What did Epicurus Learn from Plato?

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Abstract
Epicurus and Epicureans were famously antagonistic toward Platonic metaphysics and the dialectical style and technique pioneered in the Academy. However, there are Platonic methodological and doctrinal themes in Epicurus's epistemology, theology, and politics.

Epicurus liked to boast that he was self-taught in philosophy. Cicero laughed that it showed.[1] But Epicurus was the most prolific philosophical writer of antiquity, leaving some 300 rolls including his 37-book *On Nature*.[2] His disclaimers call for more than a few grains of salt. He said, after all, that there was no such philosopher as Leucippus,[3] sending some modern scholars scurrying to verify the historicity of Democritus' mentor, when Epicurus probably meant just an ironic denial that Leucippus was much of a philosopher.[4] Nausiphanes the atomist, who was his teacher, he called an illiterate deceiver, a prostitute, and a lung-fish. Doubtless there was more behind all this than disappointment with determinism.[5] But Epicurus clearly was a heretical Democritean, the *klinamen* purpose-made to bring free will and creativity into a universe that otherwise seemed fatally sealed against both. He was also a critic of Aristotle, pointedly rejecting, for example, the Peripatetic ideal of disinterested friendship.[6] The only philosopher Epicurus admitted had taught

[1] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (*DND*) 1.72; cf. *De Finibus* 1.20, 26, 71.
[2] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (D.L.), 10.26.
[3] D.L. 10.13.
[4] Rohde and Brieger were among those who took Epicurus' rhetoric seriously. See Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 226.
[5] See D. L. 10.8; Sextus, *Adv. Math*. 1.3–4. 'Lerocritus' (Nonsense) was Epicurus's pet name for Democritus. But what can we make of his calling Aristotle a 'profligate'?
[6] *The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings* (V.F.), in Graziano Arrighetti, *Epicuro: Opere* (Turn: Einaudi, 1960; 2nd ed., 1973), 23. For Epicurus' knowledge of the dialogues of the 'exoteric Aristotle', see Ettore Bignone, *L'Aristotele perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro* 2 vols. (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1973; first ed. 1936). Aristotle's philosophical works were, of course, not yet available in the form we know. So Aristotle

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him at Samos was Pamphilus,[7] a student of Plato's. Of this teacher too, Cicero tells us, Epicurus spoke scornfully (perhaps to mask the influence).[8] Yet, despite Cicero's protestation that Epicurus bore no whiff (*nihil olet*) of the Academy,[9] the mature and clearly original philosophy of Epicurus, is replete with repurposed Platonic doctrine, sometimes made foundational. This paper aims to assess Epicurus's debt to Plato.

To begin, there are many overlaps. Most exemplary is that Plato and Epicurus agree that fear of death is an impediment to living well. Epicurus held that death is nothing to us,[10] and Philodemus calls overcoming the fear of death part of the fourfold cure.[11] In the *Republic* Socrates argues that children should not be frightened and made cowards with tales 'neither true nor helpful to future warriors', of a Hades full of horrors.[12] In the *Phaedo,* philosophy is a preparation for death.[13] Few scholars have examined the links between Epicurean and Platonic philosophy, but Paul Shorey, in an incisive article,[14] notes numerous echoes of Plato in Lucretius, some traceable in the surviving scraps of Epicurus' writings and others likely

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does not loom as large as Plato in the thoughts of Epicurus, who saw him mainly as a follower of Plato.

[7] D.L. 10.14.

[8] *DND* 1.72–73.

[9] It seems worth asking whether Cicero has in mind the Skeptical Academy of his own day, the school of his main allegiance apart from ethics.

[10] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (*Ad Men.*), 124. Among the Platonic 'Apocrypha', the dialogue called *Axiochus*, written in 'a vulgar κοινή', as A. E. Taylor puts it, deploys, as a 'consolation' the argument that 'death is nothing to us, for while we are death is not, and when death is, we are not'. In the dialogue, Axiochus, an uncle of Alcibiades, dismisses the argument as childish 'twaddle'. Immisch reads the dialogue as a Platonic riposte to the Epicurean denial of mortality. Taylor calls it 'a mere revival of the ideas of a second-rate sophist' and speculates that it may reflect early, faddish responses to incipient Epicureanism. A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work* (London: Methuen, 1969), 551, citing O. Immisch, *Philologische Studien zu Plato* (Leipzig: Teuber, 1896) vol. 1, *Axiochus*. For Epicurean parallels, see Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*), 3.830 and Epicurus, *ad Men.,* 125.

[11] Philodemus, *Against the Sophists,* 4.9–14.

[12] 386a-b.

[13] 64a.

[14] 'Plato, Lucretius, and Epicurus', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* **12** (1901), 201–20. Whatever exposure Lucretius had to Plato, Shorey reasons, likely reached him via Epicurus.

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reflecting Epicurus' knowledge of Plato. Prominent here, is the hedonic calculus, never more 'uncompromisingly formulated' than in the *Protagoras*.[15] Plato, we'll note, was hunting bigger game, seeking an art of measurement that would take in goods incommensurate with sensory pleasures. But the idea of a hedonic calculus was Plato's, and it would not be out of keeping with Epicurean radicalism to trim Plato's shrub back to its earthbound root.

Every challenge to materialism that Lucretius recognizes, Shorey observes, comes from the *Timaeus*; and 'passages in the *Republic, Gorgias,* and *Theatetus* anticipate all that Epicurus had to teach of the social compact and the conventional character of justice'.[16] Shorey is certainly right about these overlaps of content and criticism; our objective, however, is to identify parallels in philosophical method and argumentative strategy as well as doctrinal overlaps. It's an irony in this regard that Epicurus held dialectic 'superfluous' (*parelkouson*).[17] He clearly found some aspects of dialectic more than useful.

1.

The plainest departure from Plato in the philosophy of Epicurus is his materialism. Epicurus, as Giovanni Reale puts it, rejected Plato's 'second voyage', developing early on 'an aversion' for both Plato and Aristotle that 'was radical and did not stop at half measures… Epicurus could not agree with Plato in any of the dimensions according to which his thinking had proceeded: not in the epistemological or metaphysical one, which was connected to the immaterial; not in the mystical, or religious, and teleological one, which was totally centered on the supersensible and on the transcendent; not in the political one, which had idealized the ancient polis and its values and which history was inexorably destroying.'[18] Epicurus, like Plato, was a teleologist. But his teleology was evolutionary and localized, grounded in natural selection, with no skyhook, like Plato's, to the heavens. The political differences, nonetheless, deserve closer scrutiny. For Plato was far more than a celebrant of the polis. He

[15] 356; cf. D. L. 10.141.
[16] Op. cit. note 14, 201.
[17] D.L. 10.31.
[18] Giovanni Reale, *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, vol. 3 of Reale's *History of Ancient Philosophy,* tr. John R. Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 113.

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knew better and sooner than most that the polis was dead,[19] and he lost his political innocence before he wrote a single dialogue, seeing in living experience the worst of both democracy and oligarchy. His utopian schemes reject the old hegemony of wealth, birth, honor, and gender, aiming for a meritocracy of reason and almost Fourier-like assignment of roles, wishfully presuming the alignment of individuals' capabilities with their natural affinities and predilections.

The political and metaphysical differences between Epicurus and Plato, of course, are stark. Besides spurning the second voyage, Epicurus, not irrelevantly, was a political quietist. We'll return to the political differences after uncovering some of the deeper methodological affinities, masked by the differences in metaphysical outlook. In making Democritus the architect of his cosmos, Epicurus rejected Plato's Pythagorean precipitation of the elements from the forms via the skeletal geometrical solids.[20] At the heart of Epicurean materialism lies a powerful distaste for the notion that numbers or ideas could ever somehow body themselves forth as *things*. Thus the force, in part, of the Epicurean *ex nihilo nihil fit*:[21] If numbers or ideas are not bodies, they cannot generate bodies. Likewise in social thought: No mere story can account for the birth of civil society. There must be a causal, developmental account of how society and language and the rest of social, material and intellectual culture arose from the natural environment that sustains them.

The enduring if unsteady alliance of empiricism with materialism is plainly the work of Epicurus. It was he, appealing to tactile

[19] Thus his biting satire of Pericles's Funeral Oration in the *Menexenus*. Thucydides too understood the devastation of that war. With the benefit of hindsight, he too reconstructs Pericles's oration as an epitome of hubris. See the discussion in Goodman, 'Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides', in *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 224–25.

[20] See *Timaeus* 53c–55c and W. Schmid, *Epicurs Kritik der Platonischen Elementenlehre* (Leipzig, 1936). For the *Timaeus* as a special target of the Epicurean rejection of Plato's geometrical derivation of the elements, see Cicero's gloss at *DND* 1.18–19. For Plato the discovery (perhaps by Theaetetus) that the regular solids of geometry are limited to five was not less exciting than the Pythagorean discovery of the octave. Both findings seemed to show the rootedness of nature and its laws in the rational patterns of mathematics – and thus to reveal the ontic primacy of the ideal.

[21] Epicurus is clear on this commitment in his *Letter to Herodotus* (*ad Herod.*), 38. Lucretius reasons similarly in *DRN* 1.150 ff. The doctrine was, of course, Democritean (D.L. 9.44), giving concrete application to the anti-creationism of Parmenides and Melissus.

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sensation, who rebutted old objections to atomism based on the invisibility of atoms.[22] Leucippus, by contrast, seems to have relied on Eleatic rationales in support of atomism,[23] and Democritus only drove the wedge deeper into the Eleatic polarity between truth and seeming when he damned sense perception as bastard knowledge.[24] Epicurus, by contrast, boldly announces that he will use the senses to discover realities imperceptible by the senses.[25]

Epicurus was a realist epistemically, close to a naive realist. For he thought that our sense organs directly contact what we know. Given the nexus of perception to its causes, he saw little point in distinguishing the reality of a sensum from the truth of a sensation.[26] He denied truth value to propositions about the future.[27] After all, no reality or percept answers to them. And he saw no need for formal logic.[28] Love of logic smacked of Plato's rationalist intellectualism, the idealist elitism of the Academy, and the mathematicist mysticism of its founder. Knowledge, for a materialist, had causes, not reasons. The mind was no independent agency but the butt of *eidola*, hunks and chunks and skins of real things whose impact connects us to the world as it is. Yet the atoms, being unseen, are known only by inference. We are in touch with them, literally, Epicurus does not doubt. But only reason, not sensation, can tell us what these contacts mean.[29]

Here we find a first hint of unpurged Platonism: The sensa that Epicurus, insists are real and true, and (for Democritean reasons[30]) beyond critique, are also *alogon*.[31] That is, they tell us nothing, being non-propositional. That point is Plato's, his reason for placing sensa below the Line, off the chart, in what seems philosophy's first

[22] See *ad Herodot*. 64; *DRN* 3.350–69 ff., where touch becomes the paradigm of perception. Note what follows: rejection of Democritus's account of the soul's placement.

[23] See Aristotle, *Physics* I 3, 187a.

[24] Democritus, fragment 68B9, from H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (DK) 6th ed. (Berlin, 1951). See also DK.68B6 and 68B8, Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* (*Adv. Math*.) 7.135–38, and D.L. 9.72.

[25] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. 38bc, 39b.

[26] See Sextus, *Adv. Math*. 8.9.

[27] *DND* 1.70. His motive: avoidance of the Megarian elenchus that would treat the ultimate outcome as a matter of necessity.

[28] D.L. 10.31; cf. Cicero, *DND* 1.31.89, *De Finibus* 1.22.

[29] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. 39b.

[30] Democritus fragment DK.68B156.

[31] Epicurus, *The Principal Doctrines* (K.D.), 23–24. See also D.L. 10.31.

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imagined graph, tracking cognitions and their objects, and assaying their reliability and worth.[32] Images, for Plato, make *quasi*-claims to truth, since they may be more or less verisimilar. But sensations do not rise so high. They are incorrigible.[33] But they lie below the Line, just as the Form of the Good stands above it. They are incorrigible because they make no claim.

Sensations, Epicurus held, cannot be corrected by reason or by another sensation.[34] This, because all sensations are true; and truth itself, irrefutable and incorrigible.[35] Plato used the same argument in behalf of the Forms: They vouch for themselves and need no external validation. They represent no further thing. They *are* the real. Our intuitions of Forms, unmediated, non-discursive, connect knowledge with its object – a connection that, for Plato, proves the affinity of reason to its supernal objects, showing the mind to be kin to the Forms. If anything can, that proves mind immortal.[36] For Epicurus the contact between subject and object is no longer metaphorical – or metaphysical. It is not Empedocles' qualitative affinity of fire for fire or earth for earth, the water in us for the water in all that's moist. Still less is it Plato's affinity of idea for idea, subjective reason linking with the objective reason of the Forms in things. It's the impact of body upon body, the only sort of cause countenanced by mechanism.[37] The fact of contact still bespeaks a sameness, but it's no longer Plato's kinship of timeless things. The reassurance it offers is not of immortality but of mortality.

[32] *Republic* 509–10.
[33] *Theaetetus* 160b.
[34] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. DL 10.31.
[35] Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math*. 8.63.
[36] *Phaedo* 103e–107b.
[37] See Lucretius' 'outburst', as Bailey calls it, at *DRN* 2.434–45: *tactus enim tactus pro divum numina sancta corporis est sensus*. Bailey translates: 'For touch, yea touch, by the holy powers of the gods, is the sense of body…' But note the concessions to mechanism at *Timaeus* 80c: 'as to the flowing of water, the fall of the thunderbolt, and the marvels that are observed about the attraction of amber and the Heraclean stones – in none of these cases is there any attraction, but he who investigates rightly will find that such wonderful phenomena are attributable to the combination of certain conditions – the nonexistence of a vacuum, the fact that objects push one another around, and that they change places, passing severally into their proper positions as they are divided or combined.' (tr. Jowett). The denial of a vacuum, which is critical here, is clearly inconsistent with atomism. But the rejection of action at a distance is a hallmark of mechanism.

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Notice the form of the argument Epicurus marshals against Democritean doubts about the senses: It's in the pattern of Plato's appeal to the contact of knower with known. For Plato this contact is beyond time, in the intellectual world. For Epicurus it's a temporal event. Yet without the idea of non-discursive intuitions Epicurus could not have rendered plausible the claim that this impact is elemental to knowledge. The atomistic touch in Epicurean epistemology is no accident: Knowledge, like the world, arises from parts that have no parts. Empedocles' appeal to the affinity of like to like, sublimated in Plato, is brought back to earth, ballasted by Democritus' reduction of qualitative sensations to quantitative, atomistic events, collisions, in fact. But the thought that elements, which are *alogon*, register subjectively and thereby become cognitive is Plato's. Epicurus has saved Plato's notion of how knowledge is constituted, although he has inverted the divided line.

Plotinus, as Lloyd Gerson has shown,[38] saw exactly what Epicurus was about: The *eidola*, streaming from the bodies we perceive, on Epicurus' account do not just *represent* reality. They *are* reality, swatches not signals. Their impressions (*tupoi*) are the very impact of the things we know.[39] Epicurus, as Plotinus recognized[40] has almost mocked Plato's thesis as to the immediacy of real knowledge: Sensory images, Plotinus insists, remain *outside* the mind. We do not capture or 'grasp' (*lambanei*) things themselves. Thought touches reality only when we know the forms.[41] Appropriating Plato's premise of the immediacy of apprehension and the affinity of knower to known, Epicurus declares the real immediacy and affinity to be physical.[42] He has even pirated Plato's argument, that mere representations cannot be knowledge.[43] Hence the odd sounding, now physicalist, Epicurean claim that what we know *is* reality. What Plato said of sense perception, that it cannot be knowledge since it does not capture the being (*ousias*) of things but must remain irredeemably

[38] Lloyd Gerson, 'Plotinus and Epicurean Epistemology', in Dane R. Gordon and David B. Suits, *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance* (Rochester, NY: RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2003), 69–79.

[39] Sextus, *Adv. Math.* 7.203.

[40] *Enneads* 5.5.1. Cf. Pierre-Marie Morel, 'Plotinus, Epicurus, and the Problem of Intellectual Evidence: Tr.32 (*Enn.* V5)', in A. Longo and D.P. Taormina, (eds) *Plotinus and Epicurus: Matter, Perception, and Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 114–23.

[41] *Enneads* 5.5.1 17–19.

[42] Sextus, *Adv. Math.* 8.9.

[43] *Theaetetus* 184b–186e; see also Sextus, *Adv. Math.* 7.210.

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subjective, reflecting only the way things seem to an individual (*ta idia*) has been turned against Plato by Epicurus: Our perceptions are what is real; ideas are the mere representations.

Epicurus has coopted Plato's premise, that knowledge demands immediate contact with reality, and he accepts Plato's assumption that the ultimate elements of knowledge must be non-discursive.[44] Since Plato used a perceptual model in speaking of our contact with the Forms it wasn't hard for Epicurus to shift Plato's claims to the realm of sensations. Verbally, he need hardly modify the descriptive and dialectical language. Only the reference of Plato's terms need be altered, casting sensory particulars in the role Plato reserved for universals.

2.

More telling is the question of how the atoms are known. An empiric warrant is critical for Epicurus, and Lucretius honors the Epicurean tradition by lavishing on his reader multiple appeals to experience in behalf of atomism – from the wearing away of stone lintels, to the scent of naphtha in a room, to the Brownian movement and the Tyndall Effect.[45] But what all this vivid naturalistic poetry masks is that empiricism deserts its post here. For atoms are invisible; and the void insensible, as critics of atomism were not shy in pointing out.[46]

[44] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. 37.

[45] *DRN* 2.112–24: 'I call to mind an illustration of this fact, an image that has passed before our eyes but is ever present to our view: Only study how the sunlight pours into the house when its rays are let into the darkened rooms, and you will see the myriad tiny bodies tumbling every which way in the empty space, caught in the sunbeams' light, as though embroiled in some unending battle, squadron against squadron, ceaselessly, advancing and retreating, joining and disjoining. Whence you can infer (*conicere*) how the ultimate particles are tossed about in the greater void.' The illustration comes from Leucippus and Democritus; see Aristotle, *De Anima* I 2, 404; cf. Lactantius, *De Ira Dei* 10.9. Einstein showed in 1905 that molecular momenta suffice to cause the Brownian movement of particles suspended in a fluid, thus causing the Tyndall effect, the scintillation of motes dancing in the light.

[46] See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*), 1.147. Democritus, Sextus charges, 'in some places abolishes the things that appear to the senses and asserts that none of them appears in truth but only in opinion,' the reality being the atoms, which must be known by

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Epicurus responds by further refining the Democritean *ex nihilo*: If things did not have indivisible parts they would long ago have vanished into nothing – and anything could arise from anything.[47] Naturalism here leans on the Eleatic rejection of creation, although for quite different reasons and with quite a different outcome than Aristotle does when he denies the void. What Epicurus saves are the quantitative realities of Democritus, not the formal realities of Plato.

But if the atoms are immutable, their solidity must be absolute. And neither immutability nor absolute solidity are observable. Here we stand at the threshold where Epicurean sensualism gives way to causal realism: The existence of atoms is an inference from what we perceive, not itself a perception.

Atoms, as Bailey notes, 'cannot from their very nature throw off "idols"'. They must be known by '*synthesis*'.[48] The term might suggest that atoms are known as sensory composites, just as ordinary objects are. But that, of course, is quite impossible. 'Only by reason' does atomism becomes the sole (*monachon*) explanation of larger phenomena.[49] Epicurus' reasoning here, as Bailey acknowledges, is at the furthest remove from sensation.[50] Lucretius openly confesses that it is *a priori*: Infinite divisibility, the (Aristotelian) alternative, would entail an infinite regress and set the parts of the universe at numeric equality with the parts of its parts, 'against which nature itself cries out in denial'.[51] So, as Aetius reports, the atoms are reached ultimately by reason.[52]

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reason (*Adv. Math.* 1.135–40), the atoms being 'void of every sensible quality' (2.6). Cf. Sextus' critique of the Epicurean inference to atomism by Demetrius of Laconia, *Adv. Math.* 2.348–50. The later Epicurean, Philodemus, whose work survived in fragmentary form at Herculaneum, was keen to address this point at the opening of *On Methods of Inference*, arguing that any method that infers non-existence from lack of perception is 'not cogent'. See *On Methods of Inference*, III. Col 1a. 1 trans. P.H. DeLacey and E.A. DeLacey (Philadelphia: American Philological Association, 1941).

47 Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 39a, 56b; cf. *DRN* 1.584–98.

48 D.L. 10.32. See, further, Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, 427.

49 Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 62.

50 Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, 430.

51 *DRN* 1.615–23.

52 Aetius 1.3.18. From Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (1879), 581–2.

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A pair of counterfactuals sustains Epicurean atomism and its corollary, the reality of the void: Were it not for the void, motion would be impossible[53] (but motion is observed); and were it not for the atoms, motion would meet no resistance (which also is observed). So the relative hardness our senses detect, say in striking a rock, signals or betokens[54] the absolute resistance of the perfectly solid, indivisible atom. Lucretius renders the argument immediate and stresses its sensuous side. Without atomic solidity, objects would dissolve at a touch – or with no force at all since there would be no touching in such a world.[55] To state the enabling premise in the more direct style of Epicurus himself: In feeling any resistance at all we sense the atoms' solidity. Without that, there would be no resistance; one's hand would pass through the rock as if through the void.

Again, without indestructible atoms, Lucretius argues, natural bodies, lacking hooks or eyes or solid surfaces, would lack all stability: 'if everything were perishable in every part, anything might vanish suddenly, needing no force to disjoin its parts and dissolve their linkage… The same force would suffice to destroy all things – unless imperishable matter held them together with stronger or lesser bonds. The slightest touch would be a deathblow, were there not eternal particles whose dissolution demands some definite force. But as things stand, since particles are variously conjoined and their matter everlasting, each body holds up unscathed until it meet a force sharp enough to fray its weave.'[56]

Epicurus infers absolute hardness from the perception of relative solidity; absolute void, from the perception of relative give. Moreover, as reported by Polystratus, heavier and lighter as relative predicates (*ta pros ti kategorou*) are said to depend on a non-relative, absolute nature (*kata ten idian phusin*).[57] But the premise that every relative presupposes an absolute is the beating heart of Platonism.

Motion, Epicurus reasons, would be impossible in a solid universe. Then, reversing the Eleatic elenchus, he infers, since motion is real,

[53] 'Epicurus says that the void exists, which is an imperceptible thing, and this is borne out by the obvious fact of motion; for if void does not exist, neither ought motion to exist, as the moving body would have no place to which to shift, because everything would be a solid mass' Sextus, *Adv. Math*. 7.213, tr. after Bailey, 260.

[54] Philodemus skirts Epicurus' distaste for formal logic by proposing an Epicurean counterpart to the Stoic theory of signs.

[55] *DRN* 1.219–20.

[56] See *DRN* 1.215–64, quoted here, 217–20, 238–47. The passage is a descant on Epicurus' thesis in *ad Herodot*. 38–39.

[57] Polystratus, *De Contemptu*. 23.26.

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so is non-being.[58] Unless there were a void opening a way for bodies to pass, motion would be impossible, given the absolute solidity that Epicurus thinks hardness entails, making atoms physical counterparts of the Parmenidean One. There would be no flexibility, elasticity, or give in atoms, nor even the slipperiness that might let a boat pass through the water, or a knife through butter. So just as relative resistance is our tactile sign that something absolutely solid exists beyond our bodies, it seems we can know of absolute emptiness (never apprehensible by the senses) from the motion we perceive.

Plato takes any of the relative values that were the Sophists' stock in trade as sure signs of the underlying reality of the same value as an absolute: Relative unity and sameness in the sensory world betoken the absolute reality of Unity Itself, beyond becoming. Our comparative notions of equality or symmetry bespeak an underlying awareness of perfect instances, accessible only by recollection.[59] Our fading life here would be impossible without its precondition, absolute life undying.[60] Without such archetypes, reality itself might lose its character. Our relative and perspectival cognitions, the opinions we hold and beliefs we entertain, our fleeting glimpses and surrogates of knowledge, presume a perfect truth as their foundation epistemically and ontically. This bed or chair would not be real were it not for the ontically prior Bed or Chair Itself.[61] All our partial truths lean against Truth Itself; all our partial and relative goods presume the Absolute Good, their Source as the sun is the source of light and the lamp of visibility in nature. Reason casts its light here for Plato, showing us the way to these ur-ontologies.

Epicurus, of course, declines the Forms. His world of bodies stands alone, rooted not in the intellectual empyrean but in the atoms. Yet to anchor the atoms, setting aside the Eleatic thoughts of Melissus and Democritus, Epicurus still needs a reasoned premise. Stated outright it would sound like this: There is no relative solidity without some absolute solidity to back it up; no room for movement without an absolute emptiness in which bodies might move and bypass one another.

Epicurus ties his atomism to the senses by urging that the resistance of things portends their absolute hardness, and reasoning that motion would be impossible without the void. But both inferences need a major premise to supplement the perceptual minor. For the atoms this is the thought that relative solidity in bodies entails

[58] D.L. 10.39.
[59] *Meno* 86b, *Phaedo* 72e.
[60] *Republic* 10.611b.
[61] *Republic* 10.597a.

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absolute solidity in their (ultimate) parts. Mutatis mutandis for the void.[62] Epicurus can even extend the point, to argue that things would have no size without the absolute solidity of the atoms, lest solids be composed of elements with no size.[63] Here too he may again have applied the *ex nihilo* idea, reflecting his distaste for Plato's derivation of solids from mere numbers and shapes. But in all these inferences, the major premise had *a priori* elements. Which brings us to the doctrine of prolepsis.

3.

The paradigm case of prolepsis is the Epicurean account of our knowledge of the gods[64] – specifically, the anchoring premise that they are blessed and immortal. Rist, echoing Bailey, sees prolepsis as a kind of generalization based on recalled perceptions. That keeps Epicurus in the empiricist fold that will later prove so well guarded by Locke, Hume, and Mill. But that reading undercuts Epicurus' argument: We don't perceive immortality, or the kind of blessedness the gods enjoy. It may be true that no pleasure outshines peace of mind,[65] but it is not perceptually that we know this to be so. Empirically we can't name the best of pleasures until we've tried them all. To press *ataraxia* to the head of the line demands a conceptual analysis of pleasure as repletion, generalizing well beyond experience.

Humans, Epicurus holds, may see gods,[66] but such visions, in sleep or waking, do not validate themselves. To recognize gods *as gods* one needs a prior notion of what it means to be a god. Plato offers the basis of such a notion when he defines it as the task of theology to say what is worthy of the divine.[67] The very first of the *Kyriae Doxai* aims to meet Plato's challenge by stipulating that the blessed and immortal is untroubled and untroubling. Epicurus here echoes Plato's language, when he has Phaedrus say that love 'is neither the cause nor the victim of any injustice'.[68] But Epicurus still must show that immortal beings

[62] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. D.L. X 42.
[63] Polystratus, *De Contemptu* 23.26.
[64] See Cicero, *DND* 1.16.43; further, compare the Stoic view at *DND* 2.5–6.
[65] K.D. 3.
[66] Epicurus, *Ad Men*. 123; *DRN* 5.1169–90.
[67] *Republic* 2.379.
[68] *Symposium* 196b.

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exist. To do so he finds it necessary to argue that if there are worlds like ours where dissolution prevails there must be inter-worlds where what breaks down is constantly restored.[69] The symmetry echoes Socrates' striking affirmation that nature does not go on one leg.[70] But here the thesis is far more concrete: Epicurus finds it necessary to posit that in the perfect *isonomia* of the cosmos, the gods' bodies are continually repaired. That's not a fact observed or even observable – any more than is the claim, equally crucial to Epicurus, that the blessedness of the gods means that their lives are undisturbed. One could, of course, affirm that the gods are mere notions: Bacchus is wine, Ceres is grain. But that only pushes Epicurus closer to Plato. Epicurus lacks robust *empiric* grounds for the claim that the gods are mere notions, let alone can he show an Epicurean how to reconcile *that* thesis with the well known and rather flagrant anthropomorphism of the school.

'Were we untroubled by doubts about the heavens and death, fearing that it affects us', Epicurus writes, 'or by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we'd have no need of an account of nature'.[71] Epicurus is heartily empiricist in intent. But he knows that naturalism requires some a priori grounding to secure the necessity and universality of natural causes – and, critically, to assure us that all humans are mortal and not at risk of being born again.[72]

Epicurus' critique of popular religion is grounded in the regulative conception of divinity that Plato made explicit,[73] namely, that one should believe of gods that they are blessed and immortal and should affirm of them only what upholds (*phulattein*) that character.[74] Plato even pauses in Book X of the *Laws* to consider the idea of atheists who admit that there are gods who do not concern themselves with human affairs.[75] So the masses (*hoi polloi*) must be wrong not only about the gods' mythic battles and frustrations but

[69] Epicurus, *ad Herod*. D.L. 10.45, *ad Pyth*. D.L. 10.89; *DND* 1.50.
[70] *Phaedo* 70–72.
[71] K.D. 11.
[72] V.F. 14.
[73] *Republic* 889e–900b. Further, restricting ourselves only to the *Republic*, the Platonic theology arguably has three regulative principles: that the gods are good (377e, 391c), that they are unchanging (380d, 390c), and that they are sources of truth (382a, 389b). To deny any of these is rank impiety (391e).
[74] Epicurus, *ad Men*., 123.
[75] A.E. Taylor, in *Plato: The Man and His Work*, calls it a 'convenient anachronism' to term this class of people 'Epicurean atheists' (490).

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also about the related issue of their playing favorites among humankind. But such truths are not accessible to observation, and some of them may seem, at least to some, to run counter to the demands of piety. Norms of piety clearly constrain Plato's discourse about divinity; and Epicurus, heeding the same constraints, writes: 'It is not he who denies the gods of the many but he who pins on the gods the beliefs of the many who is impious'.[76] To Epicurus what's impious is the notion of gods whose perfect lives are disturbed by any concerns other than their own.

Knowing that cosmological hypotheses are under-determined by experience, Epicurus urges followers not to seek certainty about phenomena beyond our sensory range but to rest content with probabilities. We may extrapolate from our terrestrial experience, but only hypotheses consistent with naturalism should be entertained. With celestial phenommena, there are always alternative explanations: 'The things above us admit of more than one sort of cause and more than one account of their nature harmonious with our senses.' Since there are infinite actual worlds, every natural hypothesis may well apply somewhere. But explanations deemed non-natural are excluded *a priori*. For peace of mind is the goal, not knowledge for its own sake.[77] Epicurean ethics drives the science here.

Epicurus did not need to discover for himself the inadequacy of the senses to establish universal truths. He has taken Plato's point that knowledge cannot be equated with our impressions but depends on our reflection on them.[78] He puts that principle to work in his tactic for subduing illusions by letting one sense check up on another,[79] and when he distances himself from the Cyrenaics by charging reason with the definition and modulation of pleasure.[80]

Cicero's Epicurean Velleius in *De Natura Deorum* notes that Epicurus held that the gods had imprinted conceptions of many things (including themselves) on human minds; these he termed *prolepses* and held inquiry and discussion impossible without them.[81] In this vein, Epicurus relates prolepsis to memory, suggesting shreds of Plato's thoughts about *anamnesis*. But on a strictly empirical account, memory might well be confined to the mere collation of perceptions.

[76] Epicurus, *ad. Men.*, 123.
[77] Epicurus, *ad Pyth.* 85b-88a; cf. *ad Herod.* 38, 51.
[78] *Theaetetus* 184, 186d.
[79] Cf. K.D. 24.
[80] K.D. 3, 5, 8, 19–21, 35; V.F. 7, 21, 51, 59, 71; Cicero, *De Finibus*, 1.39.
[81] See Cicero, *DND* 1.43.

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More will be required to allow projection across an infinite cosmos and into an unbounded future, as Epicurean naturalism requires – not least if it's to yield the confidence needed to overcome all fears of death.

Platonic *anamnesis* would open a door to a world beyond becoming. Medieval Platonists like al-Fārābī can bring Ideas down to earth by giving them sensory counterparts in the imagination – and this without forgoing incorporeal ideas and the incorporeal minds to think them. But Epicurus need not reach so far. His naturalism gives him access to what today would be called a biogenetic structuralist account of the innate stepping stones that would allow him to infer, say, the absolute solidity of atoms and the absolute emptiness of space, relying on the perceived relative resistance of matter and the (merely finite) speed of bodies in motion. Epicurus' evolutionary reflections allow him structural counterparts to Platonic recollection. And he can give such counterparts sensual content: *Prolepseis* are images made universal when 'filled in' by the addition of notions like 'all' and 'absolute', unmet in experience. Philodemus plugs the Epicurean chink, by treating prolepses as innate promptings, on the theory that 'our nature strongly desires to reveal to some others what it thinks'. An Epicurean, evidently, can say that our natures incline us toward particular thoughts, which we are, innately, moved to consider and embrace as well as share.[82]

Since Epicurus relies on causes rather than grounds to make reasoning reliable, his philosophy welcomes an appeal to animal behavior in explaining and even justifying moral and epistemic inferences.[83] Epicurus takes human nature to be embedded in nature as a whole, from which it is sprung. Not unrelated are such *a priori* articles of Epicurean faith as the belief that nature provides according to our needs,[84] that sharp pains are brief and persistent ones dull,[85] and that wrongdoers can never know peace of mind.[86] All these have empiric content. But none survives without prolepsis, a surrogate for Plato's innate ideas, connecting sensory particulars with universal truths.

[82] Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Fragment 28:10–11, trans. after D. Konstan, D. Clay, C.E. Glad, J.C. Thom, and J. Ware (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 44–45.

[83] *De Finibus* 1.42; *DRN* 1.14–20; cf. K.D. 9. This, further, is a reason why Philodemus roots validity for Epicurean logic in the psychological category of *inconceivability* in *On Methods of Inference*, 11.31.

[84] K.D. 15, 29.

[85] K.D. 4, cf. 28.

[86] V.F. 7; cf. K.D. 5, 10, 17.

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4.

The plainest lesson Epicurus learned from Plato is the means he uses to silence the Cyrenaics.[87] Hedonism becomes serious philosophy by distancing itself from mere self-indulgence. Plato's most uncompromising argument against hedonism is that without reason's tempering, the life of pleasure alone is indistinguishable from the life of a mollusk,[88] and Epicurus knows that the pursuit of pleasure will make sense to the philosophically astute only if reason holds the reins. It is from Plato, as Shorey saw, that Epicurus learns the importance of the art of measurement.[89] He'll thus appoint reason (in service to pleasure) as the hedonic umpire and judge of actions' outcomes beyond the horizon of sensation.

In *Republic* IV Plato seeks an integrated society and models on its social and economic harmony the integration of the individual as well. So he disparages social inequality as a source of class warfare. But when applied more narrowly, to the personal economy of the individual, the principle enunciated boils down to a version of 'nothing in excess'. That principle underlies the trademark Epicurean thesis that one cannot hoard pleasures – or enhance one's hedonic state by seeking ever more intense sensations.

For Plato, living to gratify one's appetites only enlarges them. Those who serve at desire's beck and call are trying to carry water in a sieve.[90] Lucretius echoes that image when he pictures the greedy soul avid for ever more pleasures, *omnia pertusum congesta quasi in vas commoda perfuuxere atque ingrata ineriere*.[91]

Echoing another topos of Plato's critique of *hedonē*, Lucretius finds the enlargement of demand not merely quantitative but obsessive: The love-besotted wretch calls the object of his passion 'a nut-brown maid' if she's dark but praises 'some idiot with a pallid, washed-out stare' as 'a gray-eyed Minerva'; one adores 'the sweet

[87] For the relations of Plato's and Epicurus' accounts of pleasure, see V. Brochard, *La Théorie du Plaisir d'après Épicure* (Paris, 1912), 252 ff.

[88] *Philebus*, 21d.

[89] Shorey, 'Plato, Lucretius, and Epicurus', 202.

[90] Plato, *Gorgias* 493a-d; see also *Republic* 363d, 585d, *Phaedo* 82e.

[91] *DRN* 3.936–37. Nature's rebuke of those unliberated souls in thrall to the fear death echoes Plato, *Gorgias* 493bc *Republic* 2.363d, 3.386. The rebuke reverts to Plato's image of the leaky vessel since Lucretius shares Plato's view that pleasures cannot last although his remedy, as nature preaches it, is contentment rather than a quest for goods beyond those that pleasure can afford. For the motif, see Ivan Lindforth, *Soul and Sieve in Plato's* Gorgias (London: Cambridge University Press, 1944).

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disorder in the dress' of a slovenly wench, while another verbally transforms a 'lumbering lummox' into 'a wild wood-nymph'.[92] Plato lampooned remaking as marks of beauty the flaws a cooler head might see in another's erotic target: 'You praise a snub-nosed one as cute, a hook-nosed one you say is regal, one in-between is well proportioned, dark ones look manly, and pale ones are children of the gods. As for a honey-colored boy, do you think the term is anything but the euphemistic coinage of a lover who found it easy to tolerate sallowness, provided it was accompanied by the bloom of youth'.[93] Lucretius, like Plato, plays on the incongruity of the attraction and the contrary extremes of the features praised. Indiscriminacy is the symptom of lust's taking charge, in poetry as in life. Leporello's Catalogue Song in *Don Giovanni* preserves the contrasting extremes, dramatic irony exposing the wilfulness that Plato and the Epicurean pinion as the mark of irrational concupiscence.

Epicurus' more practical and more modest hedonism rests on a few home truths about pleasure: (1) pleasures do not grow ever larger with the intensity of sensations, (2) pleasures cannot be amassed or accrued, 'heaped up' (*congesta*, in the language Lucretius denies to a prospective complainer, who fears that all life's pleasures have run through the holes in his leaky vessel), (3) pleasurable sensations are repletions, the sensation resulting from processes of alleviating pain or lack,[94] (4) the optimum of pleasure is no peak experience – let alone limitless sensory gratification – but *ataraxia*, peace of mind.

Porphyry reports the Epicurean view that many pursue wealth to escape their problems but only exchange old sorrows for greater new ones.[95] Distinguishing pleasurable sensations (kinetic pleasures) from katastemic (resting) pleasures, Epicurus can explain pleasurable sensations physiologically even as he gives preference to the calm life that sybarites and their apologists lose sight of. Kinetic pleasures, he

[92] These snatches from *DRN* 4.1149–70 are drawn from Rolfe Humphries' translation, *The Way Things Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 152.

[93] *Republic* 474de. The object of the infatuation in Plato's satire is an *eromenos*, but Lucretius had allowed for that at IV 1053, a hundred lines ahead of his satiric sequence.

[94] Epicurus, *ad Men*. 129; cf. *DRN* 4.865–76; cf. *Phaedo* 60ab; *Phaedrus* 258e. At *Symposium* 186d Eryximachus defines medicine as 'simply the science of the effects of Love on repletion and depletion of the body'.

[95] Porphyry, *To Marcella*, 28. Philodemus echoes the thought that wealth expands one's exposure to harms, *On Frank Criticism,* Fragment 30, column XIVa.

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calls 'a mere tickling (γαργαλισμός) of the flesh'.[96] Using these core ideas, Epicurus can develop his own, prudential hedonism,[97] centered on visions of simple self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and premised on the faith that natural desires are easily met. Extravagance is the weakness an honest hedonist must shun. Better to be satisfied with barley cakes and water than to grapple for more than nature needs.[98]

For Plato, as we've suggested, the art of measurement led on to the recognition that since pleasures (and other ends) differ in kind, we need some higher authority to judge among the incommensurate goods: Sensory appetite does not set its own limits and cannot adjudicate its quarrels, say, with honor, or piety, or the quest for understanding. Only reason can do that, knowing both itself and the objects sought by desires other than its own. Reason can test ends, not against each other directly (since they have no common denominator) but against the touchstone of the Good itself, which reason must consult to succeed in its political task of adjudication in the psyche or the state. Plato's art of measurement tracks a moving target, where reason is no mere umpire of prudence but a judge of values with no common theme, except as distinctive declensions of a higher Good. Here begins the journey Epicurus declines. Hence his denial that pleasures ultimately differ in kind,[99] his insistence that all are physical, and his tying that view to his thesis that peace of mind is the summit of happiness – even Zeus knows no higher.[100] For *ataraxia*, ultimately and simply, is a physical undisturbedness.

In place of Plato's transcendent standard, Epicurus sets out his own, practical standard of natural needs,[101] calling on memory to compensate one's giving up the illusory aim of piled up pleasures.[102] Prudence (*phronesis*) is therefore our best guide in life, better even than philosophy.[103] Prudence here is not Aristotle's *phronesis*, of course. It's far earthier, grounded in recognition of one's natural needs and a healthy disrespect for luxury and sybaritic sensations. But again note the form of the argument. For it is from Plato that Epicurus learns how to answer a Cyrenaic. It is from Plato that he

[96] Epicurus ap. Athenagoras *Opera* ed. J. K. T. von Otto (Jena: Mauke, 1857; reprinted Wiesbaden: Sandig, 1969) 12.546e. Spinoza retains the notion when he speaks of *titillatio*. *Ethics* 2.P11.

[97] See K.D. 3, 18–21, 26.

[98] Epicurus, *ad*. *Men*. DL 10.131.

[99] K.D. 9, *DND* 1.113.

[100] V.F. 33.

[101] K.D. 10, 15, 25, 29–30; V.F. 25, 59, 68.

[102] V.F. 55; cf. 19; D.L. 10.22.

[103] Epicurus, *ad*. *Men*. 132.

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learns that mere service of desire is inevitably self-frustrating – and that appetites are incompetent to judge themselves – that reason (not pleasure) must assay the anatomy and weight the worth of pleasures, long run and short. It's even from Plato that Epicurus adapts the standard to which reason must defer, not the Good itself, of course, but, its Hellenistic surrogate, the rule of nature.

Reason in Epicurus can look to nature because we are attuned to the world in which we live and from which we evolved. So our natural desires reflect our actual needs. The naturalism leafs out so richly here that it all but covers the roots where Plato ingrafted *nomos* and *physis*, overcoming the Sophists' dichotomy, to affirm the universal sway of natural law: 'Reason overruled Necessity', Plato wrote, 'persuading her to guide the bulk of things that become toward what is best'.[104] The same trust in nature that assures Epicurus that the senses will not undetectably betray us makes him confident that so long as reason can persuade the senses to stand to their natural functions our appetites will not addict us to excess.[105] This is the same trust that makes Epicurus confident that nature will not impose unbearable pains,[106] that no pleasure is intrinsically evil,[107] that our needs, when held to nature's demands, are readily met,[108] and (lest we miss the Socratic roots of this optimism) that 'No one deliberately chooses evil'.[109]

5.

Less obvious than reducing the art of measurement to its hedonic base, but prominent in what Epicurus gleaned from Plato are the fruits of Plato's argument that the gods are not venal.[110] Epicurus does not draw Plato's larger conclusion, that the worthy account of

[104] *Timaeus* 48; and F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1937), 161–77.

[105] V.F. 21; cf. 69; cf. *Republic* 8.558d. For an Epicurean/Platonic ethical application of of the metaphor of addiction as a hook, see the tenth century philosopher/physician al-Rāzī (Rhazes), see Goodman, 'How Epicurean was Rāzī?' *Studia Graeco-Arabica* **5** (2015), 247–80, and *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age* (Edinburgh and New Brunswick, NJ, 1999) Chapter 5, 'Rāzī and Epicurus', 35–67.

[106] K.D. 4; V.F. 4.

[107] K.D. 8.

[108] K.D. 15, 28.

[109] V.F. 16.

[110] *Laws* 10.905.

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the divine requires us to reject the very notion of any differences among the gods.[111] Epicurean anthropomorphism, like Epicurean realism, is rooted in a distinctively empiricist claim – The gods *must* be real since there are those who have seen them. Cicero nicely pictures *his* Epicurean, Velleius, saying not just that the gods are visible and like humans but 'the liker the better'.[112]

Epicurus does not agree with Plato[113] that the gods are impassive to pleasures and impervious to pains. He finds the gods elevated enough in making their pleasures neither excessive nor frantic: Natural pleasures are not unworthy of the gods. But in banishing the gods to the *intermundia*, as Lucretius calls their abodes, Epicurus generates his own version of transcendence. His inference that beings who are blessed and immortal would be untroubled and untroublesome, out of tune as it is with Plato,[114] makes a special case of the impassivity that Plato had urged.[115] The Epicurean focus is, of course, on *ataraxia*. There's no room here for Plato's thoughts of divine governance by or through the Forms. But if peace and peace of mind are the ideal, the gods of Epicurus live the perfect life of undisturbedness.

That ideal is prominently showcased when Lucretius opens his poem – its cosmic scope and theme worthy of the epic form – by hailing Venus as patroness of Rome and mother to the 'Aenead' race, and *invoking* her as patroness of peace. The joys Venus typifies for Lucretius are generative, embracing the poet's creativity and all else that is generative in nature and in art – the gifts of peace. Lucretius signals the union of freedom with nature's creativity, so central to his Epicurean commitments, by playing on the assonance of *voluptas* with *voluntas*. But he names the key to all that he finds creative – from human freedom to the coalescence of atoms, both made possible by the spontaneity of the *clinamen* – when he echoes a thought that Plato culls from Sophocles. Even as he dedicates his work to Memmius, Lucretius calls on Venus to lull Mars into peaceful slumbers. That will allow the poet's work to proceed, celebrating but also typifying nature's creative industry. No faithful Epicurean would ask favors of a deity. But Lucretius need not compromise

[111] See *Euthyphro* 7de; *Republic* 379–81; Goodman, 'Ethics and God', *Philosophical Investigations* **34** (2011), 135–50.
[112] *DND* I.49; cf. 18.46; 31.87, 34.96; Aetius 1.34.
[113] *Philebus* 33b.
[114] *Laws* 10.885b, 888c, 948c.
[115] *Republic* 2.381.

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Epicurean principle or Roman patriotism when he seeks (as Vergil does in his own way) to turn Roman eyes toward peace and art.[116]

As if to challenge the popular image of his philosophy, Epicurus was notable among ancient philosophers not only for his anthropomorphism but also for his more than Confucian or Ciceronian acceptance of traditional ritual practices: 'observance of the customary rites', he noted, 'is no proof of piety'. But neither are such rites, 'on suitable occasions', to be scorned when practiced by the observant, nor need they be shunned by philosophers. Piety is not going about saying how much one honors and fears the gods or making a display of one's eagerness to spend on sacrifices and offerings. Don't serve the gods in hopes of winning their favor, Epicurus urges.[117] Clarity of mind, he says, is a divine gift and to be appreciated as such. But recognition of such gifts is quite different from begging favor from the gods for serving them. As Cicero's Velleius puts it, 'if our purpose were to worship the gods with piety, we must be free from superstition'.[118]

Lucretius' Epicurean reasoning here echoes Plato's portrayal of Socrates running Euthyphro to the ground by letting him call piety a kind of commerce in divine favor.[119] Plato satirizes the notion of religion as mutual back-scratching in the *Republic*, when Cephalus shuffles off to offer sacrifices, motivated, as he confesses with the candor of the elderly, more by caution than by ardent piety: 'let me tell you, Socrates, that when a man thinks himself near death, fears and cares enter into his mind that he never had before. The tales of a world below and the punishment exacted there for deeds done here were once a laughing matter to him, but now he is tormented

[116] Plato embeds an echo of Sophocles' thoughts of Aphrodite capturing and subduing Ares (*Thyestes*, fragment 235) at *Symposium* 196d. For the balance Vergil seeks of Roman prowess with the ways of peace, see Anchises charge to Aeneas: *Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento* / (*hae tibi erunt artes*), *pacisque imponere morem,* / *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* – Roman, ever remember the art that shall be yours: Ruling nations and ordaining the ways of peace, sparing the vanquished but battling down the proud (*Aeneid* VI 851–53).

[117] Epicurus, *Oxyrh. Papyrus*, in A. J. Festugière, *Epicurus and his Gods*, tr. C. W. Chilton (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969; first French edition, 1946) 64–65, from H. Diels, ed. *Ein Epicureisches Fragment über Gotterverehrung* (Berlin, 1916) 902–04. Lucretius echoes this thought: 'It is no piety to be seen with head covered bowing again and again to a stone and visiting every altar…' (*DRN* 5.1164).

[118] *DND* 1.145.

[119] Plato, *Euthyphro* 14.

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by the thought that they may be true'.[120] Plato unerringly captures the kind of scruples against which Epicurus ranged his cosmology.

In place of venal piety, Epicurus offers the gods as an ideal, their happiness, 'infinitely more august' than ours. To offer sacrifices, he writes, is certainly acceptable for an Epicurean (by Zeus!). The wise person sets up votive images.[121] Done in the proper spirit, such acts of worship promote confidence rather than superstitious fears and breed pleasure rather than anxiety. To fear the gods, Epicurus argues, is to belittle them; hopes of appeasing them diminish the divine, as if gods would turn foul acts fair, as human litigants might hope a penalty to be remitted in proportion to the sops they offer – the bribes that Plato, like the Bible,[122] renounces on behalf of the divine.

Armstrong finds a curious affinity between the strange bedfellows, Epicurus and Plotinus, in their views about the 'uselessness of prayer'.[123] Gods, we know, do not take bribes. The many worlds of Epicurus are ruled by causality and chance; his gods have lives of their own to live in the *intermundia*. So Epicurus can picture Asclepius telling him, 'You have taught the gods *ataraxia*'.[124] The celestial gods of Plotinus do have functions to perform, but 'they are thought of as performing them in an automatic, almost mechanical way, without trouble or conscious thought or disturbance of their life… For Plotinus the visible cosmos is… the result of an unconscious reflex of the strange dream-like contemplation which is the activity of nature'.[125] These gods, too, are not Stoic deities, engaged, indeed, immersed in the world we know. They do not 'lay aside their own lives' to meddle in human affairs, let alone lay down their lives to save mankind, or to fructify the fields.

[120] *Republic* 330de.

[121] See Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*, 120, and Philodemus', *On Piety*, 126.

[122] Deuteronomy 10:17.

[123] A. H. Armstrong, 'The Gods in Plato, Plotinus, Epicurus', *Classical Quarterly* **32** (1938), 193, citing *Enneads* 3.2.8. For his part, Plotinus aims his darts at moral and spiritual weaklings, who do not reach out toward the divine. The answering neglect, then, he argues is deserved. But the implication is that prayer is aspirational: It does not move the impassive gods but rather seeks to reach them.

[124] *Epicurus apud Philodemus, Peri Kakion*, ed. C. Jensen, Book X and Jensen's *Ein neuer Brief Epikurs* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1933). See Armstrong, 195.

[125] Armstrong, 193, citing *Enneads* 3.8.3–4.

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Epicurus, we know, was the more religiously observant than Plotinus. It was Plotinus who said that if the gods wished to commune with him, 'It is for them to come to me!'[126] But both men believed they could make contact with the gods – as Philodemus shows in the case of Epicurus, and as Plotinus makes clear by his proto-kabbalistic thoughts on the cosmic role of prayer in *Enneads* IV. The intellectualist spirituality of either man would commend itself to many a Platonist; but others, less intellectualist in their spirituality, readily find it alarming.[127] Both Rāzī and Maimonides work to temper the elitist overtones of this idea of a higher spirituality – Rāzī by maintaining (in Epicurean character) that *anyone* who applies himself can think philosophically, and adding that even the slightest independent thinking can free the soul from this life's trammels; Maimonides, by finding that a well regulated moral life can put one genuinely, if implicitly, in touch with the ideas by which the mind can realize its affinity with God and win immortality. But immortality, of course, is not the goal of Epicurus.

Fear of the gods is unwholesome on Epicurus' account. Overcoming such fear is part of of the Epicurean fourfold cure.[128] At its extreme, as Lucretius paints the fear of the gods, it climaxes in the palpable impiety of a father's staining the altar with his trembling child's blood, offering her not in marriage but to propitiate an angry goddess: 'Such are the enormities religion can induce'.[129] The tone is not Plato's, but the religious radicalism of Epicurus is. Plato prefers indirection, bracketing his rejection of Greek sacred lore, whether by placing an extreme version of it in the mouth of the crackpot would be prophet Euthyphro,[130] or by masking it as a critique of 'the poets' in the *Republic*.[131] Adeimantus in the second book of the *Republic* sets it down as popular wisdom that the gods are readily appeased with charms and sacrifices like those prescribed in 'bushels' of purportedly inspired books of Musaeus and Orpheus, children of the Muses and the Moon. Such literature, guiding individuals and even states, leads people to believe that sins can be erased and wrongs annulled by sacrifices and good sport.[132]

126 Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, chapter 10.
127 Armstrong, 194–95.
128 Philodemus, *Against the Sophists* 4.9–14.
129 *DRN* 1.80–100.
130 *Euthyphro* 6a.
131 398a.
132 364b–365a.

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Cast as a devil's advocate, Adeimantus archly argues that if the poets are right, it's better to be unjust and buy off divine retribution with one's gains.[133] That opens the way for Socrates to charge the poets with lying about the gods and to debar future guardians from hearing tales of quarrels among the gods.[134] The gods themselves, by the end of the *Republic,* do not turn a blind eye to injustice, regardless of the sacrificial ceremonies religion may underwrite.[135] Epicurus echoes the language Plato puts in Adeimantus' mouth, setting up the target he too takes aim at, rejecting both the threats of dire sufferings in the afterlife and the promises of propitiation that Adeimantus bruits as popular wisdom – but not eliminating the pleasanter side of traditional Greek piety, its festal games and competitions.

6.

We now turn to the political questions we promised to consider. Epicurus and his followers preferred civic withdrawal[136] over efforts to repair public institutions. Epicureans deemed it neither in their power nor in their interest, nor even in the public interest, to try to mend civic life. In drawing this conclusion and contenting themselves with life among their friends rather than seek political engagement, we suspect they were influenced both by their own experience and by the sorts of troubles Plato suffered at Syracuse. Efforts to improve others or their lot, Epicureans insist, are misguided and counterproductive.[137] That Plato's best and second-best cities (the kalliopolis of the *Republic* and Magnesia of the *Laws*) both demand a ground-up political restart obliquely sustains the Epicurean view that fixing politics *in situ* is a task better put aside than shouldered by the wise. The Socratic withdrawal from politics reported in the *Apology* is Epicurus' favored model: 'a man who fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life, if he wishes to survive even a short time'.[138]

[133] *Republic* 366.
[134] *Republic* 377–78.
[135] 613b. And recall that each wrongdoer must suffer ten times (*dekakis*) the pain he has caused (*Rep*. 615b).
[136] V.F. 58.
[137] Cf. *DND* 1.121–22.
[138] *Apology* 32a.

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Plato himself never gave up his radical dream, but his life shows the risks and costs.[139] Epicurus has taken the lesson to heart. His own experience in the new Hellenistic age allows him to draw his more modest, practical conclusions, counseling withdrawal from the political game. 'Those who can attain complete independence of their neighbors enjoy the pleasantest lives together'.[140] 'The purest source of security from men… is the immunity derived from a life of quiet and withdrawal from everyone'.[141] Far better to look on in mild amusement at the world's woes than seek ways to end them.[142] The Epicurean's stance here is like that of Odysseus at the end of Plato's Myth of Er. Having learned the lesson of the life of *polypragmasune*, Odysseus finds that what is preferable is 'the life of a private person who does his own work'.[143]

There is a social message in the Epicurean *lasser faire*, but it comes as a backhanded inference from the calculated personalism of Epicurean ethics. Stoics with their high valuation of caring and concern, like Christians, with their idealized good Samaritan, and like Jews, with their ideal of the ethos of *ḥesed*, the active practice of loving kindness, would readily find the Epicurean ideal of privacy selfish and irresponsible. But Epicureans see a busy-body attitude or even a missionary impetus in such values. They readily argue that one may, in fact, prove best at promoting social peace or even most help others by leaving them alone. Such claims can be self-serving or self-deceiving. But Epicureans, with their sensitivity to the varied disguises of the fear of death, have some sensitivity to self-deception. Lucretius pinions the nexus between ideals of public service and the seamier side of politics when he uses his poetic gift to penetrate the motives of those who pursue a public life, and typifies them at their worst:

Avarice and blind lust for office
Lead men on to breach the bounds of law,
To join or aid in crime, by night or in broad day,

[139] See Plutarch's *Life of Dion* for a catalogue of Plato's troubles for his revisionary political ambitions (4.3–7; 11.1–17.5, and 19.1–8).

[140] K.D. 40.

[141] K.D. 14.

[142] *DRN* 2.1–61. Further, Philodemus reports Epicurus' view that rhetoric is useful but, at best, in conversing with a friend or persuading an acquaintance. He does not see it as fitting a tool for pleading a case, redressing a wrong, or addressing the populace. *On Rhetoric*, trans. Clive Chaldler. (New York: Routledge, 2006), Book 2, Column xxiv.

[143] *Republic* 10.620c.

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Vying for wealth or power, wounding life itself,
And feeding those wounds, in no small part,
By fear of death.
When harsh need or abject station
Seem distant from a sweet, calm life,
And more death's waiting room,
False fears harry men,
Who rush for some far, far escape –
By setting the state on fire, grasping greedily for riches,
Piling corpse on corpse.
Savagely they savor a brother's death,
Fearing and loathing a kinsman's table,
Consumed by envy at another's power or fame,
Seeming, so they whine,
To lie shrouded in the shadows,
Or engulfed in mire.
Some die to win a statue, or a name.
Some grow so disheartened
And hate life and light so deeply,
As to kill themselves,
Forgetting that the fear of death
Was the root of their cares.[144]

The Epicureans are the true ancestors of the amused tolerance and benign neglect of the later *philosophes*. *Sans souci* is a calque on *ataraxia*; and, when Voltaire concludes *Candide* with the words, *il faut que nous cultiver nos propres jardins*, Epicurus' garden lies at the window his hero's hard won if simple wisdom has opened. All efforts to improve others, Epicureans argue, like the ill-advised quest for fame or glory,[145] are masked symptoms of the fear of death. Religion may demand altruism in piety's name. But religion, on the Epicurean account, is itself impious,[146] misrepresenting the gods themselves as busybodies and distorting morals by placing it in service to some transcendental – and thus otherworldly goal, at odds with nature's real laws of life. For religion, from an Epicurean standpoint, is the organized fear of death. 'Friendship', by contrast, 'dances through the world, calling us to awaken to happiness'.[147]

144 *DRN* 3.59–86, translation is Goodman's.
145 See, as exemplary: V.F. 45, 64.
146 Epicurus, *ad Men*. 123.
147 V.F. 52.

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