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Epistemology as a Foundation for Epicurean Thought

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EPISTEMOLOGY AS A FOUNDATION FOR EPICUREAN THOUGHT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD SCHOOL	5
CHAPTER TWO: PROBLEMS IN EPICUREAN EPISTEMOLOGY	18
CHAPTER THREE: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION.....	30
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY	40
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	43

ABSTRACT

Epicurean philosophy is perhaps best known for its ethical system, which places an emphasis on the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, and for its removal of the gods from the physical world. While many approaches have been made to interpret Epicureanism through its ethics, I believe that the whole of the Epicurean system of philosophy can be comprehended by a thorough understanding of its epistemology. Using Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, I hope to show that Epicurean thought is based not on ethics but rather on the epistemological claim that the senses cannot be rebutted. In doing so, I will also resolve some of the inherent contradictions that arise from the Epicureans' empirical understanding of the world, such as how the senses can be deceived, and how the world can be comprised of imperceptible atoms.

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I propose to examine Epicureanism not as a primarily ethical philosophy, but rather as a philosophy built upon a unique epistemological system. I will base my examination on Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*) for two immediate reasons. First and foremost, it is one of the more completely extant Epicurean works, and second epistemology plays a predominant role in the philosophical discourse of the poem. While this does mean that I will be looking at Lucretius' interpretation of Epicureanism, the loyalty he expresses towards Epicurus suggests that Lucretius attempts to remain true to the school's founder, while presenting Epicureanism in a manner which is appealing to his contemporary Romans. Scholarship has not ignored Epicurean epistemology, but the topic has often been overlooked in favor of Epicurean ethics and their unique belief in the gods' irrelevance to the physical world. I would like to propose, however, that it is Epicurean epistemology which ultimately distinguishes the school from other ancient philosophical trends, especially their claim that the senses cannot be rebutted. Furthermore, a thorough understanding of Epicurean epistemology also sheds new light on some of the crucial and yet complex Epicurean concepts.

Epicureanism could, I argue, be described as a closed system of philosophy, with its ethics, physics, and metaphysics all deriving from one another. Consequently, finding a place to begin a study of the philosophical school can prove challenging, since it is all but impossible to discuss one aspect of the school without referring to another. But of all the places to start, epistemology seems the most logical. Just as forms and causes are often considered the basis for Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, so is empiricism to the Epicureans. Understanding how the Epicureans believe one gains knowledge must by necessity help explain why they believe they have the knowledge they claim to have. How does one know that pleasure ought to be the end of human actions? Or that the gods do not interfere with the physical world? Even more important, how does one know one has free will? The Epicureans claim to know the answer to these questions, and I shall demonstrate that they either base these claims on, or support them with, their empirical observation.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore why there is a need to approach Epicurean philosophy in a different way than it has been so far. Although many scholars, including Long and Sedley, stress the importance of recognizing all aspects of Epicureanism, not just ethics,

there is a need to find a foundation through which the school can be understood. The emphasis on Epicurean ethics goes back to the time of its practitioners. The most common argument against Epicureanism was on the basis of its ethics, which challenged the general philosophy of its day, especially in Lucretius' Rome, of encouraging political involvement and civic virtue. Calling for a separation from politics, a hedonistic lifestyle, and the belief that gods do not interfere in mortal lives, Epicureanism went against the grain. Consequently, it is no surprise that so much importance is given to ethics. Yet, I shall argue, Epicurean ethics are simply the outward manifestation of a much more complicated philosophy.

Other aspects of Epicurean philosophy have also been put forth as a kind of foundation for the school, or at least for Epicureanism as Lucretius understood it. In "Lucretius and Politics", Fowler proposes a political reading of *De Rerum Natura*. He argues that the political language used to describe physics points to the importance of the political message of *DRN*¹. While appreciating the ingenuity of this interpretation, I intend to show that this idea could also be revised. Lucretius uses political language because that is the language his readers (and specifically, the dedicatee of the book, Memmius, himself a politician) understand best. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate below, Lucretius' use of such language emphasizes not politics, but physics.

In "Philosophy, Politics, and Politicians at Rome", Griffin suggests that one of the main purposes of Hellenistic philosophy, at least in Rome, is to give followers the ethical guidance that religion lacks². Likewise, the majority of ancient opponents of Epicureanism oppose it on ethical grounds. Ethical practices, however, are merely the most visible part of a philosophical system to outsiders. To base one's understanding of a philosophy on its ethics is to risk missing its deeper beliefs. While to a non-practitioner, Epicureanism would have appeared to be nothing more than a hedonistic philosophy, the disciples of Epicurus were in fact concerned with much more.

Lucretius himself offers what is, perhaps, the best argument that ethics are not as central to Epicurean philosophy as previously thought. Immediately after his invocation and dedication, he writes

nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque

¹ Fowler, 1989.

² Griffin, 1989.

*disserere incipiam, et rerum primordia pandam,
unde omnis natura creet res (I.54-57)*

“I will set out to discourse to you on the ultimate realities of heaven and the gods. I will reveal those *atoms* from which nature creates all things.³”

This claim suggests *DRN* is concerned primarily with physics, not ethics. While the topic of “the ultimate realities of heaven and the gods” belongs to metaphysics, the Epicurean dismissal of the common view of gods in place of atoms is ultimately a physical claim. It is only after the physics of the atoms (*primordia res*) is established that ethics can be considered. In fact, it is not until book three that Lucretius begins an in-depth discussion of ethics. Ethics may very well be the end of Epicurean philosophy, but epistemology is the beginning.

Once I have shown the importance of a new reading of Epicurean philosophy, the second chapter of this examination will outline the main tenets of Epicurean epistemology. There are at least two inherently problematic issues with the Epicurean empirical system. The first problem is its relationship to their physics. The Epicureans posit the existence of atoms before the invention of microscopes, yet they believe that all knowledge comes through the senses. Without any way to provide empirical evidence for the existence of atoms, how could they make this claim? The answer to this lies in how the Epicureans believe the senses work, and their ability to infer information based upon experience.

The second problem of Epicurean epistemology is found in book four of *DRN*, where Lucretius writes that the senses cannot be deceived. Following his arguments, the reader seems to be required to accept that a square tower, which appears round from a distance, is truly round (IV.355). In such instances, Lucretius argues it is the mind, not the senses, that is being deceived. But if the mind is being deceived, we must ask how we can use reason, as Lucretius suggests, to determine what one is truly sensing and what is a deception (IV.465). I believe that this is not in fact a contradiction, and that the answer to this can be found by separating an object from the sense impression of that object, a solution proposed in other empirical philosophies. The sense impression of the tower is round, even if it itself is not; avoiding deception is done by training the brain to recognize such discrepancies.

This revised understanding of Epicureanism will be the focus of my third chapter, where I will essentially interpret the different aspects of Epicurean philosophy through its

³ All *DRN* translations are from Latham, 2005, unless otherwise noted.

epistemology. Perhaps the most complex aspect of Epicureanism is its atomic theory. Accordingly, Lucretius spends much of the first two books of *DRN* attempting to explain atoms and their properties. Comprehending why and how the Epicureans believe they know things will make it easier to grasp the more complicated arguments they make. On the other hand, a purely ethical interpretation of Epicurean philosophy would shed very little light on the complexities of the atomic theory. Likewise, trying to develop the rest of Epicurean philosophy starting with atomic theory would be nearly impossible. Epistemology, however, because it is the basis for knowledge itself, offers the ideal vantage point through which to understand the rest of Epicurean philosophy. In fact, even though Lucretius begins *DRN* with a discussion of physics, he relies on empirical observations to support his claims.

Not only will this thesis propose a new approach to Epicurean philosophy, but in doing so it will offer a new perspective on some of the key issues identified in the scholarship, such as problems with the senses and the political role of Epicureanism. My analysis will, I hope, allow for a more comprehensive view of Epicureanism. It is through understanding Epicurean epistemology that many of the problems in Epicureanism, such as the existence of atoms, can be solved. Diogenes, in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, tells us that Epicurus' critics accused him of borrowing atomic theory from Democritus and hedonism from Aristippus. Perhaps it is time for Epicureanism to have something it can call its own. For Plato had his Forms, Aristotle his causes. Why not empiricism for the Epicureans?

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD SCHOOL

Before arguing for a new perspective on Epicureanism, it is first necessary to look at the development of Epicurean thought. In this chapter, I will begin by looking at how the Epicureans viewed themselves, then explore how they were viewed by their contemporaries and finally by present scholarship. I will show that while there have been many different approaches to Epicureanism, there is still room for expanding our understanding of the school through a new approach which both encompasses the school as a whole and distinguishes it from other philosophical schools. While there have been such all encompassing studies of Epicurean philosophy (such as in Long and Sedley's *The Hellenistic Philosophers*) my approach is an attempt to find the epistemological basis for their system of philosophy, enabling us to better understand what its practitioners believed.

Any investigation of Epicureanism, no matter what the approach, immediately encounters the same initial problem--the lack of surviving texts by Epicurus himself. On account of this unfortunate fact, we are left to rely on fragments of his texts embedded in Diogenes' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, and texts by Epicurus' followers, the foremost of which is Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura (DRN)*. Diogenes is not only a source for Epicurus' teachings, but also for information on how his teachings were initially received. He writes that Epicurus' early critics accused him of "put[ting] forward as his own the doctrines of Democritus about atoms and of Aristippus about pleasure"(X.533)⁴. If we are attempting to discover what makes Epicureanism unique from other philosophies, this criticism of the school is an excellent starting point. While it is undeniable that Epicurus borrowed heavily from the philosophies of Democritus and Aristippus, finding the points where he differed from his predecessors will help us to understand the way Epicureans identified themselves. These points of differences will also allow us to develop further a more concise picture of what Epicureanism is and is not, leading to uncovering

⁴ All Diogenes translations are from Hicks, 1925.

the underlying principles of the school. One of the most important principles this exploration will demonstrate is the often descriptive, as opposed to prescriptive, nature of Epicureanism. The Epicureans were not arguing about why the world was the way it was, or saying how one ought to behave; rather they were making observations about the world and drawing conclusions from them.

Diogenes tells us that Democritus believed the universe to be made up of small indivisible particles he called atoms and the void through which these atoms moved (X.453). Epicurean physics is also based upon the principle of atoms and void. In fact, Lucretius spends much of *DRN* explaining and proving this principle. Epicurus' atomic theory, however, differed from Democritus' in several ways. The first, and for this discussion, most important way they differ is the so-called "swerve" genuinely invented by Epicurus. The importance of the concept of the swerve is due, as we shall see, to several key physical and ethical principles, such as free will. Lucretius writes

*Illud in his quoque te rebus cognoscere avemus,
corpora cum deorsum rectum per inane feruntur
ponderibus propriis, incerto temper ferme
incertisque locis spatio depellere paulum,
tantum quod momem mutatum dicere possis.
quod nisi declinare solerent, omnia deorsum,
imbris uti guttae, caderent per inane profundum,
nec foret offensus natus nec plaga creata
principiis: ita nil umquam natura creasset. (II.217-24)*

"When the atoms are travelling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places they swerve ever so little from their course, just so much that you can call it a change in direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like raindrops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom upon atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything."

There is no actual explanation of what causes the atoms to *declinare*, to change direction from a straight line or "swerve". This lack of explanation points to the descriptive nature of Epicurean philosophy. What is important is not why the swerve occurs, but that it does, and evidence for it

can be found from observations of the physical world. This random deviation of the atoms is essential to Epicurean philosophy. From it comes the physical basis of the world. If atoms did not swerve, they would all fall forever in a straight line, never touching one other. But because of the swerve, they are able to crash into one another and stack up, thus creating the physical objects of the universe. Another important result of this swerve is the existence of free-will, which, as shall be discussed in chapter three, is a key component of Epicurean ethics. Because the swerve is random, there can be no pre-determined fate for anyone or anything.

Because of the random swerve of the atoms, Lucretius is able to say confidently that
*Nam certe neque consilio primordia rerum
ordine se suo quaeque sagaci mente locarunt
nec quos quaeque darent motus pepigere profecto,* (I.1021-23)

“Certainly the atoms did not post themselves purposefully in due order by an act of intelligence, not did they stipulate what movements each should perform,”

This idea is further developed in book four. If everything is random, then

*nil ideo quoniam natumst in corpore ut uti
possemus, sed quod natumst id procreat usum.* (IV.834-5).

“nothing in our bodies was born in order that we might be able to use it, but whatever thing is born creates its own use.”

In turn, this line of reasoning propels Lucretius to propose an idea which sounds almost like the modern theory of evolution:

*Multaque tum interiisse animantum saecla necessest
nex potuisse propagando proclere prolem.
nam quaecumque vides vesci vitalibus auris,
aut dolus aut virtus aut denique mobilitas est
ex ineunte aevo genus id tutata reservans;* (V.855-59)

“In those days [early days of the earth], again, many species must have died out altogether and failed to forge the chain of offspring. Every species that you now see drawing the breath of life has been protected and preserved from the beginning of the world either by cunning or courage or by speed;”

What is noteworthy about this claim is not just how remarkably accurate Lucretius’ understanding of the world is, but the way in which this understanding develops from

observation. With the addition of the swerve to Democritus' atomic theory, the Epicureans are able to explain the natural phenomena they observe such as the randomness of creation and acts of free will. Epicurus re-shaped Democritus' atomic theory to fit the observations he had made. The swerve is not an external principle Epicurus is imposing upon Democritus' theory, but rather an addition to it which is necessary to explain observable phenomena. This is an excellent example of the descriptive attitude which is found throughout Epicurean philosophy. Another way in which the Epicurean atomic theory differs from Democritus' is that they argue that sensible qualities are themselves real. This claim greatly affects the Epicurean understanding of perception, which will be discussed further in chapter two.

In examining the ways Epicurus differs from his predecessors, it is necessary to explore not just physics, but also ethics. Just as his critics claim he took his atomic theory from Democritus, it is likewise argued that Epicurus' hedonistic ethical system is derived from Aristippus. Aristippus is the founder of a hedonistic school of philosophy called the Cyrenaics, and just like with Epicurus, we have very few original texts from him. The Cyrenaics believe that pleasure, not happiness, is the end of all actions, and that present pleasure is more important than any future pleasure. To this end, they also believe that it is not worth accepting present pain for a greater, future pleasure⁵. This, we shall see, is different from the Epicurean view, which advises accepting temporary pain, or abstaining from a present pleasure, if it will lead to greater pleasure in the future.

If Diogenes is to be believed, Aristippus himself has a reputation for seeking pleasure even at the expense of his own dignity (Diogenes II.66-81). Epicurus' understanding of pleasure as an end is considerably more moderate. Even while writing that pleasure is the "alpha and omega of a blessed life" Epicurus also acknowledges that "we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but oftentimes pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them" (X.655). In other words, it is not worth getting drunk if you will have a hangover in the morning. While avoiding pleasure that results in pain is a simple enough concept, Epicurus takes it a step further and says that often "we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains [...] bring us [...] a greater pleasure" (X.655). A modern day example might be suffering the pain of running a marathon to experience the pleasure of having completed it. Even though Epicurus places pleasure as the end goal, his understanding of what pleasure is and how one

⁵ O'Keefe, 2002 p. 395.

achieves it is very different from Aristippus'. Instead of seeking out pleasure wherever and whenever it can be encountered, Epicurus calls for calculated restraint, weighing the consequences of each decision. Whereas the Cyrenaics focus on immediate pleasure, the Epicureans look to achieve a greater amount of pleasure than pain over the course of a lifetime. Indeed, many of the actions that the Epicureans' rival school, the Stoics, accused them of, such as excessive sex and drinking, are really accusations against the Cyrenaics.

The question must be asked as to why there is a difference between Epicurean hedonism and that of Aristippus. Answering this question will help us to better understand Epicurean ethics and the role they believe philosophy played in life. It will also help us to see the connection between Epicurean ethics and physics. Hedonism seems truly to be the foundation of Aristippus' school of philosophy. Indeed, Tsouna-McKirahan begins her book *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School* with a discussion of the incompleteness of the epistemology of the school, which she attributes to their focus on pleasure⁶. On the other hand, there are many elements of Epicurean philosophy that have at least as much, if not more, importance than hedonism. Much of book four of *DRN* is concerned with pleasure, but what I find most significant is the way in which the discussion is presented. Lucretius does not so much give a prescription for seeking pleasure, but rather offers examples of men behaving foolishly in regards to bodily pleasure and offering the consequences they suffer as an example for his readers. The Epicurean view on pleasure was not a philosophy that was solely developed from Aristippus, but from observations of how people behave. Similarly, in book two, Lucretius writes

*[...] nonne videre
nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui
corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mensque fruatur
iucundo sensu cura semota metuque? (II.16-19)*

“Do you not see that nature is barking for two things only, a body free from pain, a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations?”

It is a part of man's very *natura* to seek pleasure. There is no conscious decision on the part of the individual to seek pleasure and release from fear; it is our natural instinct to do so. The hedonism of the Epicureans is not about how humans ought to behave but an observation of *how* they already behave. Mankind, says the Epicurean, naturally seeks pleasure. It is philosophy's

⁶ Tsouna-McKirahan, 1998 p. 2.

job to show them how to seek it properly so as to avoid pain. Epicurean ethics then, is more naturalistic than that of other schools. While it does offer direction on how to behave, it takes into account human nature and natural desire.

Epicurean hedonism is based on Epicurean physics. The way that the world works dictates, to some degree, human behavior. Man's *natura* seeks pleasure and avoids pain. But humans are not without control over their actions. The same atoms which drive them to seek pleasure also, through the randomness of the swerve, allow them to control how they seek it. Epicureanism is not a deterministic philosophy that leaves men at the mercy of their instincts. At the same time, however, it is impossible to oppose one's *natura*. Based on observations of the way the world works, Epicurean ethics attempts to give its followers a life which is in accordance with their *natura* and will also result in overall happiness or well-being.

In addition to Diogenes' association of Epicureanism with the Atomists and the Cyrenaics, the Stoics were their other common philosophical rivals. As with most Hellenistic philosophies, the end of the Stoic lifestyle was happiness. For the Epicureans, happiness is achieved by pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, a doctrine the Stoics furiously argue against. Happiness for the Stoics, on the other hand, was achieved through living a moral lifestyle⁷. A moral life was, of course, a life lived in accordance with the Stoic doctrine. A major component of Stoic ethics is being happy no matter what one's circumstances are, which suggests going against one's natural impulse to be unhappy in unhappy circumstances and to seek to exchange them for more pleasurable ones. In his *Letters*, the Stoic philosopher Seneca writes, *nisi sapienti sua non placent; omnis stultitia laborat fastidio sui* (IX, 22) [Only the wise man is content with what is his. All foolishness suffers the burden of dissatisfaction with itself]⁸. The *sapiens*, "wise man", the role model for the Stoics, is the man who willingly accepts his life as it is. Neither poverty, sickness, wealth, nor good health can keep a man from living morally. And if nothing can keep him from living morally, then nothing can keep him from living happily. Another important component of Stoicism is the idea of moderation in everything. Concerning wealth, Seneca says *Quis sit divitiarum modus, quaeris? Primus habere quod necesse est, proximus quod sat est.* (II.6) [You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth? First, having what is

⁷ Long and Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1997 p. 398.

⁸ All Seneca translations are from Campbell, 2004.

essential, and second, having what is enough]. Even too strong a desire to seek knowledge is a form of intemperance (LXXXVIII, 37).

This idea of moderation being a key to happiness is also evident in Epicurean ethics, as we have seen. The balancing of pleasure and pain which is a part of Epicurean philosophy appears, in practice, very similar to the moderation put forward by the Stoics. Indeed, while the Stoics and Epicureans differ in many areas of their philosophies, most notably in their physics, they are in many ways more similar than different. Both offer their followers a life free from the fear of death and a life of contentment; in short, both these philosophies promise to give man a happy life. And the means by which this life is achieved are also similar. Logical reasoning, avoiding excessive passion, life in moderation: these are the keys to the happy lifestyle of both the Stoics and Epicureans. Yet this is not enough to keep followers of both schools from disagreeing with one another.

In the first two books of *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, Cicero presents an imaginary dialogue between a Stoic (Cicero's mouthpiece, as it were) and an Epicurean. In it, he explains the problems he has with Epicurean philosophy, first with its atomic theory, and then with its hedonism. Interestingly enough, Cicero's main complaints with these two aspects of Epicureanism are exactly at the point where they differ from the predecessors. He writes of Epicurus' atomic theory, *Democritea dicit, perpauca mutans, sed ita ut ea quae corrigere vult mihi quidem depravare videatur* (I.VI) [His Doctrines are those of Democritus, with very few modifications. And as for the latter, where he attempts to improve upon his original, in my opinion he only succeeds in making things worse].⁹ In other words, Cicero takes issue with the very components of Epicurus' atomic theory which sets it apart from that of Democritus, namely the swerve. Likewise, after describing Epicurean ethics, Cicero concludes, *Quod quamquam Aristippi est a Cyrenaicisque melius liberiusque defenditur* (I. VII). [This is the doctrine of Aristippus, and it is upheld more cogently and more frankly by the Cyrenaics]. Here, Cicero addresses the same criticism brought up in Diogenes--that Epicureanism is just a combination of two earlier philosophies. Cicero, however, acknowledges that Epicurus' doctrine is different from Aristippus', but claims Aristippus' doctrine is, if not better, at least better upheld than Epicurus'. In short, as Cicero's Epicurean opponent goes on to point out, Cicero opposes precisely those things which are unique to Epicureanism itself and not to its predecessors. Such

⁹ All Cicero translations from Hackman, 1967.

things, as we have seen, are those characteristics of Epicurean philosophy which Epicurus and his followers derive from their observations of nature, such as the swerve and man's instinct to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

But this is only the introduction to the dialogue itself. When it comes time to decide what point of Epicureanism is to be debated, the interlocutors choose to *an de una voluptate quaeri, de qua omne certamine est* [discuss the single topic of pleasure, which is the one main subject of dispute] and *unum rem explicabo eamque maximam* (I.VIII) [I [the Epicurean] will expound a single topic, and that the most important]. Though this claim is made by the Epicurean in the dialogue, it is ultimately an idea presented by Cicero. This is an instance of how the importance of an aspect of Epicureanism is determined by a critic of it. For the Stoics, who are ultimately concerned with how one ought to live his life, the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure is, on the surface, especially problematic. The Stoics believe that man should strive to be in harmony with the nature of his condition; the Epicureans believe man is driven by a desire for pleasure and a fear of pain¹⁰. Indeed, regarding the Epicurean doctrine, Cicero writes *Ad maiora enim quaedam nos natura genuit et conformavit, ut mihi quidem videtur* (I.VII) [Nature, in my opinion at all events, has created and endowed us for higher ends [than seeking pleasure and avoiding pain]]. The Stoics, in choosing to focus on the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure, bring ethics, as opposed to some other aspect of Epicureanism, to the forefront of the Stoic/Epicurean debate.

The emphasis on Epicurean ethics is also evident in Seneca and especially in his *Letters*. Here, however, Seneca comes across not as hostile to the Epicureans, but as interested in finding those pieces of their philosophy that he deems worthwhile. Seneca quotes Epicurus in many of his letters, nearly always to draw attention to something true in the text, and nearly always in the area of ethics. This is not to say that Seneca fully approves of Epicurean ethics, but rather only with the aspects of it which align with Stoic views. Whereas Cicero sees ethics as a jumping off point for disagreement, Seneca sees it as a point of reconciliation. But both these authors choose to focus on ethics not because Epicureans did, but because it was the focus of their own philosophy.

Perhaps because we have more Stoic than Epicurean texts, the attention the Stoics draw to Epicurean ethics continues to influence modern scholarship. In *Epicurus to Epictetus*, Long writes, "Perhaps ethics is unavoidably one-sided, and we just have to decide whether the

¹⁰ Long and Sedley, 1997, p. 350.

Epicurean or the Stoic is the one for us. It is certainly striking that the innovative Hellenistic philosophers did not plump for some comfortable middle ground, and we should infer from this that their mutual exclusiveness was part of their appeal”¹¹. Here Long questions why an ethical “middle ground” was never sought by the Epicureans and Stoics, and it is a noteworthy question. After all, as has already been discussed, the different ethical systems were extremely similar in practice. One answer may be that in an attempt to keep their philosophies separate, Hellenistic philosophers focused on the differences which were most visible to outsiders. When the Stoics looked at Epicureanism in practice, it was the ethics they saw, and vice-versa. Without joining, or at any rate deliberately studying a philosophical school, it is unlikely one could have more than a vague idea of what each school’s views on physics and metaphysics are. But ethics are practical. The way one behaves is visible to anyone with a mind to observe. Consequently, pointing out the differences between Stoic and Epicurean ethics would be more effective at demonstrating the division between the two schools than trying to distinguish between their physics or metaphysics (even if that is where the schools truly differ the most). Additionally, the Epicureans may not have tried to find an ethical middle ground because they are not overly concerned about it; since Epicurean ethics is primarily based on observations of human nature, there is no need for them to be drawn into an ethical debate with the Stoics.

The high visibility of ethics in practice may help explain why ancient sources, especially the Stoics, focus so much on it, leading much of modern scholarship also to consider Hellenistic philosophy primarily through its ethics. One example of ethics brought to the forefront, not because of its importance to followers of a philosophical school, but because of what it offered to non-followers, is found in Griffin’s paper, “Philosophy, Politics, and Politicians at Rome”. In it, she argues that one of the main purposes of philosophy in Rome was to fill in the gaps left by religion. Griffin writes, “Philosophy supplied ethical preconceptions on which moral choices were often based even by those who neither knew nor cared much about the philosophical sects”¹². Even without joining a philosophical school, Romans could lean upon the ethics of the school of their choice for the moral guidance they did not receive from religion. While this claim remains controversial, the idea behind it still suggests a reason for the focus on ethics in scholarship.

¹¹ Long, 2006. p. 6.

¹² Griffin, 1989 p. 37.

If Griffin's theory is correct, then this is just one more reason that Epicurean ethics may have received undue emphasis. Indeed, in *De Finibus*, Cicero suggests that Epicureanism may be popular because Epicurus teaches that life is naturally pleasurable (I.VII). So it may be that the situation was such that there was a large population choosing to follow the comparatively relaxed ethics of the Epicureans over the stricter Stoic doctrine. Whatever the situation, it still remains that it is Stoics, and perhaps other non-Epicureans, who push ethics into the limelight. After all, the concept of *voluptas*, pleasure, and *otium*, leisure, are problematic for the Romans, who believe in a strong work ethic.

If ethics is the lens through which outsiders view Hellenistic philosophy, then the question remains as to how its followers themselves view it. Long and Sedley argue, and I think convincingly, that Hellenistic philosophy is more than just an academic pursuit, but a way of life.¹³ The school that one chooses to align oneself with will determine not just what one believes, but how one lives. Consequently, if one takes one's alliance to any philosophical school seriously, you will end up putting its ethics into practice. This may be a transition in how Hellenistic, and therefore Epicurean, philosophy is understood. Ethics is not the way through which Epicurean philosophy is to be approached, but rather what is at the end of philosophical inquiry. Long writes "their [the Stoics' and Epicureans'] project is to make individual happiness a universally accessible objective, something whose foundation can be fully ascertained and shown to depend on two fundamental conditions—correct understanding of the world and human nature, and excellence of character"¹⁴. This, I think, is correct. The two schools are both trying to make happiness accessible to their followers. This does not mean, however, that this is the way initially to approach Epicureanism. The visible result of Epicureanism, a hedonistic lifestyle, is just that: a result. The Stoics and the Epicureans both have the same goal. It is in their means of achieving that goal where their philosophies differ. Consequently, when looking to understand what it was that makes Epicureanism unique amongst its contemporary philosophical schools, it is necessary not to look at the conclusions drawn by the school, but its methods of getting there.

Besides ethics generally, the Epicurean view of politics specifically has garnered much attention in modern scholarship. In a society where political involvement is the mark of a good citizen, the Epicureans were unique in encouraging their followers to abstain from political

¹³ Long and Sedley, 1997, p. 2.

¹⁴ Long, 2006, p. 6.

affairs. And yet, in Rome at any rate, Epicureans did get involved in politics. Griffin even refers to the number of Epicureans involved in public life as “striking”¹⁵. In a similar vein, Fowler, as I discussed in the Introduction, argues for a primarily political reading of *DRN*. He supports this by pointing to the political language used throughout the poem, especially in Lucretius’ explanations of physics¹⁶. However, as I shall show later, this use of political language actually emphasizes the importance of physics, and not politics.

In “Not all Politicians are Sisyphus: what Roman Epicureans were Taught about Politics”, Fish suggests that one can participate in politics but “still enjoy many of the benefits of Epicureanism”¹⁷. Griffin proposes a similar idea, that people can pick and choose certain aspects of Epicureanism without following its doctrines completely. If Hellenistic philosophy, as discussed above, is truly meant to be a way of living, then political Epicureanism is a kind of Epicureanism-lite. One gets to enjoy some of the more practical and enjoyable aspects of Epicureanism—not fearing death, seeking pleasure, avoiding pain—without being overly concerned about the more restrictive requirements of belonging to the school. This may be the way Romans adapt Epicureanism to fit their culture, but it still does not meet the standards of true Epicureanism. In “Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World”, Sedley argues that a practitioner of a Hellenistic philosophy is not just committed to a school, but specifically to the founder of that school¹⁸. This, then, takes school loyalty a step further than we have already seen. It is not enough to just uphold the doctrines of the school one belongs to; one must also try to emulate the actions of its founder. However later followers might interpret a founder’s writings, all authority must ultimately be derived from those writings themselves. Epicurus called his followers to avoid politics, so anyone truly practicing Epicureanism must actually avoid politics. Consequently, to read an Epicurean text as political is tantamount to declaring it non-Epicurean, or at least to classify it as an example of the pick-and-choose version of Epicureanism used by non-practitioners.

Returning to Fowler’s claim concerning Lucretius’ usage of political language, it is important to consider what Lucretius himself claimed the purpose of his non-Epicurean metaphors are. First, it should be noted that the format of *DRN* is, as a whole, un-Epicurean. The

¹⁵ Griffin, 1989, p. 13.

¹⁶ Fowler, 1989, pp. 145-6.

¹⁷ Fish, 2011, p. 76.

¹⁸ Sedley, 1989, p. 97.

opening proem is an ode to Venus, which should have little place in a text dealing with a philosophy which argues that the gods are uninvolved in worldly activity. There is no need for an actual “Venus” in the Epicurean world, and Lucretius will later explain that Venus is just a stand-in for the natural creative impulse. Yet the Venus of his introduction is clearly the mythological Venus; the reader is given a description of her just after her affair with Mars. Such use of poetry and metaphor to express Epicureanism is contradictory to the example set by Epicurus. Diogenes says “the terms he [Epicurus] used for things were the ordinary terms” and “that in the work *On Rhetoric* he makes clearness the sole requisite” (X.534). Lucretius, on the other hand, writes in the style of an epic poet, with language that is anything but direct. Lucretius states his reason for writing an epic poem at the beginning of book four.

*[...] volui tibi suaviloquenti
carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram
et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle,
si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere
versibus in nostris poseem, dum percipis omnem
naturam rerum ac persentis utilitatem. (IV.20-5)*

“I have chosen to set forth my doctrine to you in sweet-speaking Pierian song, and as it were to touch it with the Muses’ delicious honey, if by chance in such a way I might engage your mind in my verses, while you are learning to understand the whole nature of things and perceive its utility.¹⁹”

He compares his poetry with honey on the rim of a cup of bitter medicine to entice a child to take it, implying that while Epicureanism may be a bitter draught, it is one that is worth taking (I.933). The use of the proem, mythological metaphors, and political language are all ways of attracting the reader to the text. Under the attractive mask of an epic poem, the reader will find knowledge about the universe he may have tried to avoid otherwise.

While such metaphorical language is different from that of Epicurus, it is still in line with his own methods. Long writes, “Epicurus, however, had no scruples about using the tactics of the advertising man in attracting the attention of his audience. He was confident that reason and experience would consolidate the truths he believed himself to be providing, once a disciple was

¹⁹ Translation from Rouse, 2006 for clarity.

willing to join him in examining the foundations of happiness and unhappiness”²⁰. Just as Epicurus uses the appeal of a life directed towards pleasure to draw followers, Lucretius uses the language and images that appealed to people of his time. In the politically charged atmosphere of Hellenistic Rome, Lucretius uses political language to draw attention to the importance of the subjects he discussed. Consequently, when he uses such language to discuss physics, it is because of the importance of physics in Epicurean philosophy, not because he was trying to add a political element to Epicurean philosophy.

There are many different ways to approach Epicurean philosophy, but some of them are merely the honey on the rim of the cup. If we want to understand what made Epicureanism unique, then we have to focus on where it most differs from its preceding and contemporary philosophical schools. In “Meaning and Methodology in Hellenistic Philosophy”, De Lacy writes that “The Epicureans from Epicurus their founder had always been the radical empiricists of Greek philosophy, in contrast with the predominant rationalism and idealism of the Stoic schools”²¹. This, I believe, is correct, but it can also be taken in a new direction. We have already seen that an ethical approach to Epicureanism, while possible, is ineffective at separating the school from other Hellenistic philosophies. On the other hand, not only does a political approach not embrace the rest of the school, but is itself inherently un-Epicurean. Physics, the first subject discussed at length in Lucretius, offers perhaps the strongest argument as an all-encompassing approach to Epicureanism. However, without understanding how the Epicureans developed their physics, we are left with the criticism of Diogenes. Perhaps the most logical way to explore Epicurean philosophy would be to first look at how the Epicureans came to their conclusions, that is, to look at their epistemology.

It is the empirical nature of Epicurean epistemology which most sets it apart from other schools. The changes that Epicurus makes to the physics of Democritus and the hedonism of Aristippus are based on his observations of how the world works. Epicurean empiricism is also what ultimately leads to its differences from other schools, such as the Stoics. Because of its empirical approach to understanding, Epicureanism is, uniquely, a primarily descriptive, as opposed to prescriptive, philosophy. But Epicurean epistemology does more than just separate the school from its predecessors and contemporaries. By being the very basis from which the

²⁰ Long, 2006, p. 178.

²¹ De Lacy, 1938, p. 393.

Epicureans derive what they consider their knowledge of the world, epistemology offers a lens through which the whole of Epicureanism can be better understood. There are, however, several inherent problems with Epicurean empiricism, which shall be discussed in the next chapter, such as the deceptive nature of the senses. Hopefully, through addressing these issues, it will become clear that its epistemology not only distinguishes Epicureanism from other schools, but also helps to clarify our understanding of Epicurean philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEMS IN EPICUREAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Having determined in chapter one that there is room for a new approach to the foundation of Epicureanism, it now becomes necessary to examine Epicurean epistemology to see if it will aid in our understanding of the school. There are two main problems with Epicurean epistemology, however, which shall be discussed here. The first problem deals with the relationship between Epicurean physics and epistemology, more specifically how an empirical philosophy, before the invention of microscopes, can claim the world is made up of particles too small to see and the space in which they move. Second, Epicureans make the claim that the senses cannot be deceived, and yet we encounter hundreds of examples of just that in day-to-day life, a contradiction which must be addressed. This was even a criticism of Epicurus by Cicero in *de Finibus*, where he wrote, concerning the size of the sun, *tantum enim esse censet quantum videtur, vel paulo aut maiorem aut minorem* (I.VI) [Epicurus considers it about a foot in diameter, for he pronounces it to be exactly as large as it appears, or a little larger or smaller]. Cicero emphatically considered this to be a problem unique to Epicureanism, saying that Democritus believed the sun to be huge. Solving this difficulty will therefore not only answer a problem of Epicurean epistemology, but also addresses an issue unique to the school.

Lucretius freely admits that it may be difficult for readers to accept his explanation of atoms, since they cannot see them. He writes

*ne qua forte tamen coeptes diffidere dictis,
quod nequeunt oculis rerum primordia cerni,
accipe praeterea quae corpora tute necessest
confiteare esse in rebus nec posse videri.* (I.267-70).

“that you may not by any chance begin nevertheless to distrust my words,
because the first-beginnings of things cannot be distinguished by the eye, learn in

addition of bodies which you yourself of necessity confess to be numbered amongst things and yet impossible to be seen²²”.

Lucretius then goes on to discuss the concepts of wind, smells, changes in temperature, and other such invisible, yet sensible, phenomena. All these things lead him to conclude *corporibus caecis igitur natura gerit res* (I.328) [It follows that nature works through the agency of invisible bodies]. We shall see this principle at work in Lucretius’ examination of atoms and void. While he is dealing with entities which cannot be seen, much like the wind, their effects on the physical world are observable. It is from these observable effects that the Epicurean atomic theory is derived.

The concepts of atoms and void have already been introduced as the building blocks for Epicurean physics. Lucretius tells his reader that

*[...] per se natura duabus
constitit in rebus; nam corpora sunt et inane,
haec in quo sita sunt et qua diversa moventur.* (I.419-422)

“All nature as it is in itself consists of two things—bodies and the vacant space in which the bodies are situated and through which they move in different directions”.

Atoms are the simpler of the two concepts, so I will begin by looking at void, both what it is, and the role it plays in Epicurean physics.

Lucretius describes void, writing
*quapropter locus est intactus inane vacansque.
quod si non esset, nulla ratione moveri
res possent;* (1.334-6)

“by vacuity I mean intangible and empty space. If it did not exist, things could not move at all”.

Void (*inane*) is untouchable (*intactus*) and empty (*vacans*, from *vaco*). That is to say that while it exists, it is itself no-thing. It cannot be sensed, and it cannot contain anything, which makes it a rather problematic concept for an empirical epistemology. Yet while void itself cannot be sensed, its existence can be demonstrated by the movement of sensible objects, i.e. objects composed of atoms. Here is an example of Epicurean empiricism. We can see that objects move, and we can see that two objects cannot be in the same place at the same time. So there must be space in

²² Translation from Rouse, 2006, for clarity.

which there is nothing that objects can move into. Lucretius goes on to use the image of a fish swimming through the water. Both the water and the fish are made of solid parts. If the water were completely solid, the fish would not be able to move through it. Therefore, there must be empty space mixed in with the water, into which it can move as the fish pushes it aside. This void is not something in and of itself, but rather the absence of something into which things can move. Lucretius' argument from observation is remarkable, because he describes a concept he has no sensory perception of. This suggests that Epicurean epistemology is able to work backwards from the sensible to the insensible, creating a base of knowledge which is built, but not dependent, upon the senses.

So much then for void. Atoms themselves also present a problem. It is nearly impossible to imagine that a solid object, like a desk, is in fact made up of tiny vibrating particles. Yet the Epicureans seem to have no problem with this idea, which both supports and is supported by their concept of void. The Epicureans drew two divisions of kinds of material objects. Lucretius describes this division, writing

*Corpora sunt porro partim primordia rerum,
partim concilio quae constant principiorum.
sed quae sunt rerum primordia, nulla potest vis
stinguere; nam solido vincunt ea corpore demum.* (I.483-6)

“bodies are partly the first-beginnings [atoms] of things, partly those which are formed by the union of the first-beginnings. But those which are the first-beginnings of things no power can quench: they conquer after all by their solid body”²³.

There are two important things here. The first is that physical entities (*corpora*) can be either atoms (*primordia rerum*) or compounds of atoms (*concilio principiorum*). This means that atoms are not only components of objects, but are objects themselves. Since we can interact with them, atoms must be solid bodies, because *tangere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, nulla potest res* (I.305). [For nothing can touch or be touched except bodies]. Atoms have sensible qualities, and while an atom on its own is too small to be sensed, atomic compounds are what make up the sensible world. Just as with void, this is a case of the Epicureans using their observations of the immediately sensible world to draw conclusions about entities which cannot be sensed on their own.

²³ Translation from Rouse, 2006, for clarity.

Also important is that atoms cannot be destroyed (*stinguere*). This concept will ultimately be what allows Lucretius to argue that there is nothing to fear in death, an important aspect of Epicurean ethics, and will be discussed further in the next chapter. This once again illustrates the close relationships of the different aspects of Epicureanism. Such a connection is important because it points to a system of philosophy built upon a common basis. Closely linked to the idea of the indestructibility of atoms is what could be called the Epicurean theory of the conservation of matter. Lucretius writes that

*esse immortali primordia corpore debent,
dissolui quo quaeque supremo tempore possint,
materies ut suppeditet rebus reparandis.* (I.545-7)

“The atoms must be made of imperishable stuff into which everything can be resolved in the end, so that there may be a stock of matter for building the world anew”. Because we never see anything reduced to nothing (even rotting objects simply get broken down into smaller objects), then things must only break down to their smallest parts, namely, atoms. And because the world has not become overcrowded by objects (evidenced, perhaps, by the fact that there is still enough void for objects to continue to move in), if atoms are not destroyed, then after the objects they comprised have fallen apart they must be reused to build other objects.

Having made his argument for the existence of atoms and for the void through which they move, Lucretius turns to the more complicated matter of exactly how they move, which will lead to the all important concept of the “swerve”, as we have already seen. The Epicureans believed that everything in the universe moved downward at equal speed (*DRN* II.235). This idea of downward motion, as opposed to movement towards a single point, like the earth, causes problems for the Epicureans, since they believed that the earth and everything in it came about as the result of random collisions of atoms. If everything was moving earthward, then the earth would stop the movement and allow collision to occur, but this is not the case. In fact, it would be impossible under Epicurean physics, since the earth itself is composed of atoms which collided into one another. If all the atoms are moving in a uniform direction, at a uniform pace, then how could any collisions occur? We have already seen the Epicurean solution to this problem in chapter one, namely, the “swerve”, which in turn gives rise to the Epicurean belief in free will.

With this understanding of Epicurean physics, it is now possible to delve more deeply into Epicurean epistemology and its inherent problem of sense deception. The Epicurean reliance on sense perceptions makes the atomic theory put forth by Lucretius that much more impressive. Since they have no way to actually perceive atoms, they had to work from what is sensible and reason back to what is not. De Lacy proposes that “sense experience” is a “check” rather than actual limit on knowledge²⁴. This idea allows for Epicurean knowledge to go beyond what can be immediately sensed to include anything which fits in and does not contradict the sensible world. This concept can be seen in Lucretius’ earlier analogy comparing the void to a fish swimming through water. The Epicureans started with what they observed, then worked backwards to explain how what they observed came to be.

The Epicureans, as we shall see, seem to practice a sort of mild form of skepticism, but ultimately reject genuine skepticism. Indeed, Lucretius openly attacks Skepticism by presenting it as a self-refuting philosophy. He points out that *Denique nil sciri siquis putat, id quoque nescit / an sciri possit, quoniam nil scire fatetur* (IV.469-70) [If anyone thinks that nothing is ever known, he does not know whether even this can be known, since he admits he knows nothing]. Such a contradiction has no place in Epicureanism; one can have knowledge, and this knowledge comes through the senses, which *neque sensus posse refelli* (IV.480) [cannot be rebutted]. Because the Epicureans reject skepticism, that the fact that senses can be deceived is especially problematic. Since knowledge through the senses is possible, if the senses fail there is no philosophical recourse to explain the world.

Lucretius, as we shall see, argues that sense perception is the only way we can come to knowledge. Yet relying on sense perception alone seems to have inherent problems and limitations. As part of my exploration of these limitations, I shall be using David Hume’s *Enquiry Into Human Understanding* as a tool for interpreting Lucretius’ epistemology. There are several reasons that this is a useful technique; Hume is himself familiar with Lucretius’ writings, and in fact uses Epicurus as a character in several dialogues on ethics. Also, like the Epicureans, he espouses an empirical philosophy in a time before the discovery of the modern atom. The inherent similarities between the respective philosophies lend themselves to comparison. Both Hume and Lucretius argue for knowledge through experience, empiricism, and from induction. Indeed, in “Induction before Hume”, Milton says, “David Hume appears as perhaps the first and

²⁴ De Lacy, 1938. p. 396.

certainly the greatest of all inductive sceptics²⁵”, and goes on to observe that “The Epicureans were however some of the strongest ancient advocates of the use of induction, their preferred name being inference from similarity”²⁶. This suggests that the Epicureans, like Hume, initially gain knowledge from empirical evidence, then use reason to further draw conclusions about the world. Hume’s understanding of physics is also similar to Lucretius’. In “Problems of Epicurean Physics”, Konstan warns “We must beware of importing into ancient physics modern notions of billiard-ball mechanics, in which collisions involve transfer of energy or motion. There is no transfer in Epicurus’ system; the source of motion is entirely within the individual atoms”²⁷. This is in line with Hume’s understanding of motion, as he argues that there is no way to perceive any transfer of energy²⁸. Though he was writing in a time much more scientifically advanced than Lucretius’, Hume still lacks the scientific methods to explain much of the phenomena we experience. Instead, like Lucretius and Epicurus before him, he is forced to base his epistemology on what he can observe from the world around him. With a limited scientific knowledge, and a similar method of observation, Hume and Lucretius come to startlingly similar understandings of the senses and perception. Consequently, although at first glance anachronistic, Hume’s approach to understanding the senses aids us in understanding Lucretius’.

As we have already seen, for Lucretius, and Epicureans in general, knowledge begins with the senses. In book four, Lucretius writes, *Invenies primis ab sensibus esse creatam / notitiam veri neque sensus posse refelli* (IV.478-9). [You will find, in fact, that the concept of truth was originated by the senses and that the senses cannot be rebutted]. This supports what we have seen so far of Epicurean philosophy. It is the Epicurean observations of the world that shaped those aspects of their physics and ethics which are unique to the school. Even this claim, that the senses cannot be rebutted, is supported in Lucretius by observations of how the different senses work. The senses alone can give us true knowledge about the world; while reason can further than knowledge, as we will see it can also be deceived. Empirical observation, which is to say experience through the senses, is the heart of Epicurean epistemology.

Likewise, Hume argues that all our knowledge is limited to sense perceptions and experience. He writes, “When any natural object or event is presented, it is impossible for us [...]

²⁵ Milton, 1987. p. 49.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 54.

²⁷ Konstan, 1979 p. 397.

²⁸ Hume, p. 111 “Motion in the second billiard-ball is a quite distinct event from motion in the first”.

to discover, without experience, what event will result from it”²⁹ and “nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object”³⁰. All of our knowledge of cause and effect, and other such connections between objects, is not knowledge *qua* knowledge, but merely inductions made from our past experiences. We only know that which we experience, and we know that through sense perceptions.

The question of how these perceptions move from the objects themselves, through our senses and to our minds, is worth looking at, as it is this that will eventually lead to the solution of sense deception. Lucretius tells us that all objects project a kind of thin film or image (*simulacrum*) composed of fine atoms, which move through the air and enter our eyes, in the case of vision, and likewise for all the other senses. Sense perceptions are themselves actual, non-passive entities that move and enter the body through the senses, rather than reactions taking place in the mind and sending data to the senses. It has already been argued that only bodies can be touched, and that atoms are bodies. The way we interact with them can only be through touch. Like atoms themselves, this is problematic when the senses themselves are the basis of knowledge. How can the Epicureans claim to know how the senses work when the senses are what they are basing knowledge on? Once again, Lucretius turns to empirical observations to support this claim. One example is in book two, where he argues that color must be a secondary attribute of atoms, since blind men can still interact with the world. Likewise, hearing and scent are also secondary qualities. We do not need them to sense the physical world; only touch. So the atoms must work on all the senses through touch. Knowledge then, which comes through the senses, comes from direct contact with physical entities. This is a concept that may seem surprising to modern readers, and yet Hume appears to have a similar idea of how perception works.

Hume refers to the senses as “inlets, through which these images are conveyed” to the mind³¹. Here, as with Lucretius, there is an idea of active movement not just on behalf of the observer, but also on behalf of the observed. Having entered through the “inlets” of our senses, sense perceptions are in actuality present within our minds as physical, or at least semi-physical

²⁹ Hume, p. 144.

³⁰ Hume, p. 201.

³¹ Hume, p. 201.

entities. This can be related back to the fact the atoms have actual physical existence, and that anything which is not void (which is to say, anything which is anything) must either be an atom or be composed of them.

This idea of sense impressions existing in actuality in our minds can be seen in the way both Lucretius and Hume describe imagination. Hume writes, “The imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can join and mix and vary them, in all the ways possible”³². This is a succinct version of Lucretius’ description of imagination on book four, starting in line 718, where he describes all the images in our head flying around joining up with one another. He writes

*nam certe ex vivo Centauri non fit imago,
nulla fuit quoniam talis natura animalis;
verum ubi equi atque hominis casu convenit imago,
haerescit facile extemplo [...] (IV.739-43)*

“The image of a Centaur, for instance, is certainly not formed from life, since no living creature of this sort has ever existed. But, as I have just explained, where surface films from a horse and a man accidentally come into contact, they may easily stick together on the spot”.

Because sense impressions literally exist within the mind, they can be taken apart and reassembled in different ways, as if they were pictures on paper that can be cut up and pasted to one another.

What is perhaps most interesting is that both Lucretius and Hume seem to take it for granted that humans are easily able to separate actual sense impressions from impressions that result from the imagination. We can easily call to mind the image of a centaur, yet despite our awareness of this image, Lucretius assumes none of his readers will mistake the image, no matter how vivid, as proof for the existence of centaurs. Likewise, Hume writes (probably borrowing the example from Lucretius), “We can, in our conception, join the head of a man to the body of a horse; but it is not in our power to believe, that such an animal ever existed”³³. Again, both Hume and Lucretius assume an inherent ability in humans to distinguish between genuine sense impressions and creations of the mind. While this ability seems to be innate, that does not mean

³² Hume, p. 125.

³³ Hume, 124.

that empirical evidence cannot also be used to determine what is and is not imaginary. In book five, Lucretius actually offers a proof against the existence of centaurs, pointing out that as men and horses age at different rates, a centaur would have the body of a human child attached to the body of an adult horse. So yet again, we see observations of the physical world being used to determine what is and is not known. Ultimately, all knowledge must fall under the scrutiny of empiricism. If something contradicts our senses, it cannot be true.

Yet the very fact that we can conceive of objects that do not exist leads to what is perhaps the greatest challenge to Epicureans. How can we rely on our senses when our senses can be deceived? The response to this seems to be twofold. First, we must determine what is meant by the Epicurean claim that all perceptions are true, and secondly we must discover in what way the senses are deceived and if there is a way to reconcile these two ideas.

The statement “all perceptions are true” is immediately problematic. Are we to believe that the moon is the size of a quarter, or that, using Lucretius’ example, a building, depending on the distance it is seen from is simultaneously both rounded and rectangular? The Epicurean, it seems, would say “yes”. The answer to this apparent contradiction may lie in Hume. He writes, “no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent”³⁴. For Hume, and indeed, it seems, for Lucretius, when we point out an object we are not pointing out the thing itself, but rather our sense impression of it. When I look up at the moon and it seems to be the size of a quarter, it is because I am truly perceiving it to be that size, regardless of the actual size. This could be taken to mean that the sense impressions themselves are deceptive, and not showing the world as it truly is. Yet we shall see that Lucretius argues it is not senses, but the mind which is deceived by such seemingly misleading impressions.

Looking at another example of sense deception that both Lucretius and Hume give may make matters clearer. Consider the image of a stick in a glass of water. I know that the stick is straight, but the water distorts its image so that it appears to be bent. My sense impression is undeniably of a bent stick, and insofar as sense impressions go, this is true. No one can deny that I am seeing a bent stick. What can be denied is that the stick itself is actually bent. This does not seem to be out of keeping with Lucretius, for he writes,

³⁴ Hume, p. 201.

*neve putes aeterna penes residere potesse
corpora prima quod in summis fluitare videmus
rebus et interdum nasci subitoque perire. (II.1010-12)*

“You will thus avoid the mistake of conceiving as permanent properties of the atoms the qualities that are seen floating on the surface of things, coming into being from time to time and as suddenly perishing”.

In other words, we perceive the *simulacra*, not the things themselves. This is where we truly begin to see the Epicurean skepticism. The fact of the matter is that we do not have knowledge of objects themselves, only of our perceptions of them. This does not seem to be a problem for Lucretius, however, and he passes through this section of the text without addressing it. Perhaps he, like Hume, has accepted that our knowledge *qua* knowledge of the world is limited, but that the consistency of our sense impressions allows us to function as if we do in fact have knowledge.

Yet as we have seen, our sense impressions are not always consistent. This leads to the second problem of sense deception: what is the cause of our deception, and can we prevent it? We have already seen that Lucretius believes in the validity of the senses, and Hume agrees, writing, “all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid [...]Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them”³⁵. Both Hume and Lucretius find fault not with the senses, but with the mind. To quote a longer passage, Lucretius says,

*Nec tamen hic oculos falli concedimus hilum.
nam quocumque loco sit lux atque umbra tueri
illorum est; eadem vero sint lumina necne,
umbrae quae fuit hic eadem nunc transeat illuc,
an potius fiat paulo quod diximus ante,
hoc animi demum ratio discernere debet,
nec possunt oculi naturam noscere rerum.
proinde animi vitium hoc oculis adfingere noli. (IV.379-86)*

“We do not admit that the eyes are in any way deluded....But whether one light is the same as another, and whether the shadow that was here is moving over there, or whether

³⁵ Hume, p. 99.

on the other hand what really happens is what I have just described- that is something to be discerned by the reasoning power of the mind. The nature of phenomena cannot be understood by the eyes. You must not hold the eyes responsible for this fault of the mind”.

Hume also places fallibility with the mind and not the senses. When discussing how we gain knowledge through experience he says, “as this operation of the mind, by which we infer like effects from like causes [...] is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable, that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason”³⁶. We depend upon experience and sense perceptions for knowledge because reason cannot be trusted not to be deceived. The senses can only perceive what they perceive. It is the mind, i.e. reason, which misinterprets sense impressions. What is called “sense deception” should, perhaps, be relabeled “sense misinterpretation”.

The solution to avoiding deception, however, and perhaps ironically, lies with the mind and reason. For all that it is the senses, and not the reason, which is to be trusted, it is reason that will solve the problem of deception. After listing the ways the senses can be deceived, Hume writes, “These skeptical topics, indeed, are only sufficient to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason”³⁷. Lucretius, as we have just seen, said something similar in the passage above, that when it comes to determining the effects of the environment on our perceptions, “that is something to be discerned by the reasoning power of the mind”. At first glance, it may seem contradictory to use reason to correct the errors of perceptions, since it is reason after all that is faulty. If one is not supposed to rely on reason, how can one use reason to correct an error? Yet it does make a certain sense. If reason made the mistake, then it must be reason that corrects it. By acknowledging that our reason made a mistake, we use our reason to right it.

The senses are free from error because they are merely the recipients of sense impressions, and are powerless to add interpretations to them. The mind interprets the sense impressions, and in doing so allows for the possibility of misinterpretation and error. It is only through teaching the mind how to interpret properly sense impressions that we can be free from error. This education comes from experience. Once we have experienced the phenomena of a

³⁶ Hume, p. 129

³⁷ Hume, p. 200

straight stick appearing bent, we will know not to be deceived by the illusion again. Sense impressions simply exist as they are, and are therefore without error. They are simply the tool to receive data about our surroundings, it is left to the mind to provide the correct analysis of the information gathered by the senses. Only the mind and reason can impose truth or falsehood upon them.

This mild form of skepticism, which allows for the existence of sense deception, or sense misinterpretation, is also part of what allows the Epicureans to move beyond sense perceptions to the existence of atoms. From this chapter it is, I hope, clear that there is a close-knit relationship between Epicurean epistemology and physics; indeed, one cannot exist without the other. It is the empiricism of Epicurean epistemology that allows them to move beyond what is immediately sensible in order to develop their complex atomic theory. In the next chapter, I shall look at this relationship more in-depth, as well as the relationship of epistemology to the rest of the Epicurean philosophical system.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

With a clearer grasp of Epicurean epistemology, it is now possible to examine the rest of the philosophy as a whole in order to see how it develops out of the Epicureans' empirical system. In the previous chapter, the connection between epistemology and physics was explored. This chapter will expand on this connection, then continue outward to the rest of the Epicurean system, moving from physics to metaphysics and ethics. In doing so, I will show that epistemology provides a useful basis from which the Epicurean philosophical system as a whole can be understood.

Thus far, I have looked at what Epicurus' contemporaries and some interpretations in modern scholarship have considered as the basis of Epicurean philosophy. In light of the *DRN*, Lucretius leaves little doubt as to the starting point of his philosophical discourse. After his proem and his declaration that he will be discussing atoms, he warns against the dangers of *religione* (religion, superstition) (I.63). This is followed by his primary claim: *principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet,/ nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam* (I.149-50) [Our starting place will be this principle: nothing is ever created by divine power out of nothing]. But it is not enough for Lucretius to simply present this claim; instead he goes on to defend it. Drawing from observations of nature, he argues that we see corn grow from corn, grapes from grapes, humans from humans, and each in its own timing and season. This is an example of Lucretius using his observations to develop an argument in support of a claim. All these things lead to the conclusion that nothing comes from nothing; otherwise all life would spring into being willy-nilly without regards to species or seasons. "Nothing comes from nothing" is not just Lucretius' starting point, but a description of Epicurean philosophy as a whole. Because of its reliance on the senses, even this claim must first be supported by empirical evidence. Lucretius may be starting his discussion with physics, but he is using empiricism to support it.

Another important aspect of this starting principle is not just that nothing comes from nothing but that nothing comes from nothing by means of a god or divinity (*divinitus*). In my

introduction, I discussed the idea that Epicurean philosophy functions as a system, and that it is difficult to separate the different aspects from one another. Here this difficulty comes to light. Lucretius' first principle is simultaneously a physical and metaphysical claim. We have already seen the empirical evidence that supports the physical aspect of this claim; now it is necessary to look at the metaphysical part. Lucretius argues that people attribute to the gods that which they cannot understand. He writes

*quas ob res ubi viderimus nil posse creari
de nilo, tum quod sequimur iam rectius inde
perspiciemus, et unde queat res quaeque creari
et quo quaeque modo fiant opera sine divom.* (I.152-55)

“Accordingly, when we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing, we shall then have a clearer picture of the path ahead, the problem of how things are created and occasioned without the aid of the gods”.

For Lucretius then, it is not required to prove that gods are not involved in the physical world; it is sufficient to prove that they are not necessary. There is no empirical evidence of the gods interfering and making events happen contrary to the physics Lucretius has laid down. Consequently, everything happens according to the predictable and observable principles of *natura*, not the unpredictable, fearsome will of the gods.

The second claim Lucretius makes is likewise derived from empirical observation, and again blurs the distinction between physics and metaphysics. He writes

*Huc accedit uti quidque in sua corpora rursus
dissoluat natura neque ad nilum interemat res.
nam si quid mortale e cunctis partibus esset,
ex oculis res quaeque repente erepta periret;* (I.215-18)

“nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing. If anything were perishable in all its parts, anything might perish all of a sudden and vanish from sight”.

Because we do not see objects suddenly disappearing and vanishing, things must fall apart slowly, as the bonds between atoms break apart until only the atoms remain (I.245). One result of this is that once an object has been broken down to atoms, those atoms become the source of other objects. This idea of an Epicurean conservation of matter was already discussed in chapter

two in relation to atoms and void. But here we see its importance in these two main principles of Epicurean physics. Nothing comes from nothing, so all material must come from somewhere.

Lucretius writes

*haud igitur penitus pereunt quaecumque videntur,
quando alid ex alio reficit natura, nec ullam
rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena. (I.262-64)*

“Visible objects therefore do not perish utterly, since nature repairs one thing from another and allows nothing to be born without the aid of another’s death”.

Once an object breaks down to its atomic components, those same atoms are used again and again to create new objects. But this claim, like the first one, has far more than physical implications. As we shall see, Lucretius argues that if everything is made up of atoms, that means mind and soul are too. And just like everything else, the soul and mind also die and are broken down. This will be the basis of Lucretius’ argument that there is no reason to fear death. Here again is a connection between Epicurean ethics and physics, as it is their physics which will make their ethics possible.

Eliminating a fear of death is crucial to Epicureanism, which is concerned with living a life of pleasure. Lucretius describes the fear of death as completely destructive to such a lifestyle, saying

*et saepe usque adeo, mortis formidine, vitae
percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae,
ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum
obliti fontem curarum hunc esse timorem:
hunc vexare pudorem, hunc vincula amicitiai
rumpere et in summa pietate evertere suadet; (III.79-84)*

“Often from fear of death mortals are gripped by such a hate of living and looking on the light that with anguished hearts they do themselves to death. They forget that this fear is the very fountainhead of their troubles: this it is that harasses conscience, snaps the bonds of friendship and in a word utterly destroys all moral responsibility”.

The fear of death is so all-consuming that Lucretius calls it the “very fountainhead of [human] troubles” (*fontem curarum hunc esse timorem*). It is what leads men to behave immorally, and

prevents one from living the best life. Only by understanding the workings of nature, Lucretius says, can this fear be dispelled (III.93).

Dispelling the fear of death is twofold. First is the dismissal of popular *religio*. It is *natura* and not the gods which determines what happens in the physical world. Epicurean philosophy does not dismiss the gods entirely. Lucretius says of the gods

*omnis enim per se divom natura necessest
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur
semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe;
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indiga nostri,
nec bene promeritis capitur necque tangitur ira. (I.44-49)*

“It is essential to the very nature of deity that it should enjoy immortal existence in utter tranquility, aloof and detached from our affairs. It is free from all pain and peril, strong in its own resources, exempt from any need of us, indifferent to our merits and immune from anger”.

The gods exist, but they do not intervene in human or other physical affairs. In fact, even the gods themselves have to submit to the laws of *natura*. Because the gods are not involved in human affairs, there is no need to fear punishment (or hope for reward) after death; there is no ferryman to take one across the Styx, or judges waiting to determine which realm of the underworld one is to belong to. Consequently, one’s actions on earth do not need to be driven by a fear of what happens after death. Humans are free to live the life of pleasure their *natura* calls for. The fact the Epicureans keep the gods in some form may be seen as a concession to popular religious beliefs, but even just removing the numerous gods of the Roman world from human matters is no small thing. Kirk Summers, in “Lucretius and the Epicurean Tradition of Piety” calls Lucretius’ “attack” on popular religion “comprehensive”³⁸. This replacement of the gods with *natura* is what makes Epicurean ethics possible.

While the relocating of the gods allows for release from the fear of punishment after death, there still remains the fear of some kind of existence after the body has died and fallen apart. In book three, at line 323, Lucretius begins an in-depth proof on the materiality of the soul (*animus*) and its connection to the body. The use of the masculine *animus* instead of the feminine

³⁸ Summers, 1995, p. 34.

anima is significant. Unlike *anima*, which generally refers to just the spirit, or life-giving force, *animus* often refers to both the spirit and the intellect. In using it, Lucretius is able to discuss the concepts of both mind and soul with one word. The distinction between the two concepts is often a matter of great importance in many ancient philosophies, but because both are mortal in Epicureanism, the distinction seems to be less important. Once again Lucretius uses observations of the physical world to prove his claim, looking at such things such as the senses and when they fail, and the fact that bodies start to decompose once life leaves them. All of this leads to his claim that [...] *nativos animantibus et mortalibus esse animos animasque levis ut noscere possis* (III.418). [Minds of living things and the light fabric of their spirits are neither birthless nor deathless]. The soul, like the body, is physical and therefore composed of atoms. So just as the body falls apart, so does the soul. Not only is there no Hades, but there is nothing of the self remaining to go there after death. Lucretius recognizes that the idea that the soul, and not just the body is mortal, is not exactly a comforting idea. But he reassures his readers

*scire licet nobis nil esse in morte timendum,
nec miserum fieri qui non est posse, neque hilum
differre an nullo fuerit iam tempore natus,
mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit.* (III.866-69)

“Rest assured, therefore, that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal”.

There is nothing to fear in death because there is nothing after death. Just as we are unaffected by the things that happened before we were born, we will be unaffected by the things that happen when we have died.

Once more we see the physics, metaphysics, and ethics of Epicureanism intertwined. Because the world is made of atoms, and *natura* and not gods are in charge, we are free from the fear that kept us from a happy life. There is no need to fear the interference of the gods in our lives, and no need to fear death. What remains is the freedom to pursue pleasure as *natura* intended. But this idea of freedom presents its own problem. If we are simply following the course of *natura*, just how much freedom do we have? I have already touched upon the Epicurean concept of free will, and here it becomes necessary to expand upon it.

Almost ironically, the very same physics that allow for this free will to exist by removing the gods potentially renders it impossible. Everything is made of atoms, and which atoms, and how they fit together, determines what each entity is. Such materialistic determination seems to leave no room for free will. The Epicurean answer to this problem (which was not addressed by Epicurus' precursor, Democritus) is the "swerve". We have already seen the necessary role the swerve plays in physics, and it is equally important for ethics. Lucretius addresses the risk of determinism that arises from Epicurean atomic theory, writing

*[...] quod fati foedera rumpat,
ex infinito ne causam causa sequatur,
libera per terras unde haec animantibus exstat,
unde est haec, inquam, fatis avolsa voluntas,
per quam progredimur quo ducit quemque voluptas,
declinamus item motus nec tempore certo
nec regione loci certa, sed ubi ipsa tulit mens?
nam dubio procul his rebus sua cuique voluntas
principium dat et hinc motus per membra rigantur.* (II.254-62).

"if the atoms never swerve so as to originate some new movement that will snap the bonds of fate, the everlasting sequence of cause and effect—what is the source of the free will possessed by living things throughout the earth? What, I repeat is the source of that will-power snatched from the fates, whereby we follow the path along which we are severally led by pleasure, swerving from our course at no at time or place but at the bidding of our own hearts? there is no doubt that on these occasions the will of the individual originates the movements that trickle through his limbs".

This swerve introduces just enough randomness to the creation of matter that humans can will their own actions. Lucretius supports his claim that voluntary motion, acts of free will, originate in the mind then spread to limbs by pointing to horses at the start of a race. You can see their muscles strain to move forward, but there is a delay before actual movement begins. Lucretius argues that this shows the motion begins in the mind and then travels to the limbs (II.265). The physics of the swerve is what allows the mind to originate movement within itself, allowing for the free will that is necessary to Epicurean ethics.

Humans, no longer answerable to the gods, or living a pre-determined life, must choose their own lifestyle. Epicureanism, with its focus on pleasure, is often misinterpreted as a philosophy that believes in extravagance, and the Epicureans are represented as promiscuous drunkards. While this is not the case, the Epicurean reputation for promiscuity is not entirely unfounded, and looking at Lucretius' discussion of sex one can certainly find evidence for it. Love, to Lucretius, is a disease to be avoided. It is an attraction to an insubstantial image, and to love such an image is as foolish as praying to the gods (4.1057-1072). The so-called promiscuity of the Epicureans is seen in Lucretius' suggestions of how to handle sexual desires. To let such desires go un-sated is dangerous; Lucretius describes sexual attraction as a wound that must be treated, the treatment being to have sex. For the safety of one's mind, however, one should not have sex with an individual which he loves. Lucretius writes

*Nec Veneris fructu caret is qui vitat amorem,
sed potius quae sunt sine poena commoda sumit;
nam certe purast sanis magis inde voluptas
quam miseris; (IV.1073-76)*

“Do not think that by avoiding romantic love you are missing the delights of sex. Rather, you are reaping the sort of profits that carry with them no penalty. Rest assured that this pleasure is enjoyed in a purer form by the sane than by the lovesick”.

It is easy to read this as a doctrine preaching sexual promiscuity in order to “heal” one's sexual desire. But even amidst such teaching, it is important to remember that the core of Epicurean hedonism is not just to seek pleasure, but to avoid pain. There is no point in drinking all night if one is going to have to pay for it with a hangover the next morning, and much the same attitude can be applied to sex. What is perhaps most noteworthy in Lucretius' discussion of sex is the balance between prescriptive and naturalistic ethics. Lucretius takes sexual desire to be a given. There is no need to tell people to seek pleasure and avoid pain; this is an innate attribute of our *natura*. Lucretius is only prescriptive in the manner by which one seeks pleasure, and in that he gives advice only on how to best avoid pain.

While it would have been easy for outsiders of the school to see only the ethics of the Epicureans, and perhaps to be attracted to the school for its relaxed rules (especially when compared to the Stoics), true practitioners of the school were concerned with much more. While

the Epicureans appeared to be practicing a life with few religious and sexual constraints, they were in fact engaged in a philosophical lifestyle in imitation of their founder. Lucretius writes

*sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae* (II.7-10)

“But this is the greatest joy of all: to possess a quiet sanctuary, stoutly fortified by the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in search of a way of life”.

The happy life of the Epicurean does not come from a life free of constraint, but rather from a life secure in the knowledge of how the universe works. Lucretius’ empirical epistemology gives him the confidence he needs to believe the claims he makes about the universe.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

From the principle of “nothing comes from nothing” to free-will, the Epicureans build on each of their empirical observations to create a world defined not by the gods, but by physics. Throughout *DRN* we see claim after claim being supported by and developed from these observations. The ideas and concepts that are most uniquely Epicurean are those which are a direct result of their empirical epistemology. If one is looking for an aspect of Epicureanism that best defines the school as a whole, one need not look further than their epistemology.

In chapter one, we saw that while there are multiple ways to approach Epicureanism, they all ultimately fail to strike at the heart of the school. Because Epicureanism is a closed system of philosophy, finding a beginning point to explain it is like trying to find a starting point in the water cycle. Epistemology, however, naturally lends itself as an entry point into the Epicurean system. By understanding how the Epicureans believe we gain knowledge, it becomes possible to understand the inner workings of their more complicated concepts, especially in the area of physics.

But if we are to make sense of Epicurean philosophy through its epistemology, it is first necessary to have a thorough understanding of how Epicurean empiricism works. This is achieved by looking at the complications inherent in an early empirical philosophy, and the solutions the Epicureans offered for them. While the solutions to the problems of the limits of the senses and sense misinterpretation are found in epistemology, they are also closely connected with other aspects of Epicureanism. This once again suggests that a comprehensive understanding of Epicurean epistemology leads to a better understanding of the system as a whole.

Returning to the issue of ethics and metaphysics, a clearer knowledge of empiricism gives insight into the conceptual foundation and methodology of Epicureanism. An approach to the whole Epicurean system, as seen through the lens of their epistemology, aptly and cogently illustrates the intricate confluence of empiricism and ideology in the making of Epicureanism.

Once a person understands Epicurean empiricism, their physics, metaphysics, and ethics all fall into place. The atom is needed to replace the gods, the gods must be removed from human affairs to allow freedom from fear, the swerve is needed for free-will, and all this leads to the outward showing of a happy life. And yet this happy life, free from the demands of politics, is also necessary for the system, since it allows the followers of Epicurus the necessary free time to contemplate the workings of the world.

One can easily imagine why the ethics of the Epicureans would have been condemned by many Romans. Many of the core Roman values are denounced by the philosophy, such as showing piety to the gods and being involved in public life. But Epicureanism does have its appeal. In a country recovering from civil war, the Epicureans offer a philosophy that promises its followers a peaceful, pleasurable life, free from the fear of death. So it should come as no surprise that Epicureanism grows to be one of the major schools of thought in the Hellenistic period. Diogenes praises the longevity of Epicureanism, saying that “the School itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues for ever without interruption through the numberless reigns of one scholar after another” (X.539). And indeed, while the philosophy of Epicurus has all but died out today, its foundation has done something few other philosophies have succeeded in; survived the emergence of science. Though he was wrong on many things, the accuracy of Epicurus’ atomic theory is startling to modern readers. The building blocks of Epicurus’ philosophy are recognized today as the building blocks of life.

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