some Epicurean doctrines which *cannot* be endorsed or appropriated from within the context of orthodox Christianity. There was real potential, however, for a *selective* appropriation of parts of Epicurean moral thought—provided they could be detached from scandalous theological and cosmological doctrines.

What does this mean for our understanding of the history of political thought? One potential benefit of this project is that it further complicates one influential account of the origin of modern republicanism. The civic humanist thesis, as proposed in the work of Hans Baron, and elaborated (with important modifications) by many others, including J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, identifies the revival of classical political models, beginning in Renaissance Florence, as an event of unparalleled significance in the history of the emergence of a distinctively modern set of political ideas.²⁰⁴ Major differences of opinion and interpretation between these thinkers make it difficult to speak of “civic humanism” or a “republican tradition” without immediately qualifying one’s claims. Still, there does seem to be a general trend within the civic humanist literature toward a greater appreciation of the complexities and internal tensions within our republican inheritance. Thus, against Pocock’s view, which had emphasized continuities between the “Atlantic” republican tradition and its classical antecedents, Skinner, in particular, has highlighted the neo-Roman character of much early republican thought. Eric Nelson, more recently, has identified a Greek tradition in republican thought, which is, in many respects, diametrically opposed to Roman or neo-Roman versions of republicanism.²⁰⁵ The differences between the neo-Roman and Greek traditions are well worth pausing to consider. The neo-Roman view endorses the aggressive pursuit of wealth and glory for the sake of the *res publica*,

²⁰⁴ See H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Renaissance*, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, and Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Volume 1: The Renaissance). The secondary literature on civic humanism is substantial. See James Hankins, “Introduction,” *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, pp. 1-13; and Athanasios Moulakis, “Civic Humanism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), for brief overviews.

²⁰⁵ See, in particular, Eric Nelson's *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*.

and defines liberty, fundamentally, as non-domination. The Greek view, on the other hand, is associated with concern for a balanced distribution of property, endorses (or looks favorably upon) the philosopher's reluctance to rule, and defines liberty as the rule of reason.

Seen from within this framework, the present chapter's review of humanist appropriations of Epicurean moral philosophy helps to flesh out a more complete picture of the Greek tradition. Lucretius, on this reading, becomes a sort of "honorary Greek," on account of his many pointed criticisms of politics and of Roman wealth- and glory-seeking. For humanist thinkers of the renaissance, particularly in its northern European manifestations, the comprehensive struggle against *Romanitas* may have helped to forge strange new alliances. Thus in Thomas More's *Utopia*, we see a novel syncretism of Platonic and Epicurean elements for the apparent purpose of illustrating a best-possible regime in the absence of Christian revelation. *Utopia* takes many of its most important cues from the Greek tradition—indeed, it seems intentionally designed to look like "nonsense" from the Roman point of view.²⁰⁶ Epicureanism makes a significant, if understated, contribution to More's statement of Greek republicanism, insofar as it provides many of the strongest and most scathing critiques of the Roman model. This is not to say that *Utopia* is an Epicurean document. In fact, the regime of the Utopians represents a synthesis of Epicurean and other Greek elements, within a context deeply influenced by the classical political philosophy of Plato's *Republic*. Still, Epicureanism has an important, if inherently limited, part to play in More's *Utopia*.

²⁰⁶ See Nelson's, *The Greek Tradition*, pp. 19-48; and his "Utopia through Italian Eyes: Thomas More and the Critics of Civic Humanism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006), pp. 1029-1057.

Epicurean ideas play a rather different role in the political thought of Niccolò Machiavelli. Recent scholarship has complicated the view of Machiavelli as a neo-Roman theorist, highlighting cases in which the Greek tradition influenced Machiavelli and other thinkers of in his circle. Nelson, in particular, suggests that Machiavelli has internalized some Polybian ideas regarding corruption and inequality of wealth—*without* definitively associating himself with the neo-Roman *or* the Greek tradition.²⁰⁷ I will argue that, far from fitting Epicurean ideas into a syncretic republican framework as More had done, Machiavelli, latches on to the anti-republican implications of Epicurean philosophy, particularly evident in its physics and cosmology. In this way, Epicureanism serves for him, not as a resource to be mined for arguments critical of *Romanitas*, but as a means to evade the opposition of Greeks and Romans altogether. In agreement with recent work by Paul Rahe, I see Machiavelli as providing an internal critique of Epicureanism—one which takes very seriously the Epicurean account of “worldly things,” but finds that philosophic self-effacement is not the only possible response to an indifferent universe.²⁰⁸

Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The question posed by Tertullian (c. 160—c. 225 A.D.) speaks to the clash of ideas which he and his co-religionists were party to.²⁰⁹ The

²⁰⁷ Compare Skinner, *Machiavelli*, with Nelson, *The Greek Tradition* pp. 49-86.

²⁰⁸ See Paul Rahe’s “In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli’s Political Thought,” *History of Political Thought* 28.1 (2007), pp. 30-55; and his *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 22-103.

²⁰⁹ Tertullian, “On Prescription against Heretics,” in *Ante-Nicean Fathers* vol. 3, chap. 7.

Church Fathers were steeped in the philosophical culture of “Athens,” and they debated amongst themselves the question of how to respond to it. Should they welcome the arguments of Greek philosophy? Or should they reject them? Tertullian’s rhetorical question is a contribution to this conversation. Philosophy, on the view he propounds here, is a source of heresies. He warns his fellow Christians to avoid philosophical argument, lest they introduce a spirit of “curious disputation” into their faith. The alternative to “Athens,” or philosophy, is represented by him as “Jerusalem,” and the question he asks is whether “curious disputation” which divides itself into all sorts of contentious heresies, or rather faith’s “simplicity of heart,” is the better guide to truth.²¹⁰ Philosophy itself concedes defeat—or so he claims—because it is unable to achieve the sort of consensus that befits truth. Tertullian exhorts his fellow believers to avoid the dead end of idle speculation: “Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!”²¹¹

The problem can be seen as one of a clash of authorities; an instance, perhaps, of the irreducible conflict between reason and revelation.²¹² Christianity takes issue with philosophy *as such*. But if it is possible to draw distinctions between philosophies which are relatively *less* and *more* unacceptable, the distinctions might seem to go as follows. Leo Strauss observes, “It is

²¹⁰ Tertullian, “On Prescription.” Compare *Wisdom* I.1

²¹¹ Tertullian, “On Prescription.”

²¹² See Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, pp. 377-408. Regarding this aspect of Strauss’s thought, I have found Steven Smith “Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem,” *Review of Politics* 53.1 (1991), pp. 75-99 to be a useful introduction.

often said that the philosopher who comes closest to the Bible is Plato.”²¹³ By a similar token, the philosopher who is often said to stray farthest from the Bible is none other than Epicurus.²¹⁴ The roots of disagreement could not lie any deeper. Whereas the Bible teaches that “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” the Epicurean regards fear, particularly religious fear, as childish ignorance.²¹⁵ The task of philosophy is to show that “even as children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are no whit more to be feared than what children shudder at in the dark.” In so showing, philosophy dispels our fears, “not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature.”²¹⁶ The particular fear for which Epicurus and his followers have the greatest concern is fear of death. It is the job of philosophy to show that death is nothing to worry about, both because it does not lead to anything terrible, and because is not in itself anything terrible.²¹⁷

The account of Paul’s missionary journey to Athens (c. 50 A.D.) described in *Acts*, chapter 17, is the first reported encounter between Christians and Epicureans. Paul encounters “some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers” in the Agora, and they bring him before the Areopagus. There, he addresses a crowd of men and women who “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” Paul’s response is to rebuke the Athenians for their

²¹³ Compare Augustine, *Confessions* VII.9.13.

²¹⁴ Compare the use of the term “Apikoros” in the rabbinic literature. See Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Apikoros,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 2, pp. 255-256.

²¹⁵ *Proverbs* 9:10.

²¹⁶ DRN II.55-57 (LS 21W6-7), with changes. The same lines reappear at III.87-89 and VI.35-37. See also KD 10-13 DL X.142-143 (LS 21D3 and 25B).

²¹⁷ See the Epicurean *tetrapharmakon*, and KD 2 DL X.139.

superstition, and to suggest that the city's patronage of so many schools of philosophy is linked to its idolatry. He tells them that God the creator is no longer hidden. He will come to "judge the world in righteousness," and the "proof" (*pistin*) of this is the resurrection of the dead. Some in the crowd mock, while others say, "We will hear again of this matter."²¹⁸

It is striking that Paul appears to associate Athenian philosophy with idolatry. This may be because he likens the proliferation of sects to the proliferation of gods, or because he senses that philosophy and idolatry share a common source in the desire to "tell or hear some new thing." Perhaps we should regard this phrase as an early articulation of what Tertullian was to call "curious disputation"—the mindset which he earnestly implores Christians to expel from their faith. In any case, we must imagine that the Epicureans are at the forefront of those mocking when they hear Paul speak of the resurrection.²¹⁹ The central tenet of Paul's Christian faith is precisely what the Epicurean *must* mock. Thus Tertullian, in his synoptic account of the ancient schools of philosophy, specifically associates Epicureanism with "the opinion that the soul dies."²²⁰

A dispute of equal importance concerns the nature of the Deity, or, in the Epicurean case, of *deities*. The problem is not so much that the Epicureans were accused of being atheists—an accusation they could rebut with specific references, chapter and verse, in their master's

²¹⁸ *Acts* 17:16-34.

²¹⁹ Stoic views on the soul's death are complicated. For Chrysippus' position, see DL VII.157 (LS 53N). See also Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, pp. 97-98.

²²⁰ Tertullian, "On Prescription," Chap. 7.

writings.²²¹ Nor was it the fact that they asserted a plurality of gods— which Plato and Aristotle could be read as doing. The particularly intractable problem is that the Epicureans deny any providential role to the gods as being incompatible with the nature of divine happiness. For Epicurus, the gods are perfectly self-sufficient. As a result, they cannot be benefited or harmed, and they are therefore immune to any feelings of anger or gratitude.²²² As the Christian rhetorician Lactantius (c.240—c.320 A.D.) points out, this view seems destined to destroy all religion. If God feels no gratitude, what could be more senseless than “to build temples, to offer sacrifices, to present gifts, to diminish our property, [all] that we may obtain nothing?” Or, on the other side of the equation, “How can religion itself be maintained or guarded without fear? For that which is not feared is despised.”²²³ He judges that the Epicurean scheme of abolishing fear will undermine religious observance, in such a way as would ultimately terminate in the destruction of all political life. The laws themselves will lack force if there is no religious terror to support fear of punishment. “Laws cannot punish conscience unless some terror from above hangs over to restrain offenses.”

²²¹ See, for example, Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X 123-4 (LS 23B).

²²² See KD 1 DL X.139 (LS 23E4); *Letter to Herodotus* DL X.77 (LS 23C3).

²²³ Lactantius, *De ira*, in *Ante-Nicean Fathers*, vol.7, ch.8. Epicurus could respond that one honors one’s gods, not in the hopes of doing *them* some good, but in the hopes of doing *oneself* some good. Compare the Epicurean practice of monthly commemoration of Epicurus’ birthday, condemned by Cicero in *De finibus* II.102-103, and discussed in Diskin Clay, “The Cults of Epicurus,” *Cronache Ercolanesi* 16 (1986), pp. 11-28. On Lactantius and Epicureanism, see the discussion by James I. Campbell, “The Angry God: Epicureans, Lactantius, and Warfare,” in *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*, D.R. Gordon and D.B. Suits, eds., pp. 45-63.

For Christian authors, the Epicurean denial of life after death, which implies the denial of divine judgment after death, is not only theologically but also *politically* hazardous—the belief that one will be judged in the life to come is a necessary support for justice, and for the laws of this world. Tertullian argues that the Epicurean account of death, with its emphasis on the finitude of earthly suffering, undermines the fear of punishment that is an essential component of the authority of all human laws. Only a Christian who believes in eternal punishment can be trusted to uphold the law in all circumstances.

Epicurus makes light of all torture and pain; “if it is slight,” he says, “you may despise it, if it is great it will not be long.” Yes! We who are examined in the sight of God who sees all, we who foresee an eternal punishment from His hand, we well may be the only ones to attain innocence.²²⁴

It should be noted that this specific criticism need not presume a Christian theological basis.

When Cicero posed his version of the Ring of Gyges dilemma for the Epicurean hedonist, one of his arguments was that Epicurean philosophy (by its own claim) enabled its practitioners to hold in contempt all earthly punishment, through its teaching that all pains are endurable or that, “pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which barely outweighs pleasure in the flesh does not last for many days together.”²²⁵ The Christian version of the argument, as put forward by Tertullian and Lactantius, is more pointed, however: the fear of the Lord on this account is the beginning not only of human piety, but of human wisdom, and of human justice. The Epicurean project of dispelling fears thus targets the roots of human moral virtue.

²²⁴ Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 45.7, p. 197.

²²⁵ Cicero, *De finibus* II.57; KD 4 DL X.140 (LS 21C2).

Insofar as Epicurus uses materialist arguments to establish the mortality of the soul, materialism too would seem to be a likely target. This was not generally the case.²²⁶ A curious example, suggesting how the ideas of materialism and mortalism might be distinguished, appears centuries later in Dante's *Inferno*. It seems that atomistic physics is not, in itself, grounds for giving a negative assessment of an ancient philosopher. In Limbo, Dante encounters Democritus, the philosopher "who ascribes the world to chance," amongst a "family" of philosophers which includes not only Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—but even Averroes.²²⁷ Epicurus and his adherents, however, are consigned to the sixth circle and the company of heretics, where they rest forever, entombed in sealed sepulchers. "In this part," Dante writes, "Epicurus with all his followers, who make their soul die with the body, have their burial place."²²⁸ Epicurus, who has killed the soul with his doctrines, experiences the soul's true death as an eternal form of punishment.

Surveying the writings of the Church Fathers, one finds expressions of approval for Epicurean views in canonic, physics, and even ethics, but there is little middle ground between orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection, and Epicurean belief in the eternal death of the

²²⁶ For some surprising examples of early Christian expressions of approval for Epicurean atomism, see Richard Jungkuntz, "Christian Approval of Epicureanism," *Church History* 31.3 (1962), pp. 280-281. The eternality of the atoms provides a secure foundation for the doctrine of the resurrection. See also in this context Ann Blair, "Mosaic physics and the search for a pious natural philosophy in the late Renaissance," *Isis* 91.1 (2000), pp. 32-58.

²²⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV.136-144. On one reading, Averroes' conception of the Possible Intellect "allowed him to speak of the immortality of the human soul without implying the survival of the individual soul after death." Note also that Dante was sometimes accused of being an Averroist. See Paul A. Cantor, "The Uncanonical Dante: The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy," *Philosophy and Literature* 20.1 (1996), pp. 138-153.

²²⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto X.13-15.

mortal human soul. Augustine, for example, writes that before his conversion he thought very highly of the Epicurean system:

[A]s I saw it, Epicurus would have won the debate [between schools of philosophy] had I not believed that after death life remains for the soul, and so do the consequences of our moral actions; this Epicurus refused to believe.²²⁹

Augustine's point here is not just that Epicureanism is incompatible with orthodox Christianity, but that, like Tertullian and Lactantius, he regards the doctrine of the soul's eternal death as undermining moral responsibility and threatening justice in this world.

Athenae et Hierosolyma, continued

Perhaps the most famous Christian criticism *specific* to Epicureanism is Jerome's brief biographical notice concerning Lucretius. In his entry for the year 94 B.C., Jerome writes:

The poet Titus Lucretius is born. He was later driven mad by a love philtre and, having composed between bouts of insanity several books (which Cicero afterwards corrected), committed suicide at the age of 44.²³⁰

This passage has been criticized as factual error or even sheer invention—at best, it seems to provide no more than a hostile and potentially misleading caricature of what Epicurean philosophy really is.²³¹ Still, it highlights the tendency of Christian critics of Epicureanism to focus their attention on the supposed excesses of the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure.

In some versions, this criticism emphasizes the *political* cost of uninhibited pursuit of desires. Thus Lactantius claims:

²²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* VI.26, p. 119.

²³⁰ Jerome, *Chronicle*.

²³¹ Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, pp. 53-54.

In order to attract the masses, Epicureanism speaks to the lifestyles of individuals. It recommends the lazy not to study, it liberates the mean from public benefactions, it advises the coward against politics, the slothful against exercise, and the scared against a military career.²³²

This political variation on the conventional anti-hedonist criticism appears to have been borrowed from the Stoics. The Stoic Epictetus (55-135 A.D.), for example, had argued that Epicurus “cut off all that characterizes a man, and the head of a household, and citizen, and friend, but he could not cut off human desires.”²³³ The suggestion here is that Epicurean hedonism is profoundly anti-social, since it strikes at the roots of every sort of interpersonal attachment. The irony here is that Lactantius, who is such a comprehensive critic of ancient politics, appropriates a criticism of Epicureanism made on behalf of ancient politics. But animus against Epicureanism could at times create strange new partnerships.

Augustine ties criticism of Epicurean hedonism to Biblical teachings concerning “the flesh,” and the practice of “living according to the flesh.”²³⁴ For him, the espousal of hedonism is equivalent to living “by the rule of the flesh since it places “the highest good in physical pleasure.”²³⁵ This strand of criticism, in particular, enjoys a life of its own—even after the loss of the majority of Epicurean source-texts. The association of Epicureanism with hedonism and sensualism (even in the form of an exaggerated caricature) can be seen in, for example, Chaucer’s only explicit reference to Epicurus, which occurs in his description of the Franklin,

²³² Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* III.17.

²³³ Epictetus, *Discourses* II.20.

²³⁴ See, for example, *John* 3:6; *Romans* 8:5.

²³⁵ Augustine, *City of God* XIV.2.

who is said to be “Epicurus owene sone, / That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit /Was verray felicitee parfit.”²³⁶

With the return of Epicurean texts into wide circulation, the first question humanist thinkers had to confront was: Does Christianity *necessarily* find itself in conflict with Epicureanism? One possible answer to the question is “yes.” The “necessary conflict” thesis was not new, having roots that go back to the first reported encounters between Epicurean philosophy and revealed religion. As we have seen, there are a number of good reasons to support it.

In Stephen Greenblatt’s recent book, he argues that conflict *is* necessary, and that the Christian side had won round one: “In one of the great cultural transformations in the history of the West, the pursuit of pain triumphed over the pursuit of pleasure.”²³⁷ I think this is, first, an oversimplification of Christian attitudes (pleasure, even ecstatic pleasure, plays a role in Christian *beatitudo*). Second, I think it misrepresents Epicurean attitudes towards pleasure. The pleasures of *kinesis* are to be indulged, it is true; but there is something peculiarly ascetic about Epicurean indulgence. Epicurus once told a disciple that there was probably no one who had ever gotten anything good out of sexual intercourse.²³⁸ Lucretius warned against getting too caught up in the particular object of sexual attraction. He would have harshly criticized anyone who risked getting caught up in “love.” Epicurean *hēdonē* is a *hēdonē* bereft of *eros*.

The question a “yes” answer poses is: what to make of the recovery and dissemination of Epicurean ideas, and especially of the poem of Lucretius, during the renaissance? Now, broadly

²³⁶ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, 338-340.

²³⁷ Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, p. 103.

²³⁸ *Vatican Saying* 21 (LS 21F2). Compare Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, pp. 196-198.

speaking, there are two possible responses. One is that attempts to transmit (or revive) Epicurean ideas are subversive of Christianity. The other, as Greenblatt perceptively theorizes, is that they are attempts at *containment* by conceding some ground to subversion.²³⁹ The latter in particular is problematic. It may be very hard—even impossible—to decide which is occurring in a given case. For these reasons, I believe that the “necessary conflict” thesis leaves us at an impasse. I accept the specific points of conflict enumerated above, but argue that this does not preclude agreement on a particular, narrowly defined subset of moral questions. In other words, I will argue that parts of Epicurean philosophy are, within a Christian context, seen as acceptable and even useful correctives to undesirable tendencies in ancient (and Christian) thought.

Furthermore, I argue that the potential for agreement was recognized and developed in the writings of several renaissance humanists; among them, Lorenzo Valla, Desiderius Erasmus, and Thomas More. Taken together, these thinkers make the case, not only that certain parts of Epicurean moral philosophy were worthy of consideration by a thoughtful Christian, but that some of these ideas might help to inoculate the Christian against some dangerous tendencies in ancient thought. This move, I shall attempt to show, was of immense significance for subsequent political theory.

Pagan and Christian virtue

Leonardo Bruni’s “*Laudatio* of the city of Florence” (c. 1403-1404) exemplifies the spirit of renaissance civic pride—pride in the specifically ancient parts of a people’s inheritance. In Bruni’s formulation, Rome is Florence’s “patrimonial legacy.” And not just any Rome, but the

²³⁹ Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, p. 224.

best Rome—the Roman Republic. The *Laudatio* stands as an expression of continuity between ancient and modern virtue.²⁴⁰ Bruni bases his *Laudatio* on ancient models—particularly Aristides’ eulogy of Athens.²⁴¹ The *Laudatio* is professedly Christian. It ends with a prayer—and yet it raises a problem that would, increasingly come to preoccupy humanist thought. Could pagan and Christian virtue coexist? The city, locus of the pagan conception of virtue, would become the nexus of the conflict.

The tension between ancient and modern conceptions of virtue was recognized in ancient times. Augustine, for example, criticizes ancient “worldly” virtue in a chapter of *City of God* entitled “That It is as Shameful for the Virtues to Serve Human Glory as Bodily Pleasure”

There is nothing, say our philosophers, more disgraceful and monstrous than this picture [*i.e.* of the virtues serving pleasure], and which the eyes of good men can less endure. And they say the truth. But I do not think that the picture would be sufficiently becoming, even if it were made so that the virtues should be represented as the slaves of human glory; for, though that glory be not a luxurious woman, it is nevertheless puffed up, and has much vanity in it.²⁴²

In *City of God*, Augustine observes the differences between the Stoic and Epicurean schools. The comparison is not one sided in favor of Stoicism, as one might expect. Rather, the ancients are taken to task for having made the desire for glory the guiding principle of the whole of virtue.²⁴³ The Stoics as well as the Epicureans are taken to task for “living according to the flesh.” All

²⁴⁰ Note that, if one accepts the reading suggested by Harvey C. Mansfield in “Bruni and Machiavelli on Civic Humanism,” *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, J. Hankins, ed., pp. 223-246, the problem becomes even more acute.

²⁴¹ James Hankins, ed. *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, p. 103.

²⁴² Augustine, *City of God* V.20. Epicureanism is discussed in *City of God* V.20; VIII.5; VIII.7; XI.5; XIV.2; XVIII.41; and XIX.1. V.20 and XIV.2 are most important, for my reading.

²⁴³ Augustine, *City of God* XIV.2.

ancient philosophy is infected with *dominandi libido*, lust for domination, on this interpretation.²⁴⁴

In sum, the problem faced by humanist political thought is this: the ancient city had been able to accept the love of honor and glory as a constituent part of virtue. Christianity, on the other hand, condemned love of honor as incipient “pride.” How could a good Christian make use of ancient political examples? Rabelais, for example, writes:

[The] imitation of the ancient Herculeses, Alexanders, Hannibals, Scipios, Caesars, and other such heroes, is quite contrary to the profession of the gospel of Christ, by which we are commanded to preserve, keep, rule, and govern every man his own country and lands, and not in a hostile manner to invade others; and that which heretofore the Barbars and Saracens called prowess and valour, we do now call robbing, thievery, and wickedness.²⁴⁵

It is important to note that, in this passage, Rabelais not only identifies the contrast between classical and Christian conceptions of virtue, but that he specifies the question of non-interference vs. “hostile invasion” as the crucial matter at stake. Machiavelli would agree with this formulation of the problem. Indeed, his political philosophy can be thought of as a systematic critique of the idea that it is possible to “preserve, keep, rule, and govern every man his own country and lands, and not in a hostile manner to invade others.”

²⁴⁴ Augustine, *City of God* I, pref.: “Therefore I cannot refrain from speaking about the city of this world, a city which aims at domination, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by that very *lust of domination*.” (Emphasis added.)

²⁴⁵ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Ch. 1.XLVI.

Spoliation of the Epicureans?

Augustine puts forward his views on philosophy in the context of a scriptural exegesis.²⁴⁶ In Exodus 12:35-36, the children of Israel, having been told to leave Egypt by the Pharaoh, “borrow” from the Egyptians their gold and silver and garments. This so-called “spoliation of the Egyptians” becomes an example for Augustine and his contemporaries, Christians steeped in a Hellenic culture. Like the Israelites, they are instructed by God to take whatever is valuable—not in this case gold or silver or garments, but “liberal instruction,” “principles of morality,” and “even some truths in regard to the worship of God.” The Christian “separates himself in spirit” from pagan culture, just as the Israelite separated himself bodily from the Egyptian kingdom during the Exodus. But the treasures of pagan culture are to be kept and put to a Christian use.

Augustine makes his own preferences clear. He finds the greatest “treasures” in the doctrines of the Platonists. But he exhorts his fellow Christians to make use of “whatever is true and in harmony with our faith.” Thus the “spoliation of the Egyptians” provides a rationale for the eclectic appropriation of whatever may be found valuable in *any* of the schools of Greek philosophy, including the most hostile—in fact, better if it is hostile! At the same time, Augustine counsels his co-religionists to separate the gold from the dross: Christians must throw out the “false and superstitious fancies” and the “heavy burdens of unnecessary toil” that encumber every school of Greek philosophy.

It is not too hard to guess which doctrines of Epicurean philosophy must be discarded. The Epicurean rejection of providence was deemed theologically unacceptable by every

²⁴⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40. See Blair, “Mosaic Physics,” p. 34 for Augustine’s use of the term “Christian philosophy.”

Christian authority that we have any knowledge of. Likewise, the Epicurean denial of personal immortality. Even Tertullian, who at times flirts with corporealism and mortalism, accepts the doctrine of the resurrection. Finally, the Epicurean denial of heaven and hell, which was intended to eliminate the sources of fear, is theologically and politically suspect—theologically, because Christian revelation asserts judgment in the afterlife; politically, because the belief that one will be judged in a life to come is a necessary support for justice and the laws.

Augustine's "spoliation-rationale" was immensely influential. However, we find little sign of Christian appropriation of Epicurean ideas in the period following Augustine. Christian attitudes towards Greek philosophy had begun to crystallize, and Augustine's oft-stated preference for Platonism had set an important precedent. Furthermore, it was becoming harder and harder to obtain Epicurean texts. The Emperor Julian had noted this phenomenon a generation prior to Augustine (c. 360 A.D.)—with expressions of approval, given his own Neoplatonist leanings: "The gods have already in their wisdom destroyed [most of the books of Epicurus and Pyrrho]," he notes with satisfaction in a letter to a pagan priest.²⁴⁷ Augustine, for his own knowledge of Epicureanism, seems to have chiefly relied not upon the works of the Epicurean school, but rather upon the works of Cicero, especially *De natura deorum*, the *Tusculan Disputations*, and *De finibus*. But it is clear that Augustine had some familiarity with the text of Lucretius as well, as his allusions, expressions of approval, and occasional examples taken from DRN show.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Julian, *Letter to a Priest*, in *The Works of Emperor Julian*, vol.II, p. 327.

²⁴⁸ Michael Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire," in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, J. Warren, ed., p. 63.

Of the true and false good

In 1417, Poggio Bracciolini, Florentine humanist and onetime Papal Secretary, discovered a long-forgotten copy of DRN in the library of a German monastery.²⁴⁹ The text of Lucretius was at this time otherwise unknown. Poggio had a copy made, and gradually the poem began to circulate in manuscript. It was first published in Brescia in 1473.²⁵⁰ Our other main source for Epicurean philosophy, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, had circulated in a fragmentary form during the Middle Ages. A full text was brought from Constantinople to Florence in 1416, and a Latin translation by Ambrogio Traversari made its way into print in the early 1470s.²⁵¹ Surprisingly, Epicureanism seems to have taken a detour from oblivion. More to our purposes, the conditions were once again present for the compatibility of Christian faith and Epicurean teaching to be put to the test.

The most significant early attempt to probe the compatibility of Epicureanism and Christianity was Lorenzo Valla's 1431 dialogue *On Pleasure (De voluptate)*, which he later reworked and re-titled.²⁵² Our reading is based on this final version, entitled *Of the True and the False Good*. Valla knew Poggio; the two were professional rivals. Interestingly, it seems that

²⁴⁹ The story of Poggio's discovery is engagingly recounted in Greenblatt, *The Swerve*. For the history of Lucretius during the Middle Ages, see Michael Reeve, "Lucretius in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, S. Gillespie and P. Hardie, eds., pp. 205-213.

²⁵⁰ Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 33.

²⁵¹ Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 34.

²⁵² See Lorenzo Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate (Of the True and the False Good)*, ed. Maristella Lorch, trans. A. Kent Hiatt and Maristella Lorch.

Valla did not have access to the newly-recovered text of Lucretius—which was kept under lock and key by Poggio’s friend Niccoli during the 1430s.²⁵³ As a result, Valla was forced to resort to other sources (which would have included Diogenes Laertius, as well as the dialogues of Cicero) in order to construct his attempt at a vindication of the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure.

The textual history of Valla’s dialogue is complicated. The work consists of three books, the first preceded by a proem in the author’s own voice. The interlocutors are chosen from among Valla’s contemporaries and they change between versions of the dialogue. The first (Leonardo Bruni/Catone Sacco) takes up the Stoic position defending virtue and *honestas*, the second (“Panormita”/Maffeo Vegio) takes up the Epicurean position defending pleasure, the third (Niccolò Niccoli/Antonio da Rho) takes what is ostensibly the “Christian” position and mediates between the two. In the end, he opines “although I disapprove of both sides, I make my decision in favor of the Epicureans [. . .] and against the Stoics.”²⁵⁴ In truth, he says, both schools of philosophy are unsatisfactory when compared to Christian revelation; but if one *were* forced to choose between them, Epicureanism is much to be preferred—it recognizes that true virtue is not the highest good, and it does not breed hypocrisy, as did the Stoic school.

Valla’s readers, both then and now, have struggled to understand the intention of the dialogue. A vigorous defense of Epicurean doctrines in books I and II gives way, seemingly, to a statement of orthodox Christianity in book III.²⁵⁵ Greenblatt suggests that the dialogue can be

²⁵³ See the discussion in Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, pp. 221-226. On p. 302 Greenblatt notes that Valla sometimes quotes Lucretius, but only in fragments that would have otherwise been generally available.

²⁵⁴ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 265.

²⁵⁵ Lorch and Hiett, “Introduction,” to Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, pp. 26-33.

read either as an attempt at containment—or an attempt at subversion. “Which is it?” he asks, to which he responds: “It is exceedingly unlikely that at this distance anyone will discover the evidence that might definitively answer the question—if such evidence ever existed.”²⁵⁶

I will argue (in agreement with Lorch and Hiett) that Valla’s argument is subversive in a different sense than Greenblatt may imply—that it proposes a return to what Valla considers the spirit of original Christianity, the spirit of the Fathers and of the Bible. The irony of Valla’s proposal is that it models itself, in certain respects, on the philosophical dialogues of Cicero, especially *De finibus*. But on the other hand, it uses Cicero to expound an anti-Ciceronian position. As Lorch and Hiett write, “it is typical of Valla to use an author against himself.” If what I am arguing is correct, Valla’s artfulness goes further. In fact, he uses the classical tradition against itself. That is to say, he finds in Epicurean philosophy (or in his creative reconstruction of Epicurean philosophy) a suitable tool for pruning back the excessive claims of the classical political tradition, as represented, in his work, at least, by the philosophical politics of Cicero.

In the proem to book I, Valla declares that that he has chosen to place Stoic and Epicurean theories of the good in opposition to each other because “the Stoics assert more bitterly than all others the value of virtue.” The Epicurean advocacy of pleasure, with its instrumental account of virtue, seems to offer the best rebuttal to this view. The purpose of the dialogue is to refute the Stoics, to show that these proud philosophers champion “not virtue but the shadow of virtue, not honor but vanity, not duty but vice, not wisdom but folly.” These arrogant pagans and self-declared “followers of wisdom” would have done better “had they

²⁵⁶ Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, pp. 224-225.

worked for the cause of pleasure.”²⁵⁷ We should note that this is distinct from the actual advocacy of pleasure.

The first speech of the dialogue is given by the Stoic spokesman Catone. In predictable fashion, he praises virtue and condemns pleasure. He cites Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for the claim that, if virtue could be seen with the human eye, it would incite an incredible love of wisdom.²⁵⁸ One may detect, in his critical recounting of the Epicurean newborn argument, more than a hint of the Christian doctrine of concupiscence:

We can see children from infancy turning toward the vices of gluttony, games, and luxury, more than toward virtue and honor; they hate punishment and love caresses; they flee instruction and seek out lasciviousness. I pass over in silence with what pain good habits are inculcated.²⁵⁹

This anti-hedonist credo sets the stage for the Epicurean Vegio’s rejoinder. He states that he will defend not only pleasure, but human nature itself: “what Nature created and shaped cannot be anything but holy and praiseworthy.” Thus the Stoic argument can be answered “piously, religiously, and without offending the ears of man.” He cites the providential design of nature described by Lactantius in his *De opificio (On the Handiwork of God)*. It is true, Vegio admits, that Epicurus had denied divine providence—as good Christians, we must disavow this part of his philosophy. Vegio, for his part, will speak in defense of pleasure but he will not deny that “all things have been created in accordance with the providential care of Nature.” Thus it is not Epicureanism *in toto* but rather Epicurean *hedonism* which Vegio defends in books I and II. As

²⁵⁷ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 53.

²⁵⁸ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 57. The source is Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d.

²⁵⁹ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 63.

he does this, he simultaneously subjects the Stoic praise of virtue to a harsh critique. Most significantly for our purposes, Vegio singles out the Stoic virtue of courage, arguing that it is not in fact a good. The heroic Romans, “men like Codrus, Curtius, Decius, [and] Regulus,” alone enjoyed nothing of the goods which they had won through courage and acts of self-sacrifice.²⁶⁰

Book III gives the response of Valla’s Christian spokesman, the monk and theologian Antonio da Rho. He finds something to praise and something to criticize the positions of both sides:

I say that both sides of the argument—that of virtue and the right and that of pleasure—ought to be both approved and disapproved. They ought to be approved because the virtuous and pleasure are both excellent things; they ought to be disapproved because they should be understood differently from the ways that your arguments intended.²⁶¹

This means, of course, that virtue and pleasure are worthy only to the extent that they are understood within a Christian theological framework. Still, from this framework, there is something to be said for both sides. Citing the passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* discussed above, da Rho suggests that the Bible’s reference to Stoics and Epicureans be regarded as a qualified endorsement. These schools are more worthy than the others; they represent the best that Greek philosophy has to offer.

Interestingly, da Rho suggests that Vegio’s espousal of hedonism is ironic—“more Socrates than Epicurus,” as he phrases it.²⁶² Why would Vegio have put forward arguments that

²⁶⁰ Compare Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, pp. 41-2, in which the speaker discusses the Decii and Curtius, asking, “what made the Decii devote themselves to the infernal gods, or Q. Curtius to leap into the gulf, but an empty vainglory, a most bewitching siren?” The speaker concludes that it is none other than “Folly” who has “laid the foundations of cities.”

²⁶¹ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 235.

²⁶² Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 261.

he did not believe sincerely? We are given no clear indication. In the end, da Rho states that he disapproves of both sides, but favors that of the Epicureans. Human virtue is false religion or idolatry. True virtue is, rather, instrumental:

[V]irtue is not to be desired for itself, as something severe, harsh, and arduous, nor is it to be desired for the sake of earthly profit; it is to be desired as a step toward that perfect happiness which the spirit of soul, freed from its mortal portion, will enjoy with the Father of all things, from whom it came.²⁶³

That is to say, Epicurean arguments about the instrumentality of virtue, and even about the primacy of perfect happiness, are correct. It is true that the Epicureans erred in their description of perfect happiness—it is not *ataraxia*, but rather the heavenly bliss of the pious soul.

All of this fits with the spoliation-rationale. In this respect, Valla modeled his actions on the Church Fathers, and especially Augustine, who served for him as objects of admiration. Valla's methods are representative of the later trends in the Epicurean revival. The first part of Epicurean philosophy to receive widespread sympathetic reassessment was hedonism, and this reassessment was dependent upon recognition of the fundamental austerity of Epicurean pleasure.

Thus Erasmus, in his colloquy "The Epicurean," has one interlocutor defend the proposition that "there are no people more Epicurean than godly Christians."²⁶⁴ This proposition is maintained, with some success, against another interlocutor's skepticism through a rediscovery of the authentic Epicurean distinctions between bodily pleasure and mental pleasure, and between kinetic pleasure and *katastematic* pleasure. Erasmus cites Cicero in support of these

²⁶³ Valla, *On Pleasure: De Voluptate*, p. 267.

²⁶⁴ Erasmus, "The Epicurean," in *Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 1075.

points.²⁶⁵ In the end, it is not clear whether Erasmus himself means to endorse the Epicurean view. The dialogue can certainly be read as falling within the tradition of anti-Epicurean literature. On this reading, the Epicurean notion of happiness is best fulfilled, not by an Epicurean way of life, but rather by a Christian way of life. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Epicurean notion of happiness is being given an honest, and even sympathetic, appraisal.

Pleasure in *Utopia*

Although the names “Epicurus” and “Lucretius” never appear in *Utopia*, Epicurus’ views on pleasure and virtue are unambiguously replicated in Raphael Hythloday’s account of Utopian moral philosophy.²⁶⁶ Erasmus’ colloquy “The Epicurean” suggests an explanation for *Utopia*’s silence: “no school is more universally detested” than the Epicurean. Still, there is a remarkable,

²⁶⁵ See Cicero, *De finibus*, II.4.11.

²⁶⁶ The absence of Epicurus (and his disciple Lucretius) from More’s *Utopia* is one sign of More’s excellent understanding of Epicurean philosophy. As Edward L. Surtz observes in *The Praise of Pleasure*, the Epicureans would have been excluded from Utopian society on account of their denial of divine providence, personal immortality, and judgment after death. It is fitting, then, that the names of the leading representatives of the school are figuratively exiled from More’s work, although their ideas are given admittance in attenuated form. The characteristic Epicurean distinctions among *types* of pleasures are in fact accepted by the Utopians—*i.e.* pleasures of the body vs. pleasures of the mind (*Utopia*, p. 71, compare p. 65), pleasures of kinesis vs. pleasures of stasis (p. 72), and so forth. The greatest pleasure, in their view, comes from practice of the virtues and consciousness of leading a good life (p. 73). The Utopians agree with the Socrates of Plato’s *Gorgias* that a life dedicated to “low” pleasures such as eating or scratching oneself is a miserable one (p. 73). The Epicureans and Utopians alike eschew “false” or “empty” pleasures in favor of a definition of pleasure which concentrates on the satisfaction of natural needs—whose demands, it is asserted, are easily satisfied (p. 51). “Honors” are classified as a model “false pleasure” (p. 69). The best pleasures are those which can be enjoyed unmixed with any pains (p. 74). Common opinion or disease may lead to mistaken ideas concerning what is pleasant, but this does not change the true character of the pleasant (pp. 69, 71). In all the preceding instances, the Utopians follow an unspoken Epicurean precedent.

and surely non-coincidental, degree of philosophical convergence between *Utopia* and Epicurean doctrine. “[The Utopians] carry on the same arguments we do,” Hythloday states:

They discuss virtue and pleasure, but their chief concern is what to think of human happiness, and whether it consists of one thing or more. On this point, they seem rather too much inclined to the view which favors pleasure, in which they conclude that all or the most important part of human happiness consists.²⁶⁷

Hythloday’s mild but uncharacteristic expression of disapproval for Utopian views is noteworthy.²⁶⁸ He does not say that the Utopians are mistaken, only that they are “rather too much inclined” to the view which identifies pleasure with the sum total of human happiness. This is the central tenet of Epicurean ethics, and also the school’s distinguishing feature, when contrasted with other ancient schools.²⁶⁹

It follows from this view of the human end that the Utopians regard virtue as a means, albeit a necessary means, to the life of greatest pleasure. In agreement with Epicurus, they affirm that “virtue itself draws our nature to [good and honest pleasure] as to the supreme good,” thus relegating virtue to an instrumental role.²⁷⁰ Hythloday observes that among the Utopians there is an opposing view, held by some, which upholds the Stoic position that “virtue is itself happiness.”

²⁶⁷ More, *Utopia*, p. 65.

²⁶⁸ Compare *Utopia*, p. 74, where Hythloday concludes: “In all this, I have no time now to consider whether they are right or wrong, and don’t feel obliged to do so. I have undertaken only to describe their principles, not to defend them. But of this I am sure, that whatever their principles are, there is not a more excellent people or a happier commonwealth anywhere in the whole world.”

²⁶⁹ The Cyrenaics, too, could be said to identify pleasure with the sum total of human happiness, but, as Hythloday’s subsequent *précis* of Epicurean moral theory makes clear, the Utopians are “Epicurean” rather than “Cyrenaic” in the particular details of their pursuit of pleasure.

²⁷⁰ More, *Utopia*, p. 67.

But even these “Stoics” reason their way to a position which is, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from Epicureanism. According to the thinkers of this school, “living according to [pleasure’s] rules is defined . . . as virtue.”²⁷¹ Any disagreement, then, would be purely terminological. Thus the overall tendency of Utopian moral philosophy, in all of its varieties, traces an outline which was first sketched by Epicurus.

It is not just that the Utopians are said to live pleasantly, nor that they appear to make pleasure the measure and end of a good life. Rather, in their thoughts and actions they recapitulate the Epicurean typology of pleasures, with the same intense concern for the distinction between “true” and “false” pleasures. The Epicurean influence works its way into the Utopians’ more fine-grained moral judgments. They define pleasure, in agreement with the Epicurean newborn argument, as “every state or movement of body or mind in which we find delight according to the behest of nature.”²⁷² There are mental pleasures and bodily pleasures—and, of bodily pleasures, some are pleasures of “immediate delight,” while others are pleasures of the “calm and harmonious state of the body.” As in Epicurus, the latter category, we might call them “pleasures of stillness” or *katastematic* pleasures, are said to be “the foundation and basis of all the pleasures.”²⁷³ The practical consequence of these arguments is, just as in Epicureanism, to deprecate all pleasures deemed unnatural or unnecessary. The Utopians label these “false” and “empty” pleasures (*falsum . . . inanis voluptates*), and give as examples delight in fancy dress, gemstones, ceremonial honors, and opinion of noble birth—as well as such

²⁷¹ More, *Utopia*, p. 68.

²⁷² More, *Utopia*, p. 69.

²⁷³ More, *Utopia*, pp. 71-2.

hobbies as gambling and hunting²⁷⁴ Hythloday goes on at particular length in his critical description of false pleasures, concluding:

They often please the senses, and in this they are like pleasure, but that does not alter [the Utopians'] view. The enjoyment does not rise from the nature of the experience itself, but from the perverse habits of the mob, which cause them to mistake the bitter for the sweet [. . .]²⁷⁵

The Utopians know better, of course, and they practice what they preach. Their lives embody the Epicurean moral teaching, with its view of pleasure rightly understood. They live simply and moderately, in keeping with the true understanding of man's natural needs. A little work is sufficient to supply them with the necessities of life, while leaving substantial time for leisure activities (which include philosophy).

It seems that one of More's objectives—certainly one of Hythloday's—is to cast light on and to criticize the pursuit of empty pleasures in contemporary European society. Hythloday makes no attempt to sugarcoat his indignation as he diagnoses the vice at the source of these misguided pursuits:

I have no doubt that every man's perception of where his true interest lies, along with the authority of Christ our Savior (whose wisdom would not fail to recognize the best, and whose goodness would not fail to counsel it), would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt the laws of this commonwealth, were it not for one single monster, the prime plague and begetter of all others—I mean Pride.²⁷⁶

The blustering indignation of Hythloday in this passage should not distract from the fact that *Utopia*'s response to the pride and folly More saw all around him is deeply "Epicurean." The

²⁷⁴ More, *Utopia*, pp. 69, 104.

²⁷⁵ More, *Utopia*, p. 71.

²⁷⁶ More, *Utopia*, p. 106.

book as a whole recommends the adoption of Utopian views by presenting More's audience with arguments based in calculating self-interest. Europe's political communities would be happier and more secure if they imitated the commonwealth of the Utopians. Self-interest alone ought to persuade men that wealth-hoarding and status-seeking are both foolish and vain. And though More's narrator declares that he "can hardly agree with everything [Hythloday] said," yet he freely concedes that "in the Utopian commonwealth there are many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see." Thus it appears that there are at least two ways in which More's *Utopia* can be thought of as "Epicurean." It depicts a commonwealth ordered, in many, if not all, respects, along Epicurean lines; and the work itself functions as a rationalistic-hedonistic critique of contemporary European practice, following the Epicurean therapeutic approach.

Is Utopia, then, an *Epicurean* commonwealth? That would go too far. For one thing, we ought to recall Hythloday's marked similarities to Plato, which highlight the role of Platonic political philosophy in *Utopia*. Plato's influence is apparent in the Utopian practice of communism, which recalls the communism of Plato's *Republic*. Epicurus had instructed his followers not to hold all things in common. The reasons the Utopians give for preferring communism to private ownership are, however, consistent with Epicurean principles. Communism is both a defense against human pride, and a means of ensuring bodily happiness for all.

The Utopian commonwealth appears to mix Platonic and Epicurean elements. This is problematic, on its face. On what principle is the mixture made? Pleasure? Beauty? The good

and the just? Consider Adeimantus' objection in Republic IV, and Socrates' response.²⁷⁷ The *Republic* is a city "happy as a whole" in which none of the parts appear to be happy. This is different from Utopia, a city in which all of the parts appear to be happy. This suggests that the mixture of philosophies is made on terms not unfavorable to Epicurus.

Machiavelli and Epicureanism

In recent decades, scholars have begun to give greater attention to the question of Machiavelli's relation to Epicurean philosophy. This is the belated result of a remarkable finding. In 1961, Sergio Botelli identified a manuscript copy of Lucretius in the Vatican Library as being in Machiavelli's hand. It appears that Machiavelli transcribed the entirety of DRN sometime in the late 1490s. Machiavelli kept abreast of new developments in the study of the ancient Epicureans. He makes use of the 1495 Venetian text, and he incorporates emendations proposed by Michele Marullo, which did not make it into print until the 1512-1513 Giuntine edition. Machiavelli most likely copied the poem in 1497, the year before he was named Secretary of the Florentine Chancery.²⁷⁸

Given these demonstration of interest, it is surprising that Machiavelli never mentions Lucretius or Epicurus by name in his writings. If we did not have proof that he had copied DRN by hand, it would be very difficult to establish that he had read Lucretius at all.²⁷⁹ Allison Brown

²⁷⁷ Plato, *Republic* IV, 419a.

²⁷⁸ Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, p. 69. See also Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 32-34.

²⁷⁹ Compare Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, p. 68: "[Machiavelli] never mentions Lucretius' name and rarely quotes him, so without knowing he had copied the

points out two considerations which help to explain his extreme, but not uncharacteristic, reticence. The first is Machiavelli's loss of office and imprisonment following the Medici's return in 1512. The second is the Florentine synod's ban on Epicurean and Averroist philosophy in 1513, at the very start of Machiavelli's writing career.²⁸⁰ It would seem that Machiavelli had ample reason to be circumspect.

The philosopher of worldly things

Niccolò Machiavelli does not openly announce that he is a philosopher. He does not give his books titles like *On Nature* (as Epicurus did) or *On the Nature of Things* (as Lucretius did). To the contrary, the books that he says contain "as much as I know and have learned" are entitled *The Prince* and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*. These titles suggest that Machiavelli's outlook is politically oriented in the narrow sense.²⁸¹ There is nothing to contradict this view in the titles of Machiavelli's other works: books such as *The Art of War*, *Florentine Histories*, and *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*. To these we may add literary works such as the play *Mandragola* and the poem *The Ass*. An interesting and varied set of titles, to be sure, but they do not give us any clear indication of a philosophical predilection.

The dedicatory letters of the *Prince* and *Discourses* help to describe the books' content. The *Prince* is dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino. (Does "dedicated to" mean the

whole text in his own hand, it would be difficult to trace Lucretius' influence on his outlook or philosophy."

²⁸⁰ Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, p. 68; see also Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, p. 226.

²⁸¹ For the classic statement of a broader understanding of "politics," see Aristotle, *Politics* I.

same thing as “written for?” Consider Machiavelli’s letter to Vettori of December 10, 1513, in which he names a different potential dedicatee, even as he suggests that the particular dedicatee is not at all important.) He (and whoever else reads the *Prince*) will be enabled to understand in a very short time “all” that Machiavelli has “learned and understood.” The best part of Machiavelli’s knowledge is the “knowledge of the actions of great men,” which Machiavelli has learned from “long experience of modern things and a continuous reading of ancient ones.” Once again, this suggests that the book contains historically informed discussion of political action—“politics” in the narrow sense.

In a similar vein, the dedicatory letter of the *Discourses* states that the work contains “as much as I know and have learned through a long practice and a continual reading in worldly things.” We infer that everything Machiavelli knows he has learned through practice and reading of “worldly things.” In the expression we may detect a slight echo of Lucretius: are the “worldly things” (*cose del mundo*) equivalent to “natural things” or even “the realm of nature” (*rerum natura*)?²⁸² Nothing would seem to exclude the possibility, although Machiavelli’s dedicatees, Buondelmonti and Rucellai, are said to be qualified to receive the work on account of their

²⁸² “Worldly things” are also mentioned in *Discourses on Livy* I.38, where the Florentines are said to “lack knowledge of worldly things” after making a political error; *Discourses* III.1, where it is said “all worldly things have a limit to their life”—compare DRN II.1142-3; and *Discourses* III.43 where it is said that “all worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times”—compare DRN I.1024-8, V.187-194 (LS 13F5), and V.422-431, as well as Montaigne’s comment in M.A. Screech, *Montaigne’s Annotated Copy of Lucretius*, p. 11, cited in Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, p. 249. Also compare the sole mention of “worldly things” in *Prince*, X.

“deserving to be princes,” which establishes the presumption that the knowledge Machiavelli here communicates is in some way political.²⁸³

In the famous fifteenth chapter of the *Prince*, Machiavelli distances himself from what he calls “the orders of others.” Who are these “others”—Machiavelli’s “competitors?” Context suggests that one of them is Aristotle, who offered a list of eleven moral virtues and their corresponding vices, just as Machiavelli now offers a list of eleven pairs of “qualities that bring . . . blame or praise.” But the word “others” has a general referent: the “many” who have “imagined republics and principalities.” At the very least, this category includes not only Aristotle, but also Plato (who, after all, wrote “the” *Republic*), and quite possibly the whole tradition of classical political philosophy beginning with Socrates.²⁸⁴ The “many” who have “imagined republics and principalities” have guided men into ruinous error, since “it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.” Machiavelli dissociates himself from this

²⁸³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, “Dedicatory Letter;” *Discourses on Livy*, “Dedicatory Letter.”

²⁸⁴ Cicero, for example, ought to be presumed among the “many,” although only fragments of his *Republic* were available in Machiavelli’s time. Note also that Diogenes Laertius credits many in the Socratic tradition (broadly construed) with writing books entitled “The Republic:” the list includes Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno, and Chrysippus. See DL VI.80, VII.4, and V.188. Epicurus was a determined enemy of this tradition. Vander Waerdt suggests that he may have formulated his teachings on justice in response to Zeno’s *Republic*. See Vander Waerdt, “Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man,” *The Classical Quarterly* 37.2 (1987), pp. 404-405. The corresponding tradition of writing “imagined principalities” may be a reference to the genre of “mirrors of princes” modeled after Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*. On Machiavelli’s knowledge (and use) of DL, see below.

misguided effort. His own method will instead proceed by “leaving out what is imagined . . . and discussing what is true.”²⁸⁵

In sum, the titles and overt intentions of Machiavelli’s works indicate an overriding concern with particular—and often narrowly political—objects. Even the *Prince*, which, by its title, seems to consider a general category, is in the end dedicated to *a* particular prince (although it may not matter *which* particular prince); to whom a particular course of action is recommended.²⁸⁶ The dedicatory letters of the *Prince* and *Discourses* suggest a focus on action and on practical politics—although Machiavelli does not delineate the bounds of his knowledge except to say that it concerns “worldly things.” The fifteenth chapter of the *Prince* disavows “orders of others” based on “imagined republics and principalities,” in favor of a search for “effectual truth.”

On the basis of these considerations, it would seem that Machiavelli is not a philosopher. Additional support for this conclusion, were it needed, would seem readily available in Machiavelli’s use of sources. His references to philosophy and philosophers are few and far between. In the *Prince*—which he says “contains all [he has] learned and understood”—he refers once to “Marcus the philosopher”—that is to say, to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius.²⁸⁷ In the ensuing discussion Marcus is considered not as a philosopher but as an Emperor. He is found to be a “fitting and glorious example” for one who seeks to “conserve a state that is already established and firm,” but Machiavelli concedes that “a new prince in a new principality cannot

²⁸⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV.

²⁸⁶ See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI.

²⁸⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV.

imitate the actions of Marcus.” This would seem to suggest that philosophy cannot serve as a guide for Machiavelli’s primary subject: the “new prince.” Whether Machiavelli reaches this conclusion as a result of himself engaging in philosophy is not yet apparent. In the preceding chapter, Machiavelli makes his only reference to a philosopher by name in the *Prince*. Xenophon is named, but not as a philosopher; rather, as the biographer of Cyrus, whose biography enabled Scipio’s later imitation of Cyrus.²⁸⁸

References to philosophy and philosophers are relatively sparse in the *Discourses* as well. book I, chapter 56, which discusses “signs” that “forecast great accidents,” mentions “some philosopher” who would have it that “this air is full of intelligences that foresee future things by their natural virtues.”²⁸⁹ He does not mention those philosophers who would deny the existence of “airy intelligences.” Given the scarcity of Machiavelli’s references to philosophy, it is reasonable to wonder whether he here intends to make a larger point—perhaps regarding philosophy as such. We note that Machiavelli here refers both to ancient and to modern examples of prognostics. He calls our attention to the difference between ancients and moderns, but he leaves us to wonder if the difference specifically pertains to the question at hand.

As regards the question at hand, Machiavelli specifically mentions the modern prognostics of Charles VIII’s invasion of Italy, the death of Lorenzo de’Medici the elder, and the downfall of Piero Soderini, and the ancient prognostics of the “French” (*i.e.* the Gauls) coming to Rome. However, Machiavelli appears to dismiss the point before he has even made it, bluntly

²⁸⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XIV.

²⁸⁹ The philosopher is Posidonius, who believed “the air is full of immortal souls, already clearly stamped, as it were, with the marks of truth.” See Cicero, *De divinatione* I.30.64.

concluding that we do not have “knowledge of things natural and supernatural.” We do not have knowledge; yet he concedes that “after such accidents extraordinary and new things supervene in provinces.” It would seem significant that Machiavelli does not adopt the Epicurean strategy, or that he does not dismiss the significance of prognostics out of hand. For Epicurus, we recall, dogmatism was a necessary means to *ataraxia*. Thus Machiavelli’s evasion of dogmatism implies his rejection of *ataraxia* as Epicurus conceived it. The problems of human action and choice are not to be resolved by “knowledge of things natural and supernatural.”²⁹⁰

In chapter five of the second book of Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, he considers the cosmological question of the eternity of the universe. He calls to our attention to those “philosophers who would have it that the world is eternal” and points out a weakness in the arguments of their opponents.²⁹¹ If the world *were* eternal, Machiavelli writes, “it would be reasonable that there be memory of more than five thousand years”—were it not that “memories” are “eliminated by diverse causes,” of which “part come from men, part come from heaven.” Aristotle and possibly Cicero are presumably the “philosophers” in question. Epicurus and Lucretius do not fit easily into Machiavelli’s schema. They maintained the eternity—not of the world—but of atoms and void, and the eternity of the universe as a whole; the “world” as we know it is a temporary accretion of atoms which was at one time generated and will be at some later time destroyed. Once again, Machiavelli’s own cosmological views remain obscure.

²⁹⁰ Contrast KD 11-13, DL X.142-143 (LS 25B).

²⁹¹ Which, we note, is not the same thing as affirming their position, see the discussion in Strauss *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 201-203. Compare Machiavelli’s statement in *Discourses* II, pref.: “I judge the world always to have been in the same mode and there to have been as much good as wicked in it.”

Finally, in book II, chapter 12, Machiavelli considers “certain moral philosophers” who wrote that the hands and tongue of men “would not have worked perfectly nor led human works to the height they are seen to be led to had they not been driven by necessity.” Machiavelli’s source for this claim has not been found. The tradition of classical political philosophy seems rather to incline to the view that the full development of man’s natural faculties (such as hands and tongue) does *not* belong among the necessary things.²⁹² Machiavelli’s view bears some resemblance to Lucretius’ in book V of DRN, in which necessity is conceived as the driving force behind such things as the development of language and the useful arts. It seems from this, that, although Machiavelli has little use for Epicurean dogmatic cosmology, he may indeed have use for the Epicurean conception of necessity—particularly as it relates to human political development.

Philosophy and philosophers are occasionally mentioned in Machiavelli’s other works. The *Florentine Histories* once mentions Boethius, “a most holy man.”²⁹³ In book V, the embassy of the Athenian philosophers to Rome (which so scandalized Cato, and which provided the definitive statement of ancient skepticism regarding justice) is briefly mentioned. Finally, *Florentine Histories* VII.6 mentions Ficino, the “second father of Platonic philosophy.”

Machiavelli’s *Life of Castruccio Castracani* concludes with a list of sayings. Of thirty-four sayings in total, thirty-one have been identified as coming from DL.²⁹⁴ The sayings come

²⁹² See Plato, *Laws* I, 628d.

²⁹³ Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* I.4. This reference should be understood in light of the ridiculous figure presented by Messer Nicia in *Mandragola*, who is said to “have learned in Buetheus [sic] a great deal of law.”

²⁹⁴ See the discussion in Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 223-224.

from the “Lives” of Aristippus (nos. 2-16), Bion (nos. 17-18, 20-21), Aristotle (no. 19), and Diogenes the Cynic (nos. 22-32). None of the sayings come from the “Life of Epicurus,” which should give us pause. Could it be that Machiavelli failed to read book X? The possibility seems remote given Machiavelli’s interest in ancient hedonism and atheism—consider his predilection for choosing sayings from the Cyrenaic Aristippus and the “notorious atheist” Bion. It is perhaps safer to assume that Machiavelli for some reason chooses to direct our attention to more marginal figures in the “shadow tradition” of critics of classical natural right. Diogenes the Cynic could certainly be included in such a category, given his preference for nature over convention combined with his conviction that politics is a product of convention. Only one of the sayings (no. 19) comes from a figure within the natural right tradition. The list of sayings is of particular interest given Machiavelli’s extraordinary reticence concerning philosophy and philosophers. It might be said to be an instance of such reticence—the sayings of DL’s “Eminent Philosophers” are, with alterations, put into the mouth of a self-made political man who “rose from nothing.” Here we have another example of how Machiavelli tacitly substitutes politics for classical political philosophy. He takes a saying which, in the original refers to Socrates (no. 14), and instead makes it refer to Caesar. In summary, Machiavelli’s references to philosophy are extremely scanty. He could truly be said to abstain from philosophy “as much as is humanly possible.”²⁹⁵ But this makes his occasional expressions of interest for thinkers in the conventionalist tradition all the more intriguing.

The conventionalist account of politics implies a particular view about the relationship of man to the natural world. The ancient conventionalists, to one degree or another, rejected the

²⁹⁵ Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders*, p. 392.

view that nature is rational. The Lucretian account of the “swerve” is an example of this. This rejection took both a skeptical form (Democritus, the Sophists, Pyrrho, and the New Academy) and a dogmatic form (Epicurus, Lucretius). Machiavelli’s original contribution to the history of human thought is seen in his refusal to subscribe to either alternative. The ancient conventionalists were, without exception, modest and retiring. Machiavelli, too, is a conventionalist of sorts, but he is neither modest nor retiring. Prince XXV would seem to suggest that, in his view, the proper response to the rule of the “swerve” or “Fortuna,” is to *dominate* it.

Machiavelli appears to disagree with the Epicureans as regards the character of individual self-interest. Epicurean hedonism regards withdrawal into a philosophical “garden” as the optimal way of life. As Epicurus put it, “we must liberate ourselves from the prison of routine business and politics.”²⁹⁶ Machiavelli would beg to differ—but it is important to understand exactly *why*. It is not that Machiavelli disputes the claim that “politics is a prison”—the *Prince* and the *Discourses* give ample indication that Machiavelli, too, saw politics as a realm of “necessity.” Rather, Machiavelli doubts the possibility that *anyone*—the Epicurean philosopher emphatically included—could *ever* liberate himself through “withdrawal.” Politics simply cannot be avoided. Human liberation, if it is to occur, will occur as a result of a political *project*. Necessity must be turned against necessity. To borrow the Epicurean metaphor, we must “rise up” and *conquer* the prison-guards.

Another dimension of ancient conventionalism should be considered. In Epicurus and Lucretius, conventionalism is associated with the critique of religion. Machiavelli could not fail to be influenced by their naturalistic account of the pagan religion, which seems to be echoed in

²⁹⁶ *Vatican Saying* 58 (LS 22D1).

his own description of Christianity as a “sect” among sects—that is to say, a human phenomenon with its own natural lifespan. But Machiavelli’s own attitude towards religion is colored by the changed status of religion in renaissance Europe. Christianity is *revealed* religion, and in that respect quite distinct from the pagan religion Epicurus and Lucretius criticized. Machiavelli does not seek to turn his readers into garden philosophers, like Epicurus and Lucretius. He does not seek to turn them into peaceable skeptics (as Lucretius seems to have hoped to do with his Memmius). Machiavelli contemplates the secular *use* of religion. In this way, his project encompasses Christianity. When he describes the Roman use of oracles, he anticipates a Christianity “put to use” by his new politics.

Given the active interest in Epicureanism in Machiavelli’s time, and the manifest relevance of Epicurean texts to many of the issues which interested him, it should not be surprising that a close reading of Machiavelli’s writings reveals several important connections to the concerns of Epicurean philosophy. To show this, I offer a new reading of the opening chapters of the *Discourses*—a reading in which Machiavelli’s hidden dialogue with Lucretius is finally brought to light. Machiavelli is seen to follow a Lucretian precedent in his attack on political rationality. And although Machiavelli does not commit himself to *any* cosmological position, there is good reason to think he accepted Epicurean atomism as a sort of “working hypothesis.” Machiavelli gives Lucretius’ cosmology a radical turn: his attack on political deliberation is also an attack on the fundamental rationality of nature itself. Machiavelli’s political philosophy can be understood as an attempt to show how we might live in a world that is fundamentally fickle and irrational, in which he draws upon, but ultimately rejects, the “prior

art” of Epicurus. Thus we may say that Machiavelli offers an “internal critique” of Epicurean philosophy.²⁹⁷

There is good reason to think that, if Machiavelli ever means to discuss Epicurean philosophy, he does so in the *Discourses*. First, his dedicatees are “potential princes” with sufficient leisure to engage in lengthy, digressive conversations. This distinguishes them e.g. from the dedicatee of the *Prince*. Second, in the *Discourses*, as opposed to the *Prince*, Machiavelli does not divide what he knows into “ancient things” and “modern things”: the ancient things are in a sense more immediately present in the *Discourses*. This might be expected to include ancient philosophy in all its forms, including the Epicurean. Third, Machiavelli alludes to his conversations with Buondelmonti and Rucellai in the *Orti Oricellari*. If it were not for these conversations, Machiavelli says, he would not “be forced to write what [he] would never have written for himself.” Did Machiavelli discuss the garden-philosophy of Epicurus with his friends in the *Orti Oricellari*? It would be not surprising, knowing what we know about Machiavelli and about the intellectual life of Florence in this time, if the Epicurean account of philosophical withdrawal came up in discussion—particularly as Machiavelli himself was suffering from a sort of unwilling “withdrawal” from political life during this period of time.

The second chapter of the *Discourses* discusses “how many species are republics, and which was the Roman Republic.” The centerpiece of the chapter is an extended discussion of the cycle of regimes, which follows closely the discussion found in Polybius book VI. The cycle of regimes is discussed in many places by authors in the classical tradition; one reason Machiavelli chooses to prefer the account given in Polybius is that only there do we find a discussion of the

²⁹⁷ As Rahe claims. See *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 22-103.

cycle, alongside a discussion of Machiavelli's ostensible subject—Rome and Roman politics. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's extended discussion of the cycle shows that his concerns extend beyond merely antiquarian interest in Roman political beginnings. There is good reason to think that he uses the present discussion of the cycle of regimes in order to call our attention to his major disagreements with the classical tradition. Lucretian Epicureanism plays an important role here. DRN, book V, gave an account of human political beginnings which in some respects overlaps the account given in Polybius and in the present chapter. Moreover, there appears to be an Epicurean logic to some of Machiavelli's subtle departures from the text of Polybius VI.

Machiavelli's primary finding is an un-classical vindication of republics ordered by chance and accident over those ordered "by one alone and at a stroke." We see in this a tacit deprecation of political rationality. It is notable that Machiavelli prefers to base his account on "accidents" or "necessity" in preference to human choice. Thus he says that variations in government arise by chance, where Polybius said that they arise by nature. Similarly, Machiavelli's prefers a typology of three regimes as over Aristotle's (and Polybius') favored typology of six. Machiavelli would rather speak of the rule of one, a few, or the many, apart from any consideration of the common good, because the common good is a matter of contention and public debate. This foreshadows a more general attack on political judgment. In any case, Machiavelli prefers a sort of "mixed regime" not susceptible to the flaws of the simple regimes, and capable of improving by accidents.

Furthermore, Machiavelli's account of the origins of justice gives an "Epicurean" reading to that told in Polybius. As the ancient historian put it, when men see ingratitude towards parents or other benefactors, they are offended—their faculty of reason allowing them to distinguish

ingratitude, as other animals fail to do. Through imagination they put themselves in the place of the suffering benefactor, and they share the benefactor's resentment. This results in a "notion of the meaning and theory of duty, which is the beginning and end of justice." And similar terms, Polybius describes the origin of our ideas of noble and base. When men see one man who is foremost in defending his fellows from the onslaught of beasts, they distinguish his behavior from that of the man who avoids such responsibilities. They admire the one, and dislike and reproach the other.

For Polybius, it is the faculty of reason which enables man to distinguish gratitude and ingratitude (he singles out the natural relationship of children to parents) and this directs men to knowledge of justice and injustice. For Machiavelli, on the other hand, it is the thought that the same injuries one sees done to another could also be done to one's self. He omits the reference to children and parents, writing only that,

[S]eeing that one individual hurt his benefactor, hatred and compassion among men came from it, and as they blamed the ungrateful and honored those who were grateful, *and thought too that those same injuries could be done to them*, to escape like evil they were reduced to making laws and ordering punishments . . . hence came the knowledge of justice.²⁹⁸

This approaches in spirit the Lucretian account:

Then also neighbors began to join friendship amongst themselves in their eagerness to do no hurt and suffer no violence, and asked protection for their children and womankind, signifying by voice and gesture with stammering tongue that it was right (*aequum*) for all to pity the weak.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.2. (Emphasis added.)

²⁹⁹ DRN V.1019-1023 (LS22K2).

In sum, while Polybius locates the origin of justice in a feeling of indignation at natural ingratitude, Machiavelli, following Lucretius, locates it in a chance compact made out of consciousness of weakness in order to protect oneself or one's own.

Chapter three of the *Discourses* continues in much the same vein, critiquing choice and praising necessity. "Men can never work any good unless through necessity," Machiavelli writes. "[W]here choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder." It is characteristic of Machiavelli to reduce political rationality, or "choice" to "license."

Tumults

Machiavelli *Discourses* I.4-6 introduces a powerful criticism of classical republican theory, whose ancient adherents professed such admiration for the internal harmony of the Spartan polity, and whose modern adherents tended to find in Venice the corresponding modern epitome of the well-ordered regime. Against their views, Machiavelli argues that it is Rome, with all its tumults, which ought to serve as the model "if someone wished to order a republic anew," rather than the small but harmonious and long-lasting republics of Sparta and of Venice. The tumultuous republic is ordered "to expand like Rome in dominion and in power", while the *serenissima* republic is forced to "remain within narrow limits." Were it possible to remain within fixed limits, the Spartan or Venetian way might seem to be the more promising option: "the true political way of life and the true quiet of the city." But this way is ultimately untenable: "all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you." The Spartan or Venetian republic is

forced by circumstances, like the Roman republic, to acquire, but not having the Roman republic's "great number of men, and well-armed", its "expansion is poison." As Machiavelli notes, "Venice lost everything in one day."³⁰⁰

Where does Machiavelli derive the claim, so crucial to his criticism of classical republicanism, that "the things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady", but must "either rise or fall?" The ancient atomists were associated with a similar claim, advanced on a cosmic level: the world and all things in it are defined by their natural patterns of growth and decay. Even the cosmos (so claims Democritus) has a birth, a period of growth, an *akmē*, a period of decline, and an end.³⁰¹ Living organisms follow a similar trajectory, and even human creations are governed by a similar pattern of growth and decay. Thus Lucretius muses on Rome's demise, and even the collapse of the walls of the world.

It is, I think, reasonable to surmise that Machiavelli was profoundly influenced by his reflections on the atomistic doctrines of growth and decay. And the conclusions he drew are not altogether surprising: Machiavelli's criticism of Epicureanism begins from premises acceptable to Epicurean physics (and quite possibly inspired by them), but he uses these premises to reason to conclusions that undermine the Epicurean confidence in the very existence of a quiet, secure position, "fortified by the teachings of the wise." And if there is no such place, then the conclusion Machiavelli reaches is a compelling one: if all things must rise or fall, take care that you and your city remain for as long as possible among the things rising.

³⁰⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.6.

³⁰¹ Friedrich Solmsen, "Epicurus on the Growth and Decline of the Cosmos," *American Journal of Philology* 74.1 (1953), pp. 36-39.

Reading *Discourses* in this way, one finds in Machiavelli's criticism of the Spartan or Venetian way allusions to—and criticisms of—the Epicurean philosophical position. Epicurus staked his philosophy on the possibility of finding, within the chaos of existence, a secure position from which the philosopher could gaze down on the tumults of nature and of politics. Machiavelli responds that those who settle “in a strong place of such power that nobody would believe he could crush it at once,” are only deluding themselves: sooner or later they will be compelled to engage in politics, and they will be crushed, or find themselves so ill-disposed for holding on to the gains they are forced to make that they will inevitably lose everything.³⁰² Similarly, Epicurus' attempt to characterize himself and his followers as good citizens, observant of justice and the laws of the city, orthodox in religious practice, and so forth—and to seek safety in demonstration of the non-threatening and private character of their philosophy, is doomed to failure. It is true that *one* of the two causes why war is made on a republic is “for fear lest it seize you”—but the *other*, as Machiavelli notes, is “to become master of it.”³⁰³

Sparta and Venice together represent the choice for quiet, as opposed to Rome, the choice for empire. Both represent the position that one ought to set limits to human acquisition. As “Sparta” stands for the tradition in political thought that, by its enemies, was criticized for its idealization of Sparta—the “men with cauliflower ears”—and which made virtue the *ne plus ultra* of the political community, so “Venice” stands for the tradition in thought that found a safe home “constrained by necessity . . . to live in places that were sterile, deformed, and devoid of

³⁰² Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.6.

³⁰³ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.6.

every comfort.”³⁰⁴ In no time at all they made these places “not only habitable but delightful; they established laws and orders among themselves, and . . . enjoyed security.”³⁰⁵ It is the tradition which made *ozio*, or indolence, the objective of political life and the reason for withdrawal *from* political life—the tradition of the Garden.

Rolling one’s stone

We return to the famous fifteenth chapter of the Prince. Machiavelli considers it “more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.” Again, this seems to be a statement of Machiavelli’s newness. In this case, he sets up an “effectual truth vs. imagination” dichotomy. He would class Epicurean withdrawal as among the “imagined republics and principalities.

The garden is dismissed as a pipe-dream: just another “imagined republic or principality.” But in I.6, Machiavelli indicates that it is a choice. He does not think the option for Epicureanism is a respectable choice for a man. It is the option of a pig. In *The Ass*, Machiavelli alludes to this by putting Epicurean arguments in a pig’s mouth.

Fittingly, the contrast between classical political philosophy, Epicureanism, and Machiavelli’s own views again comes to the fore in *Discourses* III.2—the only location in the

³⁰⁴ See Plato, *Gorgias*, 515e.

³⁰⁵ Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* I.29.

Discourses where Machiavelli refers to the *sapiens* or wise man. It is here that Machiavelli most directly confronts the question of whether it is possible to stand aloof from politics.

[S]ome say that with princes one should not wish to stand so close that their ruin includes you, nor so far that you would not be in time to rise above their ruin when they are being ruined. Such a middle way would be the truest if it could be observed, but because I believe that that is impossible, one must be reduced to the two modes written above—that is either to distance oneself from or to bind oneself to them. Whoever does otherwise, if he is a man notable for his quality, lives in continual danger. Nor is it enough to say: “I do not care for anything, I do not desire either honors or useful things; I wish to live quietly and without quarrel!” For these excuses are heard and not accepted.³⁰⁶

Machiavelli’s letter to Francesco Vettori of December 10, 1513 contains what may be an allusion to Lucretius. Machiavelli, suffering *ozio* in the form of an involuntary exile from politics, writes to his friend that he wishes to find employment with the Medici, even if he has to “roll a stone” at first.³⁰⁷ In this image, he recalls Lucretius’ negative depiction of the life of the unwise as a sort of Hades on Earth. The punishment of Sisyphus, in particular, is likened to the torment which is ever felt by the politically ambitious:

To solicit power, an empty thing, which is never granted, and always to endure hard toil in the pursuit of it, this is to push laboriously up a hill the rock that still rolls down again from the very top, and in a rush recovers the levels of the open plain.³⁰⁸

Machiavelli, however, would choose to “roll a stone” in preference to his unwilling *ozio*. This is suggestive of the way in which Machiavelli at once takes up elements of Epicureanism and challenges them. He has no use for the Epicurean wise man’s attitude of serene acceptance of

³⁰⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* III.2.

³⁰⁷ Machiavelli, *Letter to Francesco Vettori*, reprinted in *The Prince*, pp. 107-111.

³⁰⁸ DRN III.998-1002 (LS 22F4).

chance. There is no room in his philosophy for this mildness of spirit. He counsels us, not to bear up under bad fortune with equanimity, but to rise up and conquer it, as is seen in his treatment of the Venetians, and his ultimate rejection of a republicanism that attempts to find hiding-place secure from the tumults of nature and of human nature. Thus when the Lucretian metaphor of Sisyphus rolling his boulder reappears in Machiavelli, the implications are reversed: instead of being a symbol of the futility of politics, the myth of Sisyphus serves as a model for the Machiavellian project.

Chapter VI: Thomas Hobbes's Political Hedonism

In this chapter I argue that Epicurean political teachings—particularly the teaching *lathe biōsas*—make an important and distinctive contribution to the modern liberal idea of freedom. The Epicurean contribution can be most clearly recognized in the familiar notion of freedom as “being let alone.” But the similarity between *lathe biōsas* and freedom as “being let alone” should not distract us from the fact that Epicureanism is fundamentally a teaching as regards the *ends* to which freedom is best put to use. One seeks to be “let alone,” on the Epicurean account, in order to pursue the life of optimal pleasure, and this life is understood as a sort of union of higher and lower pleasures, or of philosophical and sensual forms of enjoyment. The Epicurean legacy in modern liberal thought is a sort of “rump Epicureanism,” detached from Epicurus’ own dogmatic notions about the purpose of life and the role of philosophy in the good life. This chapter thus engages in a twofold exploration: on the one hand, I seek to discover the legacy of Epicurean ideas in modern thought; on the other hand, we describe the “hollowing out” of the Epicurean theory of the good life into a sort of neutral and non-dogmatic “felicity.”

There is yet another way to look at this issue. The revival of Epicurean philosophy in the early modern period coincided with a general revival of the philosophy of the Hellenistic schools. I argue that there are important differences between the idea of freedom as espoused by the Stoics (and the neo-Stoics of the early modern period) and the idea of freedom as espoused by the Epicureans. In brief, the Epicurean believes that certain minimal *material* conditions must be fulfilled in order to achieve freedom, while the Stoic believes that freedom need not take any account of material conditions, since it consists solely in the power to assent or not to assent. And whereas the Stoic contribution to early modern political philosophy is generally recognized,

the Epicurean contribution is, more often than not, ignored or conflated with that of its Stoic counterpart.

One common theme in the introductory materials of sixteenth and seventeenth century editions of Lucretius is that we now see the recovery of the *authentic* teachings of Epicurus, as against the distortions and errors introduced by Cicero and centuries of Cicero-influenced scholarship. Along with this theme we sometimes see the argument, pioneered by the humanists discussed in the previous chapter, that Epicureanism, rightly understood, is no more unacceptable on Christian doctrinal grounds than any other pagan philosophy. Sometimes the argument is presented in such a way as to recall Augustine's "spoliation rationale." In a memorable passage, the Catholic priest and Epicurean Pierre Gassendi wrote: "It is surely undeserved, on account of a few evils, to expunge so many goods, and to destroy the rose garden because of the spines borne by the rose bushes."³⁰⁹ This became the motto of the modern appropriators of Epicurean philosophy.

Alongside this sympathetic appropriation may sometimes be seen a sort of fideism (one thinks, for example, of Montaigne): human reason suggests certain conclusions, some of which are compatible with Epicureanism, but one must always be skeptical of reason's conclusions—to the degree that they can, and indeed *must*, be rejected when they come into conflict with matters of certain faith.

³⁰⁹ Gassendi, *De vita et moribus Epicuri*, "Dedicatory Letter." Quoted in John Evelyn, "The interpreter to him that reads," *An Essay on the First Book of T. Lucretius Carus*.

Thomas Hobbes and the anti-Hobbes literature

It is sometimes said that Hobbes's political philosophy does not depend upon his physics. This may mean, first, that his political philosophy does not depend upon premises established by physics; second, that it was developed independently of (and perhaps prior to) any of Hobbes's physical speculations; or, finally, that it has a basis altogether distinct from the materialist account of the world given, for example, in the opening chapters of *Leviathan*.³¹⁰ It is possible that *all* of these claims are true—or true to some degree. Even so, in the first part of this paper I will argue that our understanding of the *intention* of Hobbes's political philosophy can be advanced by a careful study of Hobbes's physical doctrines. Hobbes's intention can be called “Epicurean” insofar as it draws upon the two main planks of the Epicurean philosophical project. Lucretius writes of Epicurus that he “put a limit to desire and fear”—*finem statuit cuppedinis atque timoris*.³¹¹ Thus, by way of establishing a starting-point for our investigation, we shall call Hobbes's intention “Epicurean,” to the extent that he co-opts this project of “putting a limit” to human fears, on the one hand, and “putting a limit” to human desires, on the other.

There is one obvious clash between Hobbesian and Epicurean physics, and it deserves to be noted here. Hobbes rejects the Epicurean view that there exists such a thing as “chance,” which can be described on the atomic level as a distinct movement or “swerve,” and that the microscopic “swerve” can in some way account for the macroscopic phenomenon of free choice.

³¹⁰ For some representative versions of these arguments, consider John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, pp. 29-30, and Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, pp. 6-7.

³¹¹ DRN VI.24-34 (LS 21X3); compare KD 3, DL X.139 (LS 21C1). For the unusual form *cuppedinis*, see Bailey, *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* I p. 131.

One gathers that Hobbes believes this account to be grossly incoherent. Moreover, he believes it is quite simply unnecessary. On the one hand, it does not advance our understanding of man or the science of politics (which, he believes, can now get along pretty well without any assumption of freedom), and on the other hand, it stands to encourage political pretensions in subjects which threaten the common welfare.

When did Hobbes first read Lucretius? Did Epicureanism play a role in his intellectual formation?³¹² Given the historical distance and Hobbes's aversion to crediting (or even mentioning) other authors, it is difficult to answer these questions.³¹³ Still, we know that Hobbes served as amanuensis to Bacon, who praised the ancient atomists very highly.³¹⁴ Later in life, Hobbes tried to keep up to date on developments in the study of Epicureanism. He was a close friend and correspondent of Pierre Gassendi, the era's leading Epicurean.³¹⁵ And even Hobbes's written references to Epicureanism, scanty as they are, give some evidence of close acquaintance.³¹⁶

³¹² Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 291-293, suggests that Hobbes may have first read Lucretius during his years at Magdalen Hall.

³¹³ Another problem: Hobbes had a strong incentive to "cover his tracks" when dealing with authors widely reputed to be atheists. We know he engaged in at least one "prudential *auto-da-fé*." See Noel Malcolm, in Hobbes, *Correspondence*, vol. I, pp. xxv-xxvi for details.

³¹⁴ See especially Charles T. Harrison, "Bacon, Hobbes, Boyle, and the Ancient Atomists," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 15 (1933), pp. 192-200.

³¹⁵ See Hobbes, *Correspondence*, vol. I, pp. 186-203.

³¹⁶ The extensive (but critical) discussion of Epicurus-Lucretius in *De corpore* 26.3 could be taken as evidence of a *very* close acquaintance. Note also the passage from DRN that Hobbes uses as an epigraph for his "Concerning Heresy and the Punishment Thereof:"

A promising avenue, hitherto insufficiently appreciated, for the study of the influence of Epicurean ideas on the physics and political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes is the anti-Hobbesian literature. A considerable amount of criticism was leveled at *Leviathan* and its author. This criticism was varied in its aims and methods; but for the philosophically and theologically minded, Epicurus and the ancient atomists emerged as important secondary targets, and, in some cases, as significant targets in their own right.³¹⁷ It is safe to say that Hobbes has been dogged by charges of Epicureanism for as long as he has been widely read in English.³¹⁸

In tenebris metuunt: sic nos in luce timemus
 Interdum, nihilo quae sunt metuenda magis, quam
 Quae pueri in tenebris pavitant, finguntque futura.

DRN II.54-7 (LS 21W6); see the discussion of this passage above, on page 115.

³¹⁷ Samuel Mintz, in *The Hunting of Leviathan*, surveys the English anti-Hobbes literature. Charles T. Harrison “The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), pp. 1-79, remains the most comprehensive study of the anti-Epicurean texts; see especially pp. 23-56. It is illustrative of the convergence of the anti-Hobbes and anti-Epicurus strands of argument that John Smith, writing in 1651, could focus his whole attention on the ancient atomists, while his editor, John Worthington, writing just nine years later, makes allusion to the entry of Hobbes into the debate:

He [i.e., John Smith] lived not to see atheism so closely and craftily insinuated nor lived he to see Sadduceeism and Epicurism so boldly owned and industriously propagated as they have been of late, by some who, being heartily desirous that there were no God, no Providence, no reward nor punishment after this life, take upon them to deride the notion of spirit or incorporeal substance, the existence of separate souls, and the life to come.

John Worthington, “To the Reader,” in John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp. xx-xi.

³¹⁸ Nor were Hobbes’s links to Epicureanism ignored on the continent. Pufendorf, for example, states that Hobbes borrows his notion of justice as keeping of faith and observing of covenants from Epicurus. See *The Law of Nature and of Nations* I.vii.13, p. 81. Pufendorf asks the reader to compare Hobbes, *De cive* III.6, and *Leviathan* XV, with DL X. *circ. fin.* Interestingly, he cites Gassendi (*Syntagma* III.26-7) as asserting, like Hobbes, “a right of every man to all things.”

The anti-Hobbes polemicists were not always careful readers, and they were not always scrupulous in their scholarship. Often, categories were blurred. A representative case occurs in Bishop Samuel Parker's *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*. Parker argues, in essence, that there are only two possible philosophical positions: Epicureanism and Christianity, writing,

If there be a Deity, there must be a Law of Nature; and if a Law of Nature, a future State. And on the contrary, if no future State, then no Law of Nature, and if no Law of Nature, no Deity.³¹⁹

In such a scheme, it is easy to see how Hobbes and Epicurus might begin to blur together.

Elsewhere in the literature, similar tendencies can be observed. Sometimes a critic will misrepresent Hobbes's views, perhaps out of a certain conviction of what his views *ought* to be.

It is not surprising that more recent scholars have only rarely taken the claims of the anti-Hobbes literature seriously.³²⁰ Nor, for that matter, did Hobbes openly admit any debt to Epicurus. The few references that do appear are critical or disparaging in character.³²¹

³¹⁹ Samuel Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*, p. xxii. See the discussion in Harrison, "The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), pp. 24-ff. One may compare Grotius's infamous *etiamsi daremus*.

³²⁰ Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan*, p. 32 makes a single passing reference to the charge leveled on Hobbes of Epicureanism; Harrison, in "The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), pp. 1-79, discusses the literature at length, but dismisses most of it as "uncritical," and regards the supposed claims of influence as specious. Leo Strauss's recently published *Hobbes's Critique of Religion* is the rare exception to this general rule of neglect.

³²¹ Hobbes's correspondence complicates the picture slightly. Privately, Hobbes and his friends spoke freely in Epicurean allusion. Sorbière, for example, likens Hobbes to a new Epicurus, quoting Lucretius' encomium (DRN I.62-74). As Malcolm notes, "reading literally between the lines, we find that Sorbière is implying that Hobbes has overthrown religious superstition." See Letter 38: *Correspondence*, vol. I, pp. 121-3. On the other hand, the surviving

Still, the time may be ripe for a reappraisal of the arguments of the early critics of *Leviathan*. As Hobbes's religious ideas receive greater scholarly interest, the arguments of these polemicists demand greater attention. At their best, the anti-Hobbes critics demonstrate a depth of theological learning that cannot be assumed among Hobbes's later readers.³²² Moreover, they often have a solid grounding in the "Aristotelity" of the schools—that is to say, Aristotelian metaphysics—and thus are well suited to identify specific points of disagreement with that tradition. In some cases, they are good guides to the grounds of that disagreement.

Hobbes and Epicurean hedonism

The first area which invites comparison is hedonism. To what extent do Epicurus and Hobbes share a common, hedonistic orientation? It is worth noting that many of the accusations of "Epicurean" leveled at Hobbes by his contemporaries (and subsequent near-contemporaries) are focused on this area. However, Philip Mitsis offers a compelling counterargument against the view that Epicurus and Hobbes share significant hedonistic common ground: Epicurus is more concerned that one have the proper desires than that one have satisfaction of whatever one desires; he is in this sense far more "objective" in his hedonism than either Hobbes or Callicles from Plato's *Gorgias*.³²³ A related question concerns the relations between the Epicurean and Hobbesian notions of pleasure. James Nichols discusses this point in his *Epicurean Political*

correspondence between Hobbes and Gassendi is "curiously slight." Hobbes, *Correspondence*, vol. I, p. xxxi.

³²² As is pointed out by Leo Strauss, "Review" of Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan*, p. 255.

³²³ Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability*, pp. 52-57.

Philosophy. He argues that Hobbes's denial of felicity is, in effect, democratic. Only a minority of people (*i.e.* philosophers) have any chance of successfully ignoring kinetic pleasure in favor of *katastematic* pleasure. Hobbes's response is to abandon the category of *katastematic* pleasure: "there is no such thing as [felicity, the] perpetual tranquility of mind."³²⁴ True felicity in fact consists in a "continuall progresse of the desire from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is, that the object of mans desire, is not to enjoy once onely, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire."³²⁵

On the other hand, there appears to be considerable common ground between the Epicurean and Hobbesian criticisms of political ambition. In Epicurus' scheme, the pleasures of ruling are illusory and altogether artificial; "neither natural nor necessary." One important service of Epicurean philosophy is to purge the soul of such "empty" desires. The "illusory" and "empty" aspects fit well with Hobbes's notion of vainglory. It is notable that Hobbes proposes a practical, political remedy to vainglory in the form of the Leviathan.

The modern notion of happiness runs into some problems which the Epicurean notion was not subject to. Unlike Epicurean happiness, which is based on restricting the desires to what is naturally necessary; the Hobbesian notion of happiness seems to imply necessary conflict, and thus some mechanism for resolving conflict. This mechanism is the Hobbesian "Leviathan," and what this means is that the Leviathan, "King of all the children of pride," takes the role of

³²⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan* VI, p. 46.

³²⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan* XI, p. 70. See the discussion in Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, p. 184.

limiting desires that most men are not willing or able to limit for themselves. But here, again a difference appears with Epicureanism. The limiting principle is not “what is natural, and what is necessary,” as it was for Epicurus. Instead it is “what can be enjoyed, without disturbing the enjoyment of others.” This is Hobbes’s “public” formulation of the laws of nature all summed together, which he claims is intelligible to the meanest capacity. It is a sort of “negative” golden rule: “Do not that to another which thou wouldest not have done to thy selfe.” It may be understood as the synthesis of Christ’s teaching, namely, “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,” and the Epicurean teaching, “live unnoticed.”

Hobbes and Epicurean physics

Hobbes’s early critics found ample material in his physics to support the allegation of Epicureanism. They pointed, first of all, to Hobbes’s mechanistic physics and his denial of incorporeal substances, which seemed to recall Epicurean atomism, and, like Epicurean atomism, seemed tantamount to atheism.

When specific physical doctrines are examined and compared side by side, the charge that Hobbes owed his physics to Epicurus appears to lose some of its persuasiveness. Consider the charge of atomism. During this time, atomism itself had become the topic of heated debate.³²⁶ But there is little in Hobbes to substantiate the polemicists’ claim of a link between Hobbes and Epicurean atomism. In fact, Hobbes’s longest and most significant discussion of Epicurean

³²⁶ See Harrison “The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), pp. 1-79. See also Harrison “Bacon, Hobbes, Boyle, and the Ancient Atomists,” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 15 (1933), pp. 191-218.

philosophy (the discussion of Lucretius in *De corpore*) definitively shows that he rejected the Epicurean description of the universe as atoms and void.³²⁷ And the attempt to tie Hobbes to Epicurus on account of mechanism likewise runs into insuperable difficulties. Simply put, Epicurus was not a mechanist. In fact, Epicurus' account of human freedom as dependent on an undetermined "swerve" in the motions of certain atoms stands opposed to Hobbesian determinism.³²⁸

More importantly perhaps, the basis of Hobbes's physics is not the same as the basis of Epicurus'. While Epicurus is an ontological materialist, Hobbes avoids any ontological commitments. And while Epicurus argues that certain phenomena (for example, color) are not inherent in individual atoms, Hobbes goes much further. For Hobbes, it is crucial to remember that our perceptions are our perceptions, and nothing more. He rejects Epicurus' suggestion that things really are more or less as we perceive them, a suggestion Epicurus took to notorious length when he stated that the sun is more or less the size it appears to us to be—that is to say, "a human foot."

Despite these differences, a certain resemblance between Hobbesian and Epicurean physics cannot be denied. Both were united in the notion that, as Lucretius put it, "everything is done without the working of gods."³²⁹ Hobbes's denial that God takes an active role in the world

³²⁷ Hobbes *De corpore* I.26.3.

³²⁸ *Letter to Menoecus*, DL X.133-134 (LS 20A). Compare DRN II.251-ff (LS 20F). Contrast with Hobbes, who claims "Liberty, and Necessity are consistent . . . to him that could see the connexion of those causes, the necessity of all mens voluntary actions, would appear manifest," *Leviathan* XXI, pp. 146-7.

³²⁹ DRN I.158; compare Samuel Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*, pp. iii-ff. Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, p. 66 notes the discrepancy

is particularly evident in his tenth objection to the *Meditations*, in which he goes through the Cartesian list of God's attributes, on the one hand granting that God is (as Descartes claims) a substance, independent, and infinite, but on the other hand denying that there is any basis on which to claim that He is supremely intelligent, or supremely powerful, and concluding that "though all these things were demonstrated, it still would not follow that a creator exists."³³⁰

With regard to the role of God in the world, Hobbes, like Epicurus, approaches very close to the spirit of Laplace's famous reply to Napoleon: *Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là*.

The liberation from fear

What Epicurus and Hobbes *did* have need of was a hypothesis—*any* hypothesis—that would support the project of liberating mankind from fear. Hobbes describes the natural science of his *De homine* in exactly these terms. In his Latin prose autobiography, Hobbes writes:

But dreams and phantasms, which formerly had been held for spirits and souls of the dead, and were the bugbears of the coarse common people, it [that is to say, Hobbes's *De homine*] altogether overthrew.³³¹

between Hobbesian determinism and Epicurean libertarianism, but refers both to the underlying intention of eliminating fear of the gods, and describing nature "in such a way as not to be troubling [i.e. fearful] to man . . . as [being] without riddle and secret in principle."

³³⁰ See *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, p. 131; Compare Thomas Tenison, *The Creed of Mr. Hobbes Examined*, pp. 52-3, who notes that "even Gassendus confessed the need for a Creator." See also *Leviathan* XXXI, p. 247, where Hobbes derives the right of sovereignty of God, not from His creation, but from His omnipotence: "it is from Power, that the Kingdome over men, and the Right of Afflicting men at his [sic] pleasure, belongeth Naturally to God Almighty; not as Creator and Gracious; but as Omnipotent."

³³¹ Hobbes, *Opera Latina* I.xviii. See the discussion in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, p. 67 n.149.

Similarly, the Epicureans made one of the goals of natural science the critique of dreams and *phantasmata*, with the ultimate aim of alleviating men's natural fears of these things.³³²

For Epicurus, this project necessarily extends to encompass the claims of religion, which by their nature tend to demand men's prior allegiance over any claims of philosophy. The first objection Lucretius anticipates his addressee, Memmius, making, is that of impiety, and his response is that religion itself has brought forth criminal and impious deeds.³³³ In place of the things that are believed by the multitude, Epicurus and Lucretius advance a conception of the gods as unconcerned with the world,³³⁴ and argue that one need not fear torments in the afterlife,³³⁵ because the soul is extinguished when the body dies.³³⁶

Hobbes's methods are complicated by the claims of the Christian religion, but many of his conclusions are remarkably similar, which induces us to ask whether his intentions might be "Epicurean" in some deep sense. The question, for Hobbes, is *what is to be feared*. And for all the notable role that the promotion of a certain fear—namely the fear of a violent death—plays in the functioning of the *Leviathan*, it is at least as significant, for the purposes of understanding Hobbes's political theory, to note the way in which that theory is intended to *relieve men from fear*.

³³² See DRN IV, especially 907-1036; and the account of men's first visions of the gods at V.1169-1182.

³³³ DRN I.80-83.

³³⁴ KD 1, DL X.139 (LS 23E4). Compare DRN I.44-49.

³³⁵ DRN III.966-1023 (LS 24F).

³³⁶ DRN III.417-829 (LS 14F, 14G, 14H).

Leviathan chapter 12 suggests a distinction between philosophic religion (which originates from men's desire to know causes—*i.e.* the root scientific desire, and which leads to a conception of a “first mover” but *not* to any conception of divine judgment or punishment), and fear-based religion (which originates in “opinion of ghosts,” “devotion towards what men fear” and “taking of things causal for prognostics,” and which leads to a still greater fear: the fear of eternal punishments—with pernicious political consequences). This fits well with the “Epicurean account” of *De homine* mentioned above. Hobbes finds in Epicureanism remedies for the fear-based religion which he holds responsible for the civil unrest of his time.

In Parts III and IV of *Leviathan*, Hobbes works to liberate mankind from fear by means of a strange and novel interpretation of Holy Scripture. As Hobbes's critics were quick to note, the effect of this interpretation is to eliminate, as much as possible, the terrible and fearful aspects of traditional Christian doctrine. So far as is possible, Hobbes denies the active role of God in the world. He claims that the soul is material and naturally dies when the body dies,³³⁷ and his discussion of the torments of hell and the “second death” leads to perhaps the *least* troubling depiction of hell that is compatible with orthodox Christian doctrine (or, if you like, a *less* troubling picture of hell than is compatible with orthodox Christian doctrine).³³⁸ Tenison draws the logical conclusion. Speaking of the “second death” that the wicked will suffer after the

³³⁷ See Hobbes, *Leviathan* XXXIV, pp. 430-ff.

³³⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan* XXXVIII, p. 314.

resurrection, he says “that which you [that is, Hobbes] make as the top of their calamitie is to be reckoned as a priviledg” because it will bring all their torments to a conclusion.”³³⁹

Was Hobbes a Christian? It is not my intention to reopen a debate regarding a point, which, in my own opinion, does not and could not admit of any conclusive answer, unless Hobbes were, like Plato’s Protagoras, to re-emerge from Hades (at least as far as the neck) and make himself subject to all of our inquiries. And perhaps not even then. Consider that, in his own lifetime, Hobbes was known as a skilled disputant and as one who had a particular talent for hedging his claims—a talent which we can still see shining through in his written works.

That said, *if* Hobbes was a Christian, he was a Christian of a most unusual sort—a Christian who, as a reader and interpreter of scripture, unfailingly identified and expunged from his own personal profession of faith all those elements of Christianity which, in the received Christian tradition, had tended to promote fear of God, and in particular the fear of God’s judgment. This, I think, is indisputable. *Can* such a one be a Christian?

Security in Epicurus and in Hobbes

The first fact we note is that, for both thinkers, “security” is associated with the idea of fear. Epicurean security is fundamentally “security against fears”—that is to say, the subjective

³³⁹ Tenison, *The Creed of Mr. Hobbes Examined*, p. 217. This aspect of Hobbes’s intention was generally understood; compare Clarendon, *A Brief View and Survey of the Dangerous and Pernicious Errors to Church and State, in Mr. Hobbes’s Book, Entitled Leviathan*, p. 223: “[Hobbes] is the first man (since Vergil accompanied Aeneas thither) that hath taken pains so accurately to rescue & vindicate Hell from the prejudice that men might have to it, from some expressions they find in Scripture relating to it; which he endeavors, by his Interpretations, to make not altogether so severe as they are generally understood to be.” See also Bramhall, “The Catching of Leviathan or The Great Whale,” in *Works*, vol. IV, pp. 537-539.

feeling of safety that accompanies the rational certainty, imparted by Epicurean teaching, that even the most intrinsically distressing experiences cannot stop the wise man from enjoying *ataraxia*, and, thus, true happiness.

The Epicurean claim can be broken down further. It implies, first of all, a particular account of human happiness and unhappiness, an account which begins by locating the primary causes of human unhappiness in fear—*i.e. not* in scarcity, false opinion, or so forth. Compared to other animals, human beings have an exceptionally large number of reasons to be fearful. They are rather poorly provided for by nature, having none of the natural weapons or defenses that other animals can typically rely upon. In primitive circumstances, they have tended to serve as prey for beasts. But human fear is not merely the product of human weakness (which men, in any case, can and have managed to ameliorate through social organization and technological innovation, a fact Epicurus readily grants); human fear is, in fact, much more the product of the human power of imagination. The best way to see this dimension of human fear is to recall DRN II.54-57:

For just as children tremble and fear all things in blind darkness, so we in the light fear, at times, things that are no more to be feared than what children shiver at in the dark and imagine to be at hand.³⁴⁰

Incidentally, we know that this passage was important for Hobbes; his posthumously published “Concerning Heresy and the Punishment Thereof” takes it for an epigraph. The chief of these imagined fears are the fear of divine rewards and punishments, and the fear of an afterlife. But a detailed examination of the Epicurean strategies against religious fear is beyond our present

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Note that these lines recur at, among other places, DRN VI.36-38.

purposes; suffice it to say that, with regard to the fears instigated by religion, Epicureanism and Hobbesianism are profoundly in sympathy.

The Epicurean response to religious fears is thoroughly rationalistic; by knowing the true nature of the universe and the nature of the gods, one is freed from the fear of divine rewards and punishments (since the gods are revealed to be blissful and disinterested in human affairs), and, at the same time, one is freed from fears regarding the afterlife (since the character of the soul, and its mortality is firmly established). But note that Epicurus does not seem to be entirely fair to religion. He counts up the fears inspired by religious belief, but ignores all of its consolations.

The Epicurean response to the fears brought about by human weakness is equally rationalistic. To be sure, it is the case that social organization and technological innovation remove the primitive fears of starvation and of being eaten; nevertheless they introduce new (and arguably worse fears (think of tyrannical persecutions and of the terrible clashes of armies). The chief virtue of social organization and technological innovation is not the amelioration of the human condition, but rather that they enable the emergence of true philosophy, *i.e.* Epicurus.

Epicurean security is fundamentally security against fears, since fears prevent the mind from achieving the intrinsically desirable state of *ataraxia*. In contrast, Hobbesian security is, to some extent, a consequence of fears: the fear of violent death leads, upon reflection, to the imperative to contract away one's natural right in favor of peace, when peace is offered. Thus it can be said that fear is not something for philosophy to dispel, but rather something for philosophy to appropriate and direct.

This apparent contrast conceals the fact that there is also room for the "Epicurean approach to security" within the Hobbesian system: fear of a violent death is not the only, nor

necessarily the strongest of human fears. Hobbes states that the fear of invisible spirits is potentially *at least* as strong.³⁴¹

Epicurus recognizes fears which originate in human weakness, and he recognizes fears which originate in the human power of imagination. Of these two, the latter are by far the more troublesome. Man, by his own effort, can reduce the former to tolerable levels; the latter, however, can only be remedied by the practice of philosophy.

Epicurus' division of fears seems to be compatible with Hobbes's theory: the fears of weakness include the (quite rational) fear of a violent death in the state of nature; the fears of imagination include the "feare of spirits invisible." Philosophy *can* provide a remedy for the latter, but Hobbes, like Epicurus, considers it a remedy only for a few philosophers.

A second argument involves an internal critique. Epicurean physics is in fact in tension with Epicurean ethics, and even tends to undermine it. Lucretius is fond of using war-metaphors to describe the motions of the atoms—and this is not merely poetic license. Lucretius uses the metaphor of armies fighting on a distant plain to argue that, though seemingly discrete wholes (such as armies) may *seem* to be at rest, in fact everything is in violent motion.³⁴²

All perceptible things and many that extend beyond our perception—*e.g.* the cosmos itself—are "mixed bodies" produced by inter-atomic collision. As conglomerates, they are weak and subject to disruption by every wandering atom that passes their way. It is in the nature of every mixed body to eventually perish from this disruption. As human beings, you and I are no different. Our death is inevitable, and the human soul (being a particular structure of atoms

³⁴¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan* XI, p. 75.

³⁴² See DRN II.308-332.

within the body) is just as fragile—or even more fragile—than the human body. Our cosmos, too, will one day die. The whole contains innumerable such *cosmoi*, scattered in an infinite sea of atomic flux. The ceaseless hail of atomic projectiles will annihilate them all, while others randomly emerge from chaos to take their places. In all the entirety of things, no object of human attachment can survive forever.

Given that this is the sort of world we live in, the Epicurean predilection for calm and moderation may seem somewhat baffling. Machiavelli similarly assumed that “all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall,” but this did not lead him to counsel moderation, in politics or in life.³⁴³ The possibility must be considered that, as Cicero argued, Epicurus was a better man than his opinions entitled him to be.³⁴⁴ Hobbes’s project, then, can be seen as an attempt to vindicate political justice, under very inhospitable physical circumstances.

The account of political origins

In general, Hobbes’s critics seem to have regarded his state of nature as being equivalent to the Epicurean account of human origins in DRN, book V. This is certainly the view of Tenison. In his dialogue, the “Student of Theology” presses “Mr. Hobbes” to say whether he really believes, as Epicurus did, “that Mankind arose, at first, out of the fortuitous Concretions” of matter, and whether he believes that the first men were born from “certain swelling bags or wombs upon the earth, which brake at last, and let forth Infants,” as Lucretius had claimed (and

³⁴³ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.6.4.

³⁴⁴ See, for example, Cicero, *De finibus* II.80.

as Gassendi reliably transcribes). Unfortunately for us as readers, “Mr. Hobbes” evades the question and answers with a restatement of his teaching on the state of war.³⁴⁵ Similarly, Clarendon argues that the men “who first introduced the opinion, that nature produced us in a state of war” must have been the ancient atomists, that is to say, those “philosophers who could imagine no other way for the world to be made, but by a lucky convention and conjunction of atoms.”³⁴⁶ Indeed, it may be with regard to Hobbes’s account of the state of nature that the charge of “Epicurean” is most frequently raised.³⁴⁷

Recall that, in the Epicurean account, the way of life of the first humans is *not* described as being anything resembling a “war of all against all.” Clarendon is simply wrong when he

³⁴⁵ Tenison generally lets Hobbes speak for himself in this manner. Tenison, *The Creed of Mr. Hobbes Examined*, pp. 232-233.

³⁴⁶ Clarendon, “Of Liberty,” in *Essays*, p. 145. See Harrison, “The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), p. 32.

³⁴⁷ Tenison’s “student” advances an interesting argument against the Hobbesian understanding of the “State and Law of Nature.” It is worth summarizing here. First, the “student” criticizes all abstract “Leviathans” and “Oceanas,” citing Bacon’s saying that the proper object of Natural History is “the world as God made it, and not as men have made it, for that it hath nothing of imagination.” In this view, the only “imagined principalities” properly so-called are the descriptions of the political state that take as their starting premise one or another abstract principle, conceived independently of empirical context. In opposition to these “imagined principalities,” Tenison’s student cites empirical, that is to say, historical and ethnographic evidence for a natural sense of right and wrong. Finding the existence of such a sense of right and wrong experientially confirmed, the student goes on to show that the aggressors in Hobbes’s state of nature—*i.e.* the ‘dominators’ which Kavka argues are so crucial to the formation of the *warlike* character of Hobbes’s state of nature—are in fact acting against the law of nature. And he quotes Hobbes as acknowledging that, in the state of nature, it may be possible to sin against God. But the sphere of “injustices against nature” may be very circumscribed compared to the wide-ranging list of injustices recognized by conventional law. For example, for example, Tenison claims that incest and polygamy do not appear to contradict the law of nature, and cites the Bible as evidence. See Tenison, *The Creed of Mr. Hobbes Examined*, pp. 131-ff.

insinuates that Epicurus and Hobbes are similar on this account.³⁴⁸ In fact, as Lucretius presents the Epicurean position, there is no suggestion that competition with other men comprises *any* part of primitive man's concerns. The life of primitive man is not altogether idyllic—it is lived in conditions of material scarcity (but, generally, material sufficiency³⁴⁹), however the primary danger for these first men is the danger posed by wild beasts. Hermarchus (who would have been known to Hobbes through Gassendi) amplifies this point: the first humans, he suggests, came together for the sake of mutual protection against wild beasts: “man would not have been able to survive without taking steps to defend himself against animals by living a social life.”³⁵⁰

Clarendon's mistake is an illuminating one, however. It invites us to compare the differences of the Epicurean and Hobbesian accounts of man's earliest state. One difference is of overriding importance: while Epicurus presumes that primitive man's natural needs are easily satisfied (as Lucretius notes, those needs are minimal; also, in keeping with Epicurus' analysis of the desires, “natural necessities” are said to be easily obtained); Hobbes on the other hand argues, in essence, that men are naturally insatiable, because reflective.

[B]ecause there be some, that, taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion

³⁴⁸ See Clarendon, “Of Liberty,” in *Essays*, p. 145; compare Harrison “The Ancient Atomists and the Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934), p. 32.

³⁴⁹ DRN V.925-957 (LS 22J)

³⁵⁰ Hermarchus, *Against Timocrates*. Quoted in Porphyry, *On Abstinence* I.10.1 (LS 22N1). Note that Hermarchus *does* briefly allude to the possibility that other men must be defended against: some “protection” is needed against “men intent on doing harm.”

increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist.³⁵¹

We must—Hobbes asserts against Epicurus—concern ourselves with more than just the natural necessities, because others will not be satisfied with the natural necessities. And again:

For every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself: And upon all signes of contempt, or undervaluing, [man] naturally endeavours, as far as he dares . . . to extort a greater value from his contemnners, by damage; and from others, by the example.³⁵²

In a sort of “inverted golden rule,” every man demands that “treat me as you yourself would want to be treated” become the maxim of his neighbors’ every action. Even worse, he demands “regard me every bit as highly as you would regard yourself” and he demands evidence of this.

Hobbes’s reasons for conflict in the state of nature—namely competition, diffidence, and glory—have virtually no place in the Epicurean account of primitive man. First, there is no indication that available resources are insufficient to provide for man’s natural and necessary needs—which are very meager prior to civilization.³⁵³ Second, there is no reason for diffidence and preemption in the state of nature, since, for Epicurus, it is not supposed that men will have the desire to “contemplate their own power through acts of conquest.” The Epicurean account of ambition seems to ascribe its origin rather to the misguided desire for security.³⁵⁴ Epicurus would

³⁵¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII, p. 88.

³⁵² Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII, p. 84.

³⁵³ See also, in this context, DRN V.1412-ff. for Lucretius’ description of the post-civilizational growth of human needs and desires.

³⁵⁴ KD 7, DL X.141 (LS 22C1). Compare DRN V.1117-1135 (LS22L3-4).

deny that “contemplating one’s own power” is naturally pleasant; it is, rather, an acquired taste. And for this reason, Epicurus would deny that the desire for glory obtains in the state of nature.

Hobbes, so to speak, eternalizes the “now” of desire; in contrast to Epicurus, who finds the complete satisfaction of desire in “eternality” as such, and in contrast to the resolutely unreflective hedonist, like Aristippus, who feels no compunction to tie together a string of passing moments, each with their passing desire.

The account of political ends

Some sense of the transformation Hobbes has effected in political thought can be obtained by revisiting earlier views. Augustine, building on Cicero, had claimed that the political community, or *res publica*, was an association of men united by a common love. Thus, while Cicero’s spokesman Scipio had declared:

[A] commonwealth is the concern of a people, [*est . . . res publica res populi*] but a people is not any group of men assembled in any way, but an assemblage of some size associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest.³⁵⁵

Augustine took and transformed this “agreement on law and community of interest” into a far reaching “agreement on the objects of love.”

[J]ustice is found where God, the one supreme God, rules an obedient City according to his grace . . . where this justice does not exist, there is certainly no ‘association of men united by a common sense of right and by a community of interest’. Therefore there is no commonwealth; for where there is no ‘people’, there is no ‘weal of the people’ [. . .] If, on the other hand, another definition than this is found for a ‘people’, for example, if one should say, ‘A people is the association of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love’, then it follows that to observe the character of a particular people, we must examine the objects of its love.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Cicero, *De re publica* I.39a, p.18.

³⁵⁶ Augustine, *City of God* XIX.23-24.

What Hobbes does, then, is to decisively transform political philosophy by taking the traditional notion of the best regime and detaching it from—one is tempted to say, from *any* notion of a people. Certainly, from Augustine’s notion of a people as an “association of rational beings united by agreement on the objects of their love.” To the contrary, Hobbes introduces (as the working assumption of all modern politics) society-wide *disagreement* regarding the proper objects of communal love.

Nor does Hobbes return to Cicero’s definition of a people as “an assemblage of some size associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest.” It is true, Hobbes keeps a “community of interest” of a sort, but it is not the classical community of interest, but rather a sort of “communal denial of interest,” or communal cession of natural right. And Hobbes certainly does not wish to assume an agreement on law. One is tempted to say that the Hobbesian definition of *logos* is “the human faculty which divides people.”

Return to Hobbes’s physics

Stewart Duncan writes, regarding Hobbes’s physics:

Overall then, something of a puzzle remains. Hobbes clearly was a materialist about the natural world, but the explicit arguments he offers for the view seem rather weak. Perhaps he just had a good deal of confidence in the ability of the rapidly developing science of his time to proceed towards a full material explanation of the mind. Just as his contemporary William Harvey, of whom he thought very highly, had made such progress in explaining biological matters, so too (Hobbes might have thought) might we expect further scientists to succeed in explaining mental matters.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁷ Stewart Duncan, “Thomas Hobbes,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition).

This is where Hobbes's scientific materialism verges on the rhetorical—he hopes to persuade with the strength of his confidence that materialism will in due course be vindicated. In other words, Hobbes's “Napoleonic strategy” belies his own awareness of the inadequacy of current arguments for materialism. Nevertheless, Hobbes hopes to prevail with a combination of the best current arguments and his own rhetorical conviction. And to what end? To the end of excluding “powers spirituall” from the temporal politics of his time—and from the temporal politics of all subsequent times.

We might summarize the preceding by saying that Hobbes pioneered the mixture of scientific materialism, rhetorical self-confidence, and political secularism that would soon come to be known under the title of “radical enlightenment.” If Hobbes did not invent this mixture, he at the very least gives it its first classical formulation.

Blaise Pascal offered perhaps the deepest reflection on man's new “freedom” when he wrote, not without evident anguish, that the new “nature” is nothing more than “an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.” The indifferent and purposeless universe described (or *presumed*) by modern natural science appears to have the political and moral consequence of putting every individual at the absolute center. Resort to such a notion of nature debunks the claims of *any* received order. The Hobbesian restoration of order may be said to begin from the premise, “every individual his own center.”

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