Université de Montréal

Epicurus' Apolitical Attitude

A study on the political dimension of Epicurus' attitude

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Resumé

Le conseil épicurien d'éviter la participation politique a reçu maintes interprétations, souvent obscures et mal fondées. L'attitude apolitique ne peut être définie comme un simple manque d'intérêt ou de préoccupation pour la politique ; en effet, selon l'opinion de Pierre Hadot, la philosophie ancienne est profondément ancrée dans l'existence et les doctrines philosophiques n'acquièrent de l'importance que lorsqu'elles assistent le praxis. L'attitude d'Épicure est donc enracinée dans le refus de vivre selon des normes prescrites par l'établissement politique. Selon lui, la politique traditionnelle est vouée à l'échec puisqu'elle poursuit aveuglément le pouvoir et la richesse. En réaction à cette situation, Épicure crée une communauté qui instaure de nouvelles valeurs et au sein de laquelle il est possible de vivre conformément à ces nouvelles valeurs. Se situant en totale opposition aux modes de vie les plus fondamentaux de la cité, les adeptes d'Épicure, s'ils participaient à la vie politique, déclencheraient une grande hostilité de la part des partisans des valeurs traditionnelles. Pour cette raison, l'attitude épicurienne peut d'abord représenter une manière d'éviter la persécution politique. De plus, s'il est admis que la politique implique la poursuite du pouvoir, les épicuriens ne peuvent s'y adonner puisque cela serait contradictoire à leur quête d'ataraxie. À tous égards et indépendamment de ces deux motifs justifiant le retrait de la vie politique, il est clair que si l'attitude d'Épicure ne reposait pas sur une conscience politique, alors, ses critiques à l'égard de la vie politique, son désir de s'y soustraire et la création d'une communauté distincte n'auraient pas été. La politique a le pouvoir de profondément modeler la vie des gens. Considérant que ce conditionnement s'appuie sur des valeurs malsaines, le projet épicurien s'applique donc à remodeler, à la lumière de nouvelles valeurs, la vie de ceux qui ne trouvent aucune satisfaction à poursuivre la vie de la cité.

Abstract

Epicurus' advice to avoid political participation has been the object of a number of confusing and sometimes ungrounded interpretations. Based on Pierre Hadot's view that ancient philosophy was fundamentally rooted in existence, and that philosophical doctrines were only important insofar as they assisted a praxis, the apolitical attitude cannot be understood merely as a lack of interest and concern for politics. On the contrary, Epicurus' attitude was rooted in a refusal to live the way of life prescribed by the political establishment. For him, traditional politics failed at making the life of citizens better on account of their excessive lust for power and wealth. In response to this situation, Epicurus' project was aimed at creating a community in which it was possible to develop new values and live by them. Had the Epicurean community participated politically, being in direct opposition to the most fundamental ways of life of the city, it would have involved a great deal of hostility from partisans of traditional values. Thus, Epicurus' attitude may be justified first as a means to avoid political persecution. Second, since politics implied a significant amount of struggle for power, its pursuit clearly went against the prescribed undisturbed life of Epicureanism. At any rate, regardless of these two motives to avoid political participation, it is clear that if Epicurus' attitude had not been politically inspired then his criticism of political life, his avoidance of it, and the creation of an alternative community would have never taken place. Politics has the power of shaping the life of people in profound ways. Seeing how this conditioning was based on unhealthy values, Epicurus' project, therefore, was to reshape anew, under the light of new values, the life of those who did not find satisfaction in the way of life of the city.

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Acknowledgments

1. Introduction

The Epicurean advice not to participate in politics derives not from a doctrine but from a choice concerning a way of life. It has been a common tendency in academia to concentrate particularly on the doctrines of ancient philosophers without considering how practice has played an essential role in the development of the various ancient philosophical doctrines. It is after Hegel, as Heinrich Niehues-Probsting observes, that "the history of philosophy is reduced to the history of ideas: only the theoretical products of philosophers, not their biographies, are of importance for the history of philosophy."[1] Before this understanding became the standard way to understand philosophy , biographies had a strong influence in the history of philosophy for the life of the philosopher was believed to be "of exemplary character and was considered the verification of the doctrine."[2] Considering this, it is necessary to ask in which way was Epicurus' attitude practical and beneficial. Under this perspective, even if Epicurus clearly advises not to practice politics, it is impossible to detach it from the political and practical context in which Epicurus lived. Was Epicurus' position politically motivated? Did it have have political significance? Provided, as we will see, that Epicurus' philosophy is motivated by an opposition to the way of life of the city, it cannot be claimed that its intentions are deprived of political depth and intent; on the contrary, his way of life and philosophy are in fact a reaction against, and an alternative to, the fundamental but corrupted project of the

1 Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, "The modern reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment," *Hellenistic culture and society* (1996): 330.

2 Niehues-Pröbsting, *The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment*: 330.

traditional political endeavor of organizing a life within the city. Clearly, Epicurus'

philosophy, being focused on the attainment of a good life, gathers its knowledge and

ethical essence from living experience. Therefore, his advice concerning political

participation is fundamentally rooted in living experience.

Epicurus' teaching as a whole is without doubt counter-cultural. By reducing

existence to the atoms and the void and teaching that the gods have no interest in

human affairs, the power of traditional religions must have certainly felt threatened,

and this could have well been, as it was with Socrates, a strong-enough reason to

bring Epicurus before the Athenian jury. Moreover, making the Garden available to all,

including women, challenged the customs of the regime, which excluded the latter

from attending school. These and other aspects of the Epicurean organization were in

direct confrontation with the traditional Athenian way of life and customs, and could

have been the reason for many to resent the Epicurean circle. It is precisely the

avoidance of prosecution, at least in part, which prompts Epicurus to respect the laws

and traditions of the city even if they are in disagreement with Epicurean principles.

On the other hand, the Epicurean life directly confronts the traditional Platonic and

Aristotelian position which considered participation in politics as essential to human

improvement. The pursuit of power and fame, typically associated with the practice of

politics, does not provide true and lasting happiness; on the contrary, its major

production is the enmity of those who take part in the race for power and recognition,

and the enforced cultivation of the dishonesty necessary to gain the favors of others.

For Epicurus, the best way to achieve lasting happiness is that which is acquired

through the philosophical life in the company of friends. If the regime of the city, because of the values it promotes, is unable to produce those things which for the Epicureans are considered essential to the happy life (i.e., *ataraxia*, friendship, justice) then the Epicurean life, being above all a way of life, must be seen as an alternative to the life proposed by the traditional political establishment, and in consequence one with tremendous political implications.

Considering the above-mentioned, I will begin this project by determining what is precisely meant when we speak of philosophy as a way of life. The view that ancient philosophy needs to be understood primarily as necessarily involving a kind of existential choice or commitment to a specific way of living one's entire life was proposed by Pierre Hadot, particularly in his work *What is Ancient Philosophy.* To do this, I will focus on two aspects of Hadot's teaching. First, I will do an overview of his position regarding philosophical discourse and its relation to practice in ancient philosophy. Second, I will refer to Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life. I expect that these two fundamental aspects characteristic of ancient philosophy will open the way for a more in-depth analysis of Epicurus' attitude and its relationship to Epicurean practice. As we will see, ancient philosophy, starting with Socrates, was concerned with the formation of students. The development of any theoretical system was, consequently, a means to justify and help the student live according to the different precepts of each school. Seen this way, we need to study how we place the attitude in question and see how is it a means to attain Epicurean happiness. Next, I will make a review of the different theoretical principles that guided the school and

discuss how they were of assistance to those who attended the Garden. I will also consider some aspects of the School and argue how it was conceived to be a veritable alternative to the communal life of the city. After this, I will discuss Epicurus' apolitical attitude in its textual context and argue that the evidence allows us to understand Epicurus' position as an advice to avoid unsafe situations within the city, as well as a preferable practice to the attainment of ataraxy.

2. Philosophical discourse as an ethical tool in Hadot.

Hadot's effort is devoted to reconciling philosophy with its practical aspect. To do this, he undertakes a general analysis of ancient philosophy and the core role of its concern with ethics above any other. For the most part, he argues, the representation we make of ancient philosophy today is mainly concerned with the systems developed by philosophers and excludes the spiritual or existential aspect which made them important. Because of the demands of university education, students "get the impression that all the philosophers they study strove in turn to invent, each in an original way, a new construction, systematic and abstract, intended to explain the universe."[3] The theories of these philosophers, ancient and contemporary, give rise to "doctrines and criticisms of morality" which propose a number of consequences of the general principles of the system, which invites people to make choices on a particular model of life. The problem, says Hadot, is that the question of "whether this choice of life will be efficacious is utterly secondary and accessory; it doesn't enter into the perspective of the philosophical discourse."[4] Therefore, if we undertake the study of ancient philosophy, the question of the efficacy of the set of principles developed by a given philosopher or school is certainly more important than the question that solely deals with the logical rigour and *a priori* concerns of these systems.

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3 Pierre Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). 2.

4 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 2.

This does not mean that the productions and all the concepts developed in antiquity lack importance. This is clearly not the conclusion of Hadot, for whom there can be no question of "the extraordinary ability of the ancient philosophers to develop theoretical reflection on the most subtle problems of the theory of knowledge, logic, or physics." [5] However, because of the modern tendency to consider philosophy as only that which is doctrinal and theoretical, it is necessary to situate this theoretical production "within a perspective which is different from that which corresponds to the idea people usually have of philosophy."[6]

Philosophical discourse, therefore, needs to be understood from a wider perspective in which a choice of life and a particular way of seeing the world is what determines its form. Put differently, it is the choice that is made which determines the type of doctrine that is produced and the way it is taught, not the other way around. In addition, these choices are never made in solitude, as Hadot points out: "there can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group, a community - in a word, a philosophical school."[7] The latter was the means by which those who decided upon a certain way of life could have the necessary environment and stimuli to be able to actually give themselves fully to all the demands their choice implied. The culmination of such a practice would be the "desire to be and to live in a certain way."[8] It followed

5 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 3.

6 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 3.

7 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 3.

8 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 3.

that once a choice and its application were undertaken, philosophical discourse was

used to "reveal and rationally justify this existential option." Theoretical development,

therefore, was secondary to the ethical goal of each particular choice of life.

Starting with Plato, clearly under the influence of the Socratic figure, and

followed by all the philosophies of antiquity, "all shared the aim of establishing an

intimate link between philosophical discourse and way of life."[9] From the perspective

of a modern student of philosophy, he or she would be expected to be familiar with

the ideas of a particular philosophical set of doctrines. It is chance that decides

whether or not, with time, the student finds a "professor who belongs to some

particular 'school'" to which perhaps the student will swear allegiance. However, the

student's engagement to the particular "ism" he or she has decided to follow only

implies "intellectual allegiance and will not engage his way of life."[10] This, however,

was certainly not the case for the ancients. Hadot brings an interesting example of

how adhesion to a particular philosophy meant a total engagement of the student's

life. Polemo, after a night of debauchery, and as a result of a dare with his drunken

friends, entered one of Xenocrates' lectures and instantly decided to adopt the

Platonic way of life; eventually he would become the head of the Academy.[11] For

ancient philosophers, the relation between philosophy as a way of life and

philosophical discourse was so intimate that often those who limited themselves

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9 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 55.

10 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 98.

11 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 98.

exclusively to the discursive aspect of philosophy, putting aside its practical part, were

bitterly criticized. This is, most certainly, one of the reasons that must have prompted

Epicurus to say that "one must not pretend to philosophize, but philosophize in

reality. For we do not need the semblance of health but true health."[12] Hadot, to the

same effect, cites Seneca's critique of philosophers who turn "love of wisdom

(*philosophia*) into love of words (*philologia*)." [13]

    For Hadot, therefore, philosophical discourse is the result of a certain practice

whose intention is to justify and explain an existential choice to others. It enables

philosophical practice in so far as it justifies it theoretically. One's choice of life may be

nourished greatly from philosophical reflection which is best expressed in theoretical

form. Clearly each choice of life will present its own challenges which will demand of

the philosopher a certain degree of reflection on how to confront them. Two more

functions, however, are also identified. Being the expression of an existential choice

which requires that one perform actions on oneself and on others, it is an

"indispensable means."[14] Because a philosophical choice requires the assistance of

specific spiritual exercises, philosophical discourses are used as a means to help in

the formation of those who partake in it "as dialogue with others or with oneself."

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12 Epicurus, *The Epicurus reader : selected writings and testimonia*, trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). *Vatican Doctrines* 54.

13 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 174.

14 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 175.

These three distinctive features make of philosophical discourse something profoundly related to living experience based on a particular choice. Philosophical discourse, being the expression of a way of life, assists in building the rational backbone of a particular option. Whether it is "the choice of the good, as in [Plato] or the choice of pure pleasure, as for the Epicureans" it will be "necessary to disengage the presuppositions, implications, and consequences of each respective attitude with great precision."[15] Having to ask the question about what is the place of man with relation to the world, a physics will be developed. When it comes to the relation with one's fellow men, an ethics will appear. Each particular attitude by its nature comes loaded with a number of questions which will require, in the case of ancient philosophers, strong rational argument. Furthermore, the philosophical discourses of the ancients also function as a transformative tool. Their intention is also "formative, educative, psychagogic, and therapeutic." Perhaps this can be compared to the power of influence that the works of the different arts usually have on people. By means of their aesthetics, they stir individuals to act in specific ways, to a point that, in some cases, certain arts need to be banned when they fall afoul of the authorities of a given regime; this is clearly reminiscent of one of the distinctive features of Plato's ideal regime depicted in the *Republic*, in which the banning of certain poets is recommended. In the case of philosophical discourses, their efficacy lies not only with the power of their aesthetics, but also with the power of their rationality. It was this distinctive feature which distinguished philosophy from something like religion. By basing their discourses on strong logical, valid and sound arguments, these

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15 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*:175.

philosophers believed to be able to heal the soul of those who listened to them. It was

with words of reason that their ethical and therapeutic goal was in part accomplished.

The first four of the *Principle Opinions* of Epicurean philosophy also known as the

Epicurean tetrapharmakos, are a clear example of how philosophical discourse is

employed as formative and therapeutic means. And it is because each school had as

its mission the shaping of their students' characters by means of rational reflection

that discourse was a vital tool for each of them. But the rational nonetheless had its

limitation, for again, the formative and therapeutical goals were more important.

Dialogue, therefore, was not used merely to make people more knowledgeable about

things but "to make people better dialecticians", meaning that the point of learning

how to dialogue went beyond being skillful at pointing errors in reasoning. It meant

"recognizing the presence and the rights of one's interlocutor, basing one's replies on

what the interlocutor admits he knows, and therefore agreeing with him at each stage

of the discussion."[16] Again, philosophical discourse was intended to help the

members of a particular school share and improve their experience of their own

particular way of life. It allowed them to clarify and simplify the rational aspect of their

choice of life and, by means of dialogue, it allowed these choices to be understood in

the context of each student's life. For instance, this clear in the case of the Epicurean

school, where in combination with an emphasis on friendship, dialogue was used

particularly with the intention of mutual correction.[17]

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16 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 178.

17 Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire : theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*
(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). 132-35.

Philosophical discourse, therefore, needs to be understood not as something immobile or fixed but as something that acquired its form in the heart of human experience and in the context of a community, for the sake of guiding and curing the soul of people. Now we should examine Hadot's position concerning the concept of philosophy as a way of life. We should make a general account of his position so that we can move forward in our study concerning Epicurus' apolitical attitude.

2.1 Philosophy as a way of life

The idea that ancient philosophy was above all a way of life that engaged the totality of the lives of those who practiced it is not new. Kant encapsulates this attitude in the following passage:

"The ancient Greek philosophers, such as Epicurus, Zeno, and Socrates, remained more faithful to the Idea of the philosopher than their modern counterparts have done. 'When will you finally begin to live virtuously?' said Plato to an old man who told him he was attending classes on virtue. The point is not always to speculate, but also ultimately to think about applying our knowledge. Today, however, he who lives in conformity with what he teaches is taken for a dreamer." [18]

In a similar way Nietzsche also remarks on the modern tendency to reduce philosophy to its academic and theoretic aspects. Thus in *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche accuses philosophers for turning everything into a concept: "All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. They kill, they stuff, when they worship, these conceptual idolaters - they become a mortal danger to everything when they worship."[19] And when he refers to ancient philosophical schools, he tells us that as far as praxis is concerned, he views them as "experimental laboratories in which a

18 Kant in Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*. (Quoted before the introduction): xiii

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Twilight of the Idols " in *The Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (England: Penguin Classics), 16.

considerable number of recipes for the art of living have been thoroughly practiced

and lived to the hilt. The results of all the schools and of all their experiments belong

legitimately to us."[20] Hence, for Nietzsche, the "art of living" and philosophy were

clearly intimately related, practice and experimentation had supremacy over the value

of concepts.

Thus, Kant and Nietzsche were aware that during antiquity philosophy as a

practice was more important than philosophy as exclusive theoretical discourse. And

they also favored this distinction, for in their philosophies the ethical aspect of life

cannot be separated from philosophical speculation.

For Hadot, Socrates set the example for a new understanding of philosophy. It

was with him that the problem of "knowing this or that" passed to a second plane, and

rather, the question of "being in this or that way" became more important.[21] This

attitude was in opposition to the sophist claim that knowledge could be transferable

as though it was a prefabricated object. In the case of Socrates, who claimed that he

only knew that he knew nothing, knowledge could not be transferable. If there was

knowledge, it had to be rediscovered by the interlocutor himself, and that is why,

according to Hadot, Socrates limited himself to asking questions that brought his

interlocutors "to examine and become aware of themselves."[22] It is in this light that in

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20 Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*, Autumn 1881, 59 in Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's therapy : self-cultivation in the middle works* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008). 25.

21 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 26.

22 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*. 28.

the *Apology* Plato reports Socrates as having said that he was not interested in what most people commonly pursued, such as fame, power, status, or wealth, but rather, in pursuing that which could do the most good to each individual person: "by persuading you to be less concerned with what you *have* than with what you *are* so that you may make yourselves as excellent and as rational as possible."[23]

Hence, with Socrates, the relationship between knowledge and being became the particular interest of the philosopher, who before, in the perspective of the sophist, was only to acquire know-how knowledge and sophia. Thanks to this new understanding the philosopher became that individual who was utterly concerned with *being* a better person and helping others to do likewise. At this point one has to ask if the tendency to look inward, to be concerned with the extremely complex question of who one is in this world, is born out of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the way life was organized in the city. In this sense, the Socratic attitude is a refusal of universal principles or truths that people like the sophists or most of Socrates' interlocutors would claim to possess. Not only because truth is something that cannot be possessed, but also because only in so far as we pursue it can we benefit from it. And going after the truth, so far as Plato's Socrates suggests, can only be done by exercising our most human capacities. This is precisely one of the things Plato discusses in his *Apology* when human wisdom is contrasted with divine wisdom. In this text, Socrates argues that he has not acquired his reputation for charging fees in

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23 Plato, *Apology*, trans. Harold North Fowler, vol. 1, Plato in twelve volumes (Harvard University Press). 36c.

exchange for teaching virtue, but for using "human wisdom" instead of "divine wisdom." Thus Socrates states:

"Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now [sophists—those who teach wisdom] are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me."[24]

To exercise human wisdom is to be aware of one's ignorance and to make sure others are aware of it too. Such attitude clearly implies a refusal of the state of affairs in which, as we see in Plato's dialogues, many things were arranged based on an inappropriate assignation of value. Wealth or fame, for instance, were pursued by most people, as Socrates argues, on grounds which were proven to be inconsistent. However, it is not the questioning that matters most. As Hadot remarks, Socrates is important not only for "his interrogations and his irony, but above all by means of his way of being, by his way of life, and by his very being."[25] This attitude, as it will be later discussed, is present thoroughly in Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus was also extremely critical of the way of life of the city and considered that the blind pursuit of wealth or fame was among the greatest evils of culture.

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24 Plato, *Apology,* 20d-e

25 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 28.

The call to self-questioning implies a search for independence from the standards and paradigms that composed society. In other words, through self-questioning the question of what has the most value and what does not follows necessarily. In the case of what has the most value we are referred to that which is really under our control to know. To illustrate this, Hadot uses Socrates' attitude towards death. In the *Apology* Socrates asserts that it is pointless to fear death, for it is impossible to know anything about it: "no one knows whether death might not be the greatest of goods for man, but people fear it as if they were perfectly certain it is the greatest of evils. Yet how could it be anything but the most shameful ignorance to think one knows what one does not know?"[26] To act according to things of which one is ignorant is a great mistake. One ought not to fear death, for one does not know what death is; this fear should not be the grounds of any action. Instead, the only thing that should be considered when one acts is if one is acting justly or unjustly, and whether one's "deeds are those of a good man or a bad one."[27] To know what is good and what is bad when one acts, therefore, is the only thing that should be of concern to us. And it is because of this ethical distinction that knowledge is of interest to ancient philosophers. Knowledge, as Hadot puts it, beginning with Socrates, is not concerned with concepts but with values. Socrates "does know nothing about the value which ought to be attributed to death, because it is not in his power."

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26 Plato in Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?:* 33.

27 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 33.

Nonetheless, "he does know the value of moral action and intention, for they do depend upon his choice, his decision and his engagement."[28]

Self-questioning engenders an awareness of oneself, and by default, a reassessment of what is good and bad, which in turn will guide one's way of life. This manner of doing philosophy clearly displayed a rejection of some or many aspects of political society and the way of life it promoted. For ancient philosophers, the only way to break free from all the suffering and injustice implied in the values commonly promoted was to change one's way of life radically, by the treating of the passions. Political society, while natural to human beings, was agreed to be a further cause of individuals' having deeply habituated, false beliefs concerning human nature, and concerning what is good for them to pursue and to avoid. Thus, Hadot remarks that for all philosophical schools, "mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is unregulated desires and exaggerated fears."[29] Socrates' mission was to help his fellow citizens act in the most rational way, making sure they could act according to their own discovered truth, which implied a radical modification of commonly held values. This is why Foucault, for instance, insists that self-examination and the ethics of care "can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system,

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28 Plato, *Apology,* 29a-b

29 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life : spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford ; New York: Blackwell, 1995). 83.

with a disciplinary structure."[30] Self-examination imposes a deconstruction and

reconsideration of the principles that guide life which, to begin with, are initially

inculcated by society; self-examination, therefore, allows the exploration of new

values and the reconsideration of old ones. Considered this way, philosophy was

perceived as the best way to determine the best values by which one could live a life

free of disturbance; it was this conception which gave philosophy its therapeutic

essence. Ancient philosophies' main intention was to persuade people to change their

value judgements so that they could be cured of their ills. However, in order to change

our value judgments "we must make a radical choice to change our entire way of

thinking and being. This choice is the choice of philosophy, and it is thanks to it that

we may obtain inner tranquility and peace of mind."[31] Hence, each philosophy sought

to find a remedy for the human worries, anguish, and misery brought about, "for the

Cynics, by social constraints and conventions; for the Epicureans, by the quest for

false pleasures; for the Stoics, by the pursuit of pleasure and egoistic self-interest;

and for the skeptics, by false opinions."[32]

As stated earlier, such transformation can only take place in the context of a

philosophical community, and implies the constant practice of a number of spiritual

exercises. Particularly in the case of the Hellenistic schools, a set of practices was put

in place to help the student overcome old values and create new ones. For this

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30 Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom.," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 260.

31 Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life : spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*: 102.

32 Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life : spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault:* 102.

reason, techniques such as memorization, "confession" and constant self-examination are implemented, to help the student in his self-transformation process. For example, it was a typical practice for both Epicureans and Stoics to memorize very short aphorisms, containing a particular truth coherent with the values of each school. Confession too, as we have it from Philodemus, was considered of the utmost importance as a means of correction. All this was not possible without the guidance and mentoring of the schools' masters, who were living examples of the choices of life they themselves pursued, who also served as inspirers to pupils, and who knew how to develop learning strategies for the different type of students they had. Concerning this last point, M. Nussbaum makes an interesting argument by pointing out that the medical kind of ethics of the Hellenistic schools may be inclined "to adopt an asymmetrical model of the relationship between teacher and pupil, doctor and patient. Just as we do not expect a physical patient to be as well informed as the expert doctor about the diagnosis and treatments of her own disease, so too we do not expect the ethical pupil to be able to know her own situation as well as the teacher knows."[33] The teacher-pupil relationship cannot occur outside of the setting of a community, especially because in the case of Hellenistic schools, living philosophically meant the refusal of the type of life commonly pursued. Each school was in that way a setting where those who disagreed with the ways of life of the city could live with each other according to their own understandings of, say, justice, friendship, economic distribution, etc. In the case of Epicurus' school, for instance, a new understanding of justice, friendship, erotic love, were cultivated and lived. This

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33 Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire : theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*: 26.

community would not have been possible without the presence of its master,

Epicurus, the person who who was not only responsible for developing the principles

and tenets that guided the Epicurean life, but also who incarnated it.

It is clear that the understanding of philosophy as a way of life, which started

with Socrates, is profoundly linked with a general discomfort towards the type of life

promoted by the political establishment at the time. It is for this reason that

philosophy, understood this way, cannot be separate from community life, because

the purpose of philosophy was first and foremost to develop a way of life in the

company of like-minded individuals, that is, an alternative community different from

the one found in the city. In this respect, Nussbaum is right in stating that the

Hellenistic schools developed "procedures and strategies that are aimed not only at

individual efficacy, but also at the creation of a therapeutic community, a society set

over against the existing society, with different norms and different priorities."[34] The

main features of these communities, therefore, are their belief that sound and valid

arguments with great intellectual coherence deliver the individual from the sufferings

produced by the pursuits of regular life in the city; that the truths these arguments

convey require spiritual guidance and mentorship from a master, as well as the

rigorous assistance of specific spiritual exercises.

It is clear, after this discussion, that Kant and Nietzsche's insistence on the

importance the practical had for ancient philosophers is not to be taken lightly. Hadot

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34 Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire : theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics:* 40.

certainly makes an extremely important point by further clarifying and unraveling the different aspects of ancient philosophy, particularly by describing how philosophical discourse was intrinsically related to the practical, and how the practical was committed to a rational choice of whatever each school understood as the good. Furthermore, this new understanding makes clear that these different choices were made in the spirit of a refusal of the values of the political establishment, and that their aim was to create a counter-cultural community in which human life could flourish. Having said this, we can now move on and see in which way the Epicurean school proposes an alternative way of life different from the type of life of the city.

3. Epicurean Philosophy: Theory and practice

Just like most schools of philosophy after Socrates, Epicureanism was above all interested in ethics. Nonetheless, unlike Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Epicurus returns to Ionian philosophy, and thus integrates natural science into his system. Although the study of nature is primordial, its role is subordinate to a moral end, namely the attainment of ataraxy (ἀταραξία), freedom from pain and anguish. The study of nature and particularly the reduction of causality to concrete physical causes permits the flourishing of an existential condition which is free from fear of the gods. This condition is thus removed and it is replaced by a new one which sees the world as the product of its own activity and driven by the attainment of pleasure. The question of how we acquire not only pleasure, but the best pleasure, is therefore up to us and no one else's. The fear of displeasing the gods is no longer tenable, and the new preoccupation is one which can be banished by one's own personal efforts. Thus by introducing a rational calculus as the means to acquire the purest pleasure, it becomes evident that the most pleasurable life, the life of ataraxy, is within the grasp of each individual person here and now.

More precisely, Epicurean philosophy is to a large extent the assertion that happiness depends on a proper understanding of the nature of the world, an understanding that for most people is flawed because it is based on false opinions and vain desires. Equally important is the belief that it is society's culture which inculcates and promotes those values and opinions. Just as Socrates remarked,

people hold fame, material wealth and political power in great esteem, and make of them fundamental goals, mistakenly thinking that they will bring great happiness to their lives. For Epicurus, acquiring great wealth or fame or political power implies "enslavement to the masses or the powers that be"[35] because the acquisition of it does not depend on us, but on those who facilitate them. By the same token, Epicurus also claims that most men tend to conceive the universe in an incorrect way, which often leads to the incorporation of metaphysical elements from which fear and anguish frequently spring. At the outset of Epicurean philosophy, therefore, vain desires and false opinions are major points of attack because they are both responsible for bringing pain and disturbance to most people. Consequently, Epicurean ἀταραξία can only come about when such sources of distress are removed from the soul. And believing that for the most part they are promoted by culture (παιδεία), Epicurus asks for moral self-sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια) and consequently a radical change in one's way of life. One of the ways by which Epicurus enables a state of self-sufficiency is by focusing on a careful understanding of man and nature, and based on this approach he develops his philosophical system.

As Diogenes Laertius tells us, Epicurus' philosophy is divided into three different parts, namely, "canonic, Physics, Ethics",[36] even though Epicureans "conjoin canonic with physics." The first deals with the rules of investigation, Epicurean epistemology,

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35 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks, 2 vols., vol. 2, The Loeb classical library Greek authors (London: Harvard University Press, 1970). 10.25.

36 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.29.

and the second with the physical world and the processes therein. Because Epicurus "exalted nature as a norm of truth" [37] it is understandable why these two branches conjoin: they are interrelated.

The canonic part considers that the standards of truth are based on three criteria; namely, sensations, preconceptions, and feelings.[38] Sensations are the evidence acquired by the five senses. They alone provide what we could call today the raw data which is processed to create concepts. They are devoid of reason and memory; they are not self-inflicted, have an external cause; they cannot be refuted nor accused of error; and they are all equally valid.[39] Without these data it is impossible to make any claim to truth. In point of fact, even in the case of making inferences about unknown phenomena, we must use what these sensations provide as departure points for analogy. It is impossible to do without them, for even dreams, fantasies, or any of our notions "are derived from perceptions, either by actual contact or by analogy, or resemblance, or composition." It is important to add that in case of error, it is not the sensations which are wrong but the cogitation at which reason arrives. Lucretius makes this point very clear when he gives the example of a square tower viewed from a distance that gives the impression of being round[40] or

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37 Norman Wentworth DeWitt, *Epicurus and his philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964). 7.

38 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.31.

39 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.31.

40 Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2001). 4.353-363.

the case of a straight paddle that put underwater appears to be bent.[41] In both cases the impression transmitted is correct, what is wrong is to pass judgement on them without proper verification.

Preconceptions are the notions formed after repeated contact with an external object has occurred. Once we are capable of distinguishing its particular characteristics, we may assign it a term that whenever used will allow us at once to "think of its shape by an act of preconception."[42] Memory is therefore an important component of this criterion, for whenever it takes hold of a notion, it will help us define other objects as they appear. That is why it is so important that unclear sensations be tested before they are allowed to become notions. In the case of something that from the distance appears to be a tower, it is important to get closer to it before we can be sure it is a real tower . For Epicureans, this is an essential principle to keep in mind, for false opinions are mistakingly considered true when we rush to make notions out of unclear "data." For this reason, a method for testing the veracity of our impressions is created: "something is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence, and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by

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41 Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things*, 4.436-442.

42 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2.10.33.

evidence."[43] It is important to know that preconceptions are not "innate" ideas[44] but derive from perception, which is why they are valid.[45]

Feelings, the third criterion of truth, are divided into pleasure and pain. It is by means of them that the choice is made whether something is to be avoided or pursued.[46] And even though the validity of perceptions does not rest upon them, they greatly determine our conduct and morality. As mentioned before, it is the pursuit of vain pleasures and belief in false opinions that often create major dis-eases in the soul. This is why being able to read the "levels" of pleasure and pain is essential for the discernment of what is to be chosen or rejected when it comes to moral choices.

So what are the implications of the criteria just discussed? First of all, they imply that for Epicurus there is no such thing as skepticism, for our senses, our being, and the world of nature do provide us with concrete and valid knowledge. Second, the emotions are recognized as primordial in our experience and understanding of the world; whatever is considered true can only be so as long as our perception of pain and pleasure is carefully scrutinized. The combination of the availability of concrete natural phenomena and the human capacity to guide human behavior on the basis of the relationship between pleasure, pain and the world, clearly gives the individual a

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43 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2.10.33.

44 I follow Smith's reasoning which contradicts DeWitts' position. For the latter some pre-conceptions like that of justice are innate. See DeWitt, *Epicurus and his philosophy*: 23.

45 Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things*. Introduction, xxv.

46 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2.10. 34.

fair amount of autonomy. Furthermore, as observed by some Epicurean scholars,

reason is not part of the criteria just mentioned. In the consideration of each criterion

Epicurus uses the same formula; it is by virtue of their being in contact with concrete

reality that they are chosen. It is because of this contact that they "exalt nature over

reason as affording a norm of truth."[47] Reason can subsequently be looked at as a

function subservient to the primal data captured by our senses, instead of an activity

from which all reality and affirmation emanates. Concrete nature sets the standard of

concepts, not the other way around.

There are other opinions which are characteristic of and in line with the

Epicurean views just discussed that should also be mentioned. Amongst them are the

beliefs that the world is made of atoms that gather together and dissipate in the void

infinitely, that life only lasts so long as such association of atoms exists; that once

they dissipate life is no more; that the gods exist and are also made of atoms, that

they are perfectly happy and undisturbed, that they do not have any involvement in

the origin of the cosmos (the cosmos has always existed) nor do they intervene or are

interested in human affairs.

But how does Epicurus' philosophy permit the achievement of moral self-

sufficiency? It is clear that Epicurus's system is conceived with the purpose of

allowing each person be the architect of his own character, the hedonistic calculus

teaches us that much. It is also conceived with the purpose of assigning the cause of

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47 DeWitt, *Epicurus and his philosophy*: 22.

things within the world of atoms and not in a world beyond. But all these teachings

are incomplete if a practice does not accompany them. By conceiving philosophy as

an activity meant to help the individual get cured of unnecessary sufferings, Epicurus

calls for detachment from commonly held values, and for the confirmation of the

individual's happiness on the basis of his or her own experience and application of

reason. This is why, for instance, in his *Letter to Menoeceus* Epicurus highlights the

importance of key concepts of his ethical theory - the groundlessness of fear of the

gods and of death, the distinction between natural and unnecessary desires, the

eminence of pleasure and its relationship to an undisturbed state, the hedonistic

calculus, the confirmation that what is good is easily attainable - so that a student can

exercise himself continually in the company of like-minded friends. Epicurean autarky,

therefore, is possible by the developing of a theory which, as Bernard Frischer

remarks, is not based on the contemplation of an abstract notion "like the Good nor of

the superlunary and superhuman cosmos, but of the human condition and

achievement of human happiness"[48] This theory, which contemplates practice,

involves constant reflection on the value of the emotional with regards to pleasure,

and gives rise to an individual who is constantly trying to act consciously and willingly,

according to his or her own most personal and profound dispositions. The fact that

this practice needs to take place in the company of like-minded friends makes the

existence of a community essential for the attainment of a peaceful mind. The

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48 Bernard Frischer, The sculpted word: Epicureanism and philosophical recruitment in ancient
Greece, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). 36.

Epicurean ethical doctrine advises a way life, that is, for its incorporation into the everyday life of each person in all aspects of life.

Building an alternative community was an important aspect of Epicurus' method to effectively treat the suffering of the human soul. As has been discussed, Epicurus' teaching is based on the belief that the way of life promoted in the city is full of suffering primarily because of the values that most people assigned to things and the desires that ensued from them.

Before Epicurus, as Hadot has correctly remarked, this critique of the way of life of the city was already in place, as we can see in Plato's *Apology*. However, this critique was accompanied by the belief that the philosopher's function was to contribute to the betterment of the city. For instance, this is evident whenSocrates claims that by questioning people and making them aware of their ignorance, he is rendering the city the greatest service, or when the philosopher king is put as the head of the ideal city in *The Republic.* Aristotle, for his part, believes that the city and the legislator were responsible for assuring the virtuous life and happiness of their citizens.[49] As R. Bodéüs observes, for Aristotle the city and the legislator are responsible for creating the adequate context in which the necessary leisure is available for the philosophic life. Hence, one of the tasks of the philosopher consists in teaching the political man and legislator about what makes for virtuous action and a virtuous life, so that a good political regime may be developed. Seeing that there is

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49 Aristotle, *The politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). 1334a12.

an intimate relationship between politics and laws and the ethos of a people, it is not possible for Aristotle to develop an ethics detached from the city. Thus Bodéüs argues that "nous ne pouvons croire à l'intention qu'aurait eue le Stagirite de fonder une morale individuelle, dégagée des exigences que pose à l'individu son appartenance à une Cité."[50] Furthermore, this inevitable political binding is reinforced by the observation that human beings are by nature political animals not only because they need to live in community, but also because their uniquely human capacity for reasoned speech and argument supports a particular form of political community.[51] Because a community is above all a political one characterized by the type of rational understanding of life, the philosopher is most of all linked to the improvement of the regime of the city.

For Epicurus, unlike Socrates, Plato or Aristotle, the role of the philosopher does not consist in improving the city by participating in politics or by educating politicians and legislators. Epicurus did not believe that it was necessary to participate in the political establishment to achieve a happy life. On the contrary, he discourages political participation on the basis that the political, as it is commonly seen in practice, is mainly concerned with the pursuit of power and wealth, not happiness or virtue. And even though Plato and Aristotle, as Hadot puts it, find in philosophy "a means to

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50 Richard Bodéüs, *Le philosophe et la cité : recherches sur les rapports entre morale et politique dans la pensée d'Aristote*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de philosophie et lettres de l'Université de Liège ; fasc. 235 (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1982). 225.

51 Aristotle, *The politics,* 1253a8.

free themselves from political corruption"[52] Epicurus, on the other hand, abandons any interest in fighting corruption in the political establishment. If the political regime is unable to make a person virtuous, Epicureanism and its way of life provides an immediate and effective solution to the problem. By not dwelling on the hope that a city could be made better with the help of the philosopher, Epicureanism gives the individual tools to find his happiness by means of therapeutical philosophical discourse and a close community of friends. It is precisely the avoidance of this hope that is intended when Epicurus tells us μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι ("Do not engage in politics!"). According to Frischer this advice "can be understood as a reflexive reaction to the practical political failures and tragedies of philosophers from Pythagoras to Aristotle."[53] Hence, instead of constructing an ideal state, Epicurus constructs an ideal individual by building a community where the philosopher can live the life he considers best without having to face the dangers other philosophers had to put up with by trying to make the city a better place. Hence, Epicureanism not only offered the necessary theory and practice for the individual to heal himself from unnecessary sufferings, but also offered "the deracinated and alienated intellectual a home in a consciously constructed community that embodied a genuinely positive and legitimate alternative to the dominant culture of Greece."[54]

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52 Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*: 93.

53 Frischer, *The sculpted word: Epicureanism and philosophical recruitment in ancient Greece*. 39-40.

54 Frischer, *The Sculpted Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece:* 52.

4. The Epicurean Garden

When considering the Epicurean community as an unusual alternative to the way of life of the city, there are other aspects which are of interest to us. For instance, even though foreigners, women, and slaves enjoyed equal rights with Athenian citizens in private religious associations[55] (this is the legal status philosophical schools acquired in order to have protection from the state) we don't hear of other schools before the Epicurean one in which so many of these types of individuals were so widely accepted. We know, for instance, that two women attended Plato's Academy,[56] but apart from their names we don't know anything else. In the case of Aristotle's school we have no evidence of female pupils. In the case of Epicurus' Garden,[57] we know of several women who attended the school and also wrote different works. We know too that a great number of foreigners and slaves were also part of the community.[58]

Furthermore, unlike previous schools, Epicurus encouraged the participants in the school not only to marry and raise children but also to live together in the Garden. Property was not held in common because Epicurus believed that having property in

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55 Paul François Foucart, *Des associations religeuses chez les Grecs: thiases, éranes, orgéons, avec le texte des inscriptions relatives à ces associations* (Klincksieck, 1873). 5.

56 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 3.46.

57 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers,* 2. 10.7.

58 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers,* 2. 10.9-10.

common engendered mistrust and harmed friendship.[59] This, in addition to Epicurus'

insistence on the importance of living life regularly at the same time that

philosophizing and laughing took place, presented those living in the community a

very pleasant space where, as Firschner remarks, "all the normal activities of life took

place alongside learning and study." [60]

It is also interesting to observe that as we have it from Epicurus' will, the school

property was not given to the Epicurean community but to Hermarchus, indirectly

through Amynomachus.[61] Seeing this, Firschner correctly states that the Epicurean

garden did not have the legal status of a religious organization and therefore did not

have the protection of the state. In order to be recognized as a religious group, the

school property needed to be registered under the name of the community as a

whole.[62] What this implied, regardless of how impractical Epicurus' decision could

have been, is that the Epicurean community was not engaged in the worship and

adoration of any deity, remaining, therefore, in line with their strong refusal of any

superstitiously-inspired practice.

The Epicurean Garden was a place where the most distinctive values of society

were refused and where very different ones were practiced. Not only did the Garden

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59 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers,* 2. 10.11.

60 Frischer, *The sculpted word: Epicureanism and philosophical recruitment in ancient Greece.* 63.

61 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.16-17.

62 Frischer, *The sculpted word: Epicureanism and philosophical recruitment in ancient Greece.* 44.

welcome those individuals who did not have favorable status in the city but also developed its own way of marriage, its own economic arrangement, and by their strong emphasis on friendship, its own system of justice. Concerning the latter, the community itself, with its new type of fundamental arrangements, was an actualization of Epicurus' appeal to natural justice which "is a pledge of reciprocal benefit, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another." [63] This pledge was certainly not possible in the context of the regime of the city. In it, not being able to recognize the moderate bounds of nature's wealth, men toiled for small things and "incessantly [began] strife and war for gain." [64] We know that for Epicurus, something that was no longer mutually advantageous could not be considered just,[65] and as such it needed to be reconsidered. Being convinced that such reconsideration was not possible within the actual political structure of the city, Epicurus decided to make such readjustments within the limits of his private property. His insistence on the idea that "the man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens"[66] could be interpreted as exactly that which the Garden represented in practice. The community was a place where the threats of false opinion and vain desire were kept in check without failing to pay respect to the traditions and norms of the city, by, for example, encouraging involvement in state festivals.[67]

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63 Epicurus, *The Epicurus reader : selected writings and testimonia. Principal doctrines* 31.

64 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.12

65 Epicurus, *Principal doctrines* 36.

66 Epicurus, *Principal doctrines* 39.

67 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers,* 2. 10.120.

Seeing that the Epicurean community was so revolutionary in the sense of offering an experience of life very distinct from the one offered elsewhere, that it was in direct opposition to the values of Athens, and that it was not protected by Athenian corporate law, then it appears more than necessary that strict carefulness in its dealings with the authorities and other Athenians was indispensable. It is clear why, in order to be able to practice such a radical and politically different way of life, Epicureans had to avoid political confrontations. Political participation was not only beyond their intention but also in opposition to their desired undisturbed state.

So far we have discussed the ways in which the type of life Epicurus' proposed was different, attractive and effective in helping the individual cure himself from the evils of false dogma and unnecessary desires. Evidently, from what has been discussed, the community was an essential component to the therapeutic goal of the Epicurean life. Political participation, we just concluded, was to be avoided for practical and spiritual reasons. However, in order to make sure this position is tenable we ought to take a closer look at the primary sources available, and see if we can add another level of understanding to this discussion.

5. λάθε βιώσασ

Of the many Epicurean maxims concerning political withdrawal, the most significant comes in the form of two words: λάθε βιώσασ or *live unnoticed*. It is a maxim that, although clear enough to be translated without major difficulties, needs to be interpreted against specific premises of Epicurean ethical thought.

Let us first make a few remarks concerning the maxim itself. First of all, λάθε βιώσασ is not found in the extant works of Epicurus; it has been passed to us through the work of Plutarch in an essay entitled Ει καλώς είρηται το λάθε βιώσας (Is the Saying "Live in Obscurity" Right?). However, considering that the essay deals with the saying as directly quoted from one of Epicurus' writings, it is reasonable to trust Plutarch and consider it as veritable Epicurean maxim. Second, from the translations offered for these two Greek words, I have decided to follow the one proposed by G. Roskam and other scholars for a number of reasons. First, λάθε βιώσας does not mean that the Epicurean sage should live in complete seclusion away from the city and society, a meaning that is possible by other translations such as *Live unknown* or *Live in obscurity.* Rather, as noted by Norman DeWitt, the maxim is to be translated as *Live unnoticed.* For Epicurus there are three causes of injury, namely, envy, hatred and contempt.[68] For each one of these causes, there are extant texts which instruct the Epicurean sage to behave in such a way as to not inspire these feelings in

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68 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers,* 2. 10.117.

others.[69] For instance, in the case of contempt, the general prescription is extant: "As for reputation, the wise man will exercise just enough foresight to avoid contempt."[70] As is the case here and with the other two causes, Epicurus never tells his disciples to live in such a way as to not be known at all; instead, his advice is to avoid practices and actions which would call for unhappiness and hostility from fellow citizens while living with them. This and the fact that Epicurus' Garden was located on the outskirts of the city would have made it very unlikely for its members to remain unknown. Instead, Epicurus' prescriptions definitely make it easier to lead a life within the city with the least amount of distress and hostility from others.

Again, for Epicurus, the actions of the individual should be focused on acquiring natural pleasure, which is only possible through ἀταραξία. It is for this reason that to understand the intention behind the advice λάθε βιώσας we should consider the criteria composing Epicurean ethical thinking. Another, no less important reason, is the fact that texts on Epicurean ethical thinking are extant and abundant. Considering these two points, Roskam's analysis is of relevance and shall, therefore, be used to assist us. According to him, λάθε βιώσας should be understood against three general components present in Epicurean moral thinking.[71]

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69 DeWitt, *Epicurus and his philosophy*: 187.

70 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.120.

71 Geert Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*, Philosophia antiqua, v. 111. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007). 34.

We have seen that Epicurus' philosophy makes it clear that the major obstacles to leading a happy life are vain desires and false opinions. As has been discussed, Epicurus' philosophy is primarily soul-healing, and his arguments are therapeutic. This is evident in the advice found in Vatican Sayings 54 and 64. The former discourages the pretense of love and of the practice of philosophy, and argues in favor of their true practicing so that healing can become possible. The latter advises against wanting the esteem of others for the healing of ourselves instead. It is for this reason that the Epicurean student is not only expected to understand the doctrines on an intellectual level; he is also expected to internalize them by constant training, by meditation and even by learning them by heart.[72] Hence, λάθε βιώσασ should be understood under the premises of Epicurus' therapeutical objective and not merely as a theoretical principle. Its advice is practical, it is supposed to contribute to the soul-healing process of those who follow it.

Second, λάθε βιώσασ should be understood under the light of Epicurus' distinction between the three types of desires distinguished in Epicurean thought. According to that categorization, the Epicurean student will only choose the first type of desires, which are limited and are easily fulfilled, and avoid the third kind, which are unlimited and only attractive on the basis of vain opinions. As it happens, most men tend to choose the third kind, postponing joy without ever considering that their time is limited.[73] Roskam argues that the distinction between desires and the concept of

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72 DeWitt, *Epicurus and his philosophy*: 25. <u>and</u> Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 34.

73 Epicurus, *Vatican Doctrines,* 14 and 30.

limitation connected with them is of great importance.[74] Those who disregard the

advice of our maxim will strive for fame, which is an "unlimited desire that is neither

natural nor necessary",[75] postponing, therefore, the obtention of happiness to an

uncertain future. Those, on the other hand, that live an *unnoticed life* remain within

the limits of natural desire and can consequently enjoy the present.

Third, the principle of rational *calculus* (συμμέτρησισ) previously mentioned is

crucial to understand our maxim. In short, this *calculus* asserts that choice of desires

should not be made on the basis of pleasure alone but on measuring the quantity of

pleasure and pain present in either those things that are pleasurable or painful.

According to Roskam this is important for two reasons. First, it explains that Epicurus'

advice is not based on personal taste but on rational arguments. In fact, lack of

comparative judgment (ἀνεπιλόγιστοσ) is as detrimental to happiness as is an

excess in desires.[76] Second, the *calculus* in question, so Roskam argues, helps

explain why the maxim λάθε βιώσασ was not introduced in the Κύριαι Δόξαι or the

Sententiae Vaticanae.[77] Our maxim does not specify the context and the

circumstances in which it should be applied. Without these, had the maxim been

included, it would have had to be followed under *all* circumstances, an implication

which contradicts the nature of the *calculus* itself. This is why the Epicurean wise

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74 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 35.

75 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 35.

76 Epicurus, *Vatican Doctrines,* 63

77 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 36.

man, reports Diogenes Laertius, "will pay court to a king, if need be" or "will take a suit in court."[78] Epicurus is clearly aware that at times it will be necessary to act politically, even though it is not recommended.

In the fewest possible words, these three considerations tell us that the advice λάθε βιώσασ is essentially therapeutic and practical. It cures the soul from the pains of unlimited desires and keeps the Epicurean safe from unwisely dealing with politics. However, the advice is practical in another way. Roskam fails to notice that the advice to live unnoticed could also have been expressed as a practical caveat against being harmed on account of the intrinsic subversive values of the Epicurean way of life. In this perspective, political participation is troubling for the soul not only because it exposes one to the dangers of the pursue of power, fame or wealth, but also because the Epicurean, in his critique of the absurdness of such pursuits and of many important values of the mainstream tradition, could easily compromise his safety.

Three doctrines from the Κύριαι Δόξαι dealing with the question of security are of great importance, for they bring clues concerning the motivation behind Epicurean social and political thinking. Principle doctrines 6,7 and 8 deal with different ways of getting security: the first tells us that we can get it from "public office and kingship", the second from being "famous and respected" and the third states that the purest security "is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many." Roskam's translation of ἀσφαλείας ἐξ ἀνθρώπων as *security coming from others*

78 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.19-120.

instead of the traditional translation *security against others* is of importance, not only

because the grammar permits it but also because we find the same tenet in Lucretius'

account of the rise of civilization, where he describes men banding together for their

common security in order to overcome the dangers present in the state of nature.[79]

This allows to place Epicurus' political philosophy away from the claim that he is

hostile towards political society; as we see here, this was not the case.

Furthermore, Roskam's translation coincides with the Epicurean belief depicted

in Principle doctrines 31 and 38, which tells us that much security is to be gained

through "laws and justice, which should be understood as a kind of contract aiming at

mutual non-interference."[80] It also coincides with the idea that security can be

obtained from other people, particularly friends.[81] Furthermore, the fact that fame,

political power and money are ways to achieve security through other people is

pertinent and valid because they may in fact, at certain times, offer some sort of

protection from external harms. More importantly, by considering Principle doctrines 6

and 7 as ways to achieve security from other men (as opposed to *against other men*)

they avoid disagreement with Epicurus' rational calculus (συμμέτρησισ) which does

not permit to discard the value of things without measuring them against specific

contexts. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Epicurean would choose fame or

political power as his or her favorite means to security. This is likely the reason why

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79 Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things*. 5.1011-27

80 Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things.* 5.1011-27

81 Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings,* 34 and 39.

Principle doctrine14 states that security that comes from a quiet and sequestered life is preferable to that which comes from other men.

There are also other doctrines that deal with the issue of security. Principle doctrine 39 deals with the condition of the man who organizes himself best when the confidence that comes from external things is lacking. Epicurus' recommendation is that in such cases one should try to make alike to oneself those things one can, while never making those, that one cannot, alien to oneself. If neither of these options is possible one should avoid all contact. This suggests that a sequestered life is the preferable alternative "when nothing remains of the ἀσφάλεια ἐξ ἀνθρώπων" a situation in which other people are enemies who menace one's security rather than contributing to it. Principle doctrine 40 describes a similar situation but from another angle, in which security is obtained from one's neighbors. Following Roskam's translation, this doctrine explains that one's confidence is based on one's neighbors, only then, (and not by means of political power or fame) "one can live pleasantly with the strongest guarantee."[82] Furthermore, it is worth noticing that the word ὁμορούντων used in this doctrine indicates Epicurus' "characteristic focus on a confined circle of acquaintances, rather than on the scene of public life."[83] By bringing forth Principle doctrines 39 and 40 as well as translating them in his particular fashion, Roskam enables a reading of Epicurus in which abstention from politics and public life is not an a priori rule applicable to everyone, but one that should be

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82 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 40.

83 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 40.

followed in particular circumstances. Furthermore, if perhaps Epicurus' advice to live

an unnoticed life insinuates disdain towards other human beings, this is dissipated by

his emphasis on the importance of neighbors as a means to live pleasantly and

securely. If there is something clear about Epicurus position it is this: don't participate

in politics, for the moment you do there are great chances that the security one gets

from one's neighbors will be at stake.

At this point, a distinction between security coming from one's neighbors and

security coming from other men by being involved in public life becomes evident. The

latter, because of the dangers it entails, is disfavored in face of the former. But if this

is clear, something else needs further clarification. How does Epicurus' clear

preference of a sequestered life as a means to obtain security stand against the

obtention of security from one's neighbors (especially when the latter has also been

described as the best)?

It is hard to determine the meaning of the passage from Vatican doctrine 58 in

which Epicurus says that "they must free themselves from the prison of daily duties

and politics." Considering that the context is lacking, we should avoid thinking that

Epicurus is referring to everybody in general. A passage from Plutarch tells us that

"Epicurus does not think that it is necessary for the lover of honor and the lover of

fame to be tranquil but to employ their nature in political participation and prosecuting

public business because, given their nature, by not taking part in public matters they

are harmed and disturbed more, if they do not obtain the things which they seek."

This is a clear indication that in Epicurus' view, though unrecommended, political

participation is for some an unavoidable constituent part of their happiness. Given

their nature, that is given their natural dispositions and particular contexts, they will be

more unhappy if they refrain from this need. However, being what it is, in their case

partaking in politics will not lead to ataraxy. Diogenes Laertius tells us that "not every

bodily constitution nor every nationality becomes wise."[84] Clearly, the happiness that

Epicurus prescribes is not for everybody and depends highly on the nature, bodily

constitution, and particular culture of each person. S. McConnell observes that it

would be expected that Epicurean rational argument could cure everybody, but in

practice Epicurus understood that sometimes the power of philosophical rational

therapy does fail "even though in theory there is always the chance that it will

overcome the barriers presented by one's nature. And that's why his advice to avoid

political participation cannot possibly be addressed to everybody but only those who

are naturally suited to practice his way of life."[85]

Finally in Vatican saying 81, Epicurus is apodictic in saying that emotional

disturbance won't be banished by the "greatest wealth or respect from the multitude."

This, however, does not contradict what has been said in the previous analysis, which

concluded that political power and fame could be considered a means to obtain

security. What this entails, Roskam points out adequately, is that security does not

necessarily imply tranquility of mind. Clearly, even those who have managed to find

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84 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.117.

85 Sean McConnell, "Epicureans on kingship," *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 56(2010): 194.

security may still suffer from all sorts of irrational fears. With this in mind, it becomes

clear that ataraxy can be achieved by appealing to different means, of which

ἀσφάλεια is one.

Now to come back to the question of the relationship between security coming

from one's neighbors and security from leading a sequestered life, Roskam asserts

that Epicurus would prefer that the condition of ἀταραξία be reached by living within

"a confined circle of neighbors" which still provides security, "far away from the

multitude and political life."[86] Epicurus does not reject the possibility of participating in

politics lest one's security be at stake, but if the conditions of security are fulfilled, it

seems that to reach his telos, one should take distance from political life and the

desire of fame, and retire with like-minded friends to lead a sequestered life. To

reiterate what was mentioned in the previous paragraph, ἀσφάλεια ought to be

considered as a necessary condition to ἀταραξία, not a sufficient one.

So far we have argued that Epicurus' exhortation to live a hidden life is far from

displaying a hostile intention towards society. On the contrary, as we have it from the

extant texts, Epicurus carefully recommends his followers to be kind to those with

whom they live. In fact, the number of those who sympathized with him is said to

have been so large that it "could hardly be counted by whole cities."[87]   He is

described as having been a man of great kindness, who was benevolent to all

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86 Roskam, *'Live unnoticed' λάθε βιώσας   on the vicissitudes of an Epicurean doctrine*: 41.

87 Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, 2. 10.9.

humanity, faithful to his country, pious to the gods, loving of his parents, and who, as

a consequence of the deference he had for others, abstained from entering public life

and recommended those who followed his teachings to do likewise. Clearly, his dislike

for the shortcomings of society does not imply hostility but kindness. In fact, there is

no better way to live unnoticed than through kindness. Hostility even in the form of

hidden disdain does draw much more attention. It has also been agreed that his

advice is only to be applicable to each individual case, and if the rational calculus

favors political participation, only then should one get involved in politics. Also, it is

clear that Epicurus understood that not everybody is suited to live an undisturbed life;

evidently there are human beings who are far too convinced by the regular pursuits of

society. In such cases, these people should let themselves act according to their

nature.   These conclusions, though instructive in our understanding of Epicureanism,

leave us with other important questions, which I should briefly try to address next.

6. Kingship and the best political regime

I have mentioned above that according to Diogenes Laërtius the Epicurean wise man "will pay court to a king, if need be (ἀπορήσαντα)" or "will take a suit in court." So far, the position I have been emphasizing is that it is only in exceptional cases that political involvement is suggested. Gigante and Dorandi, on the other hand, argue for the opposite position by saying that Epicurus did in fact favor kingship.[88]

Their argument is primarily based on an emendation of Diogenes' passage. By replacing ἀπορήσαντα by εὑρήρσαντα the text says that the wise man will make money as normal practice, but being well-resourced (εὑρήρσαντα) from his wisdom alone he will pay court to a king at an opportune time. The reasons why this is recommended, so they argue, is that first, it is the best way to secure material stability, and second, it allows the Epicurean to assist the king by giving him philosophical advice.[89] Thus, binding these two interests in such a manner, the Epicurean would act in total agreement with the Epicurean tenet that states that the wise man will earn money by his wisdom alone. Consequently, they conclude, the Epicurean favored kingship without actually wanting to be king himself.

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88 M Gigante and T Dorandi, "Anassarco e Epicuro sul regno," *Democrito e l'atomismo antico* (1980).

89 Gigante and Dorandi, *Anassarco E Epicuro Sul Regno*: 486.

Based on Plutarch's report concerning the Epicurean rejection of kingship,[90] Fowler argues against Gigante and Dorandi's position. According to Plutarch, Epicurus was critical of political participation, claiming that an undisturbed life was much more valuable than the crown of a king, that there was no need to save Greece or be famous on account of one's wisdom, for the most essential things were to eat, drink and avoid bodily harm. For Fowler Epicurus' position could not be clearer; the Epicurean would not be king because such a position implies a life of disturbance, but he might be glad that "there was a king preserving the peace, and might well prefer a benevolent monarchy to a democracy, since in the latter he would be continually pestered by people like Pericles reminding him of his civic duties."[91]Furthermore, even though Gigante and Dorandi's emendation is ingenious, Fowler argues that the emended εὑρήρσαντα is redundant and "the connection between the maxims is overelaborate."[92] Besides, the link between ἐν καιρῷ (at the opportune time) and the original ἀπορήσαντα (when in need) are indicatives of things the wise man does not normally do but may be forced into by circumstances. Furthermore, Fowler supports his position by appealing to Lucretius' fifth book of his *De Rerum Natura.* There Lucretius narrates how kings arose naturally and built cities for their own security.[93] Before the discovery of gold, they would be fair to all their subjects, but after, their way of life was characterized by a selfish concern for securing their own wealth by

90 Plutarch, *Adversus Coloten,* 1125c–d

91 D.P Fowler, "Lucretius and politics," in *Oxford readings in classical studies. Lucretius*, ed. Monica Gale (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 408.

92 Fowler, D.P, *Lucretius and politics*: 409.

93 Lucretius Carus, *On the nature of things*. 5.1105-9.

fame or by force.[94] Lucretius, therefore, is consistent with the Epicurean position known to us through Plutarch. Being king is a source of great disturbance, for it is a cause of disaster due to others' ambition and envy towards those with wealth, fame, and power.

The possibility that Epicurus could have favored kingship for the prospects of material security and the ability to live off one's wisdom is made more unlikely by the maxim λάθε βιώσασ. As argued above, the maxim is a straightforward exhortation to avoid political participation, because doing politics often implied a constant distress over power, wealth, fame and security. And this was true of both kingship and democracy; one only has to consider the example of Alexander the Great's extensive conquests and violent death. So long as the traditional understanding of politics was concerned, kingship falls within its limits, and any implication with it is discouraged. Dorandi and Gigante's suggestion, like Fowler says, is at best not needed.

There is no evidence to say that Epicurus favored any one type of political regime. But there is clear evidence that he discouraged political participation, that he considered traditional politics to be an area mainly guided by the pursuit of vain desires. As it is, this could be understood as a veritable disinterestedness in the evolution and improvement of traditional politics. True happiness could never be possible if one tries to ennoble the political regime; the risks are simply too high. As discussed above, the fact that Epicurus understood that the pursuit of ataraxy was not

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94 Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of things.* 5.1114-22

for everyone, that there are people whose happiness lies precisely in the pursuit of fame and power, and that they should be free to act as they wish, helps us understand that the existence of an Epicurean community at a universal level including every human being is not possible. The Epicurean Garden was a community of friends committed to non-mutual harming and was simply unappealing to all those who opted for the traditional type of life offered in the city. This relation between the disposition of people towards vain desires and politics as the perfect means to attain them, is clearly an important reason to discourage all form of political participation. Only extreme situations involving danger would demand the Epicurean to step forward in the political arena, regardless of the political regime.   The type of evils politics breeds is inherent to it by the bias of those who see in politics the best means to acquire power, fame and wealth. If we have to find a political regime favored by Epicurus, there will be no other than the model we find in the Garden, and that is, a community based on the principles of mutually advantageous friendship. This is perhaps why Numemius, a non-Epicurean philosopher, describing the Epicurean school's success in living in such a good organized manner, speaks of it as being "like some true republic."[95] The Epicurean school was conceived not only as a school but as a place where the happy life could be lived. And this life was only possible by avoiding any stressful implication with the city that hosted the school.

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95 Eusebius, *Eusebius: Preparation for the Gospel*, trans. EH Gifford, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon (1903). XIV.V.

7. Conclusion

Epicurus' avoidance of political participation is fundamentally an attitude aimed at accomplishing two major objectives. First, since the Garden was certainly at odds with the established order, avoiding political involvement helped prevent political persecution. Second, the apolitical attitude was consequential of the Epicurean pursuit of ataraxy; politics for the most part are filled with greed and other vain and strong desires, on account of which, any attempt at improving the regime was simply too dangerous. Philosophy, as we learn from Hadot, is there to assist the individual in recreating himself, to allow him to question the values by which his way of life is being directed, and to facilitate the production of new ones instead. Epicurus' effort to make this transformation attain its full potential is taken to a different level by the creation of the Epicurean community, a place where the uprooted philosopher could find the space to live his life without the thwarting oppression of a world overwhelmed by suffering, and the enjoyment of the liberty that one only finds among friends. To say that Epicurus' advice was not politically motivated would be a serious misunderstanding. One of the most impressive achievements of Epicurean philosophy, and Hellenistic philosophy overall, is to have demonstrated how social conditioning shapes emotion, desire and thought. Having come to the conclusion that the condition of things upon which life unfolded was not optimal, philosophers from this era sought to reform the social conditions which enabled such a state of affairs. Aristotle tells us that ethics is a part of politics, which is the most authoritative and

architectonic science.[96] Clearly, politics has the power of shaping the life of those who live in a political regime. Epicurus clearly understood this and saw that these type of arrangements are tremendously flawed, mainly because people who are part of it are, for the most part, uninterested in the well-being of the city as a whole. For Epicurus, humans do need to live organized according to a certain structure; the only difference is that for him, such organization cannot occur if it remains attached to the pursuits and struggles of traditional political life. Thus, politics conceived merely as the distribution of goods and offices is for Epicurus an outdated notion. Politics goes beyond the scope of material administration; it reaches, and deeply, the most intimate aspect of our souls. His refusal of politics is, therefore, apolitical only in the sense that it wants to cut loose from the leash of traditional values of accumulation and power. But in itself, Epicurus' attitude wants to achieve almost the same thing that ideal politics do; namely, the well-being of each person, with the important difference that it does not aim to be universal.

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[96] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 1094a26–b2.

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