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Chapter 6

Epicurus in the Roman Imperial Age: Four Case-Studies (Aristocles of Messene, Atticus, Dionysius of Alexandria and Plotinus)

Introduction

Although there are a few excellent overviews of Epicurean thought in the Roman Imperial age, there is, to my knowledge, no comprehensive study of the history of Imperial Epicureanism in relation to the other contemporary philosophical schools.¹ This lack of a nuanced *Wirkungsgeschichte* has often created a false impression of discontinuity, which in all likelihood does not correspond to the historical reality. Although we do not know whether the Garden, the school founded by Epicurus at Athens, continued to exist in the Imperial age or had been re-founded over time, we know for certain that Epicurus' doctrines circulated widely in the various philosophical schools of that era. It remains difficult nonetheless to determine whether every thinker who quotes Epicurus directly or indirectly actually read his works first hand. It has been suggested, for example, that Epicurus' fundamental work devoted to the science of nature (φυσιολογία), the *De natura* in 37 books, which is partially preserved in the Herculaneum papyri, did not achieve significant diffusion beyond the confines of the Epicurean school.² We cannot, however, confirm this suggestion, since the few quotations from the *De natura* by non-Epicurean authors (e.g. Diogenes Laertius, Arrian, Alciphron and Galen)³ do not necessarily indicate that Epicurus' capital work failed to have a wider circulation. The *De natura*, however, is manifestly a very difficult work, and undoubtedly the intense aversion to Epicureanism on the part of both pagan ancient philosophers

1 See on this topic the excellent overviews provided by Erler 2009, Dorandi 2016 and Erler 2018.

2 Dorandi 2015, 44–48.

3 Us. 1887, 124.

Note: My gratitude goes to Gregson Davis and Sergio Yona for checking and improving the English version of this article and for their helpful remarks.

and the Church Fathers impeded broad dissemination of the major works of the founder of the Garden.

Among the clearest indications of the extent of Imperial reception of the school we may cite the following: in the Hadrianic era there was a quasi-revival of Epicureanism as documented in two inscriptions that confirm the vivid interest of Plotina, Trajan's widow, in the Epicurean school of Athens.⁴ A later event that cannot be ignored in the examination of Imperial Epicureanism is the institution in Athens by Marcus Aurelius at public expense around 176 CE of several chairs of philosophy, one of which was devoted to Epicurean thought.⁵ A recently edited papyrus fragment (*POxy. 5077*⁶) perhaps indicates the existence of a sort of "anthology" of letters written by Epicurus (and/or the Epicureans) that attests the circulation of these texts (at least in Egypt) between the first and second centuries CE. One can find discussions of, and references to, several Epicurean doctrines in many authors of the Imperial age, such as Plutarch,⁷ Sextus Empiricus,⁸ Galen,⁹ Alexander of Aphrodisias¹⁰ and Diogenianus.¹¹ In his presentation of Epicurean philosophy in Book 10 of his *Vitae Philosophorum*, Diogenes Laertius appears to be a committed apologist of his doctrines.¹² As is well known, Diogenes transmits Epicurus' three doctrinal letters, the *Ratae sententiae* (called "the most beautiful of books", by Lucian of Samosata *Alex. 47 = 70 Us.*), and the *Testamentum*, works that, *ipso facto*, were in circulation in addition to other Epicurean compendia/summaries or "anthologies." Finally, the extensive monumental epigraph of Diogenes of Oinoanda – indisputably the most important and influential Epicurean philosopher of the Imperial age – is an absolutely indispensable source for the history of Epicureanism and its relationship to other philosophical schools.¹³

In reassessing the extent and scope of the diffusion of Epicurean philosophy in the Imperial age, my analysis will focus on the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Epicureanism from the late Republican age to the third century CE. Given the impossibility, within the limited scope of this chapter, of providing a thorough account of the influential presence of Epicurean thought over so wide a period, I will target my examination

4 Dorandi 2016, 30–37.

5 See Philostr. *Vit. Soph.* 566; further passages in Todd 1976, 6 n. 29; Donini 1981; Toulouse 2008.

6 Obbink/Schorn 2011; see too Dorandi 2016, 40–48 and especially the remarkable study by Angeli 2013, including a new edition and exegesis of this text.

7 Boulogne 2003 and Corti 2014, 21–28.

8 Spinelli 1991.

9 Kaufman 2014, 284–289.; Damiani 2023.

10 Verde 2015a, 187; Verde 2015b; Verde 2016c.

11 This, however, is a much-debated point. See Isnardi 1990 and Hammerstaedt 1993.

12 Dorandi 2016, 37–40.

13 For Diogenes of Oinoanda, see the new important volume edited by Hammerstaedt *et al.* 2017.

on four “case-studies,” which, in my view, are particularly representative of both pagan and Christian receptions of Epicurus: Aristocles of Messene, Atticus, Dionysius of Alexandria and Plotinus. The aim of this brief investigation of the main features of these four authors’ approach is to show that Epicureanism had a substantial presence in the Imperial age, even though it often functioned as a polemical target in the arena of philosophical contestation.

Aristocles of Messene on Epicurus’ Theory of Affections

Aristocles of Messene (*fl.* c. first century BCE–first century CE) was a Peripatetic philosopher mainly known for his testimony on the Pyrrhonians reported by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Praep. evang.* 14.18.1 = F 4 Chiesara = T53 Declava Caizzi). He is perhaps less known for his dense criticism of Epicurus’ doctrine of affections (πάθη). Aristocles’ criticism of the doctrine is not surprising, since it is an important part of the wider polemic between Epicureans and Peripatetics.¹⁴ Before examining Aristocles’ arguments, it is useful to recall the essential features of the Epicurean doctrine regarding affections.¹⁵ The fundamental source of our knowledge of “canonic” – the first part of Epicurus’ philosophical system – is Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius’ *Vitae*. The biographer points out (10.30) that canonic is the introduction or, more literally, the access path to the whole system and is contained *only* in Epicurus’ work *Canon*, which is unfortunately lost. We know very little about the plan of this composition, but since Diogenes asserts that Epicurus dealt with canonic issues “only in the *Canon*,” it is plausible to conclude that the canonic section of Diogenes’ *Vita Epicuri* largely depends on this work. It is difficult to establish, however, whether Diogenes quotes directly from Epicurus’ *Canon* or consulted a doxographical source or a manual/handbook that summarized the contents of the *Canon* in a synthetic and schematic way.

The relevant segment of Diogenes’ account dedicated to the theory of the affections is all too short, but nonetheless it provides the core concepts of the teaching on the subject (10.34):

πάθη δὲ λέγουσιν εἶναι δύο, ἡδονὴν καὶ ἀλγηδόνα, ἰστάμενα περὶ πάντων ζῶων, καὶ τὴν μὲν οἰκεῖον, τὴν δὲ ἀλλότριον· δι’ ὧν κρίνεσθαι τὰς αἰρέσεις καὶ φυγὰς.

¹⁴ For an overview of this large topic see Gigante 1999 and Verde 2016a.

¹⁵ On Epicurus’ πάθη see Verde 2018b (also for further bibliographic entries).

They [sc. the Epicureans] affirm that there are two affections, pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined.¹⁶

It should be noted that, according to Epicurus, the affections constitute an epistemological criterion of truth, exactly like sense-perception (αἴσθησις) and preconception or anticipation (πρόληψις). In Book 14 of his *Praeparatio evangelica* (14.21.1 = F 8 Chiesara; part. 260 Us.), Eusebius transmits *verbatim* a long passage by the Peripatetic Aristocles that argues against the Epicureans, who consider pleasure as the *telos* of the moral life. Aristocles' testimony in Eusebius is particularly interesting, as the philosopher criticizes the Epicurean doctrine of affections precisely in terms of their reliability as the criterion of truth. Eusebius prefaces his lengthy quotation of Aristocles with the claim that Epicurus and his followers, starting “from Aristippus' philosophical stance” (ἐκ τῆς Ἀριστίππου διαγωγῆς), made everything depend on pleasure and sense-perception. The mention of Aristippus in this regard is not accidental, for Eusebius' account fits into the widespread (and malevolent) “historiographical” or doxographical tendency to denigrate the originality of Epicurean thinking. The same strategy is found in Cicero, who considers Epicurus to be a philosopher lacking in originality¹⁷ on the grounds that his physics derives from Democritus, while his ethics is borrowed from Aristippus (see *Fin.* 1.5.13–7.26; cf. DL 10.4).

After this introduction, Eusebius reports the Aristoclean passage *kata lexin*:

Ἐπειδή ἐστί γνῶσις διττή, ἡ μὲν τῶν ἔξω πραγμάτων, ἡ δὲ τῶν ἡμῖν αἰρετῶν καὶ φευκτῶν, ἐνιοὶ φασὶ τῆς αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς ἀρχὴν καὶ κριτήριον ἔχειν ἡμᾶς τὴν ἡδονὴν καὶ τὸν πόνον· ἔτι γέ τοι καὶ νῦν τοιαῦτά τινα λέγουσιν οἱ περὶ τὸν Ἐπίκουρον· ἀναγκαίως οὖν ἔχει καὶ περὶ τούτου σκέψασθαι. τοσοῦτου τοίνυν ἔγωγε δέω λέγειν ἀρχὴν εἶναι καὶ κανόνα τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ τῶν κακῶν τὸ πάθος, ὥστε ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ τοῦτο αὐτὸ κριτηρίου δεῖσθαι. Διότι μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν, ἑαυτὸ δείκνυσιν, ὁποῖον δ' ἐστὶν ἑτέρου δεῖ τοῦ κρινούντος. εἰ μὲν γὰρ οἰκεῖον ἢ ἀλλότριον, ἡ αἴσθησις λέγει, πότερον δ' αἰρετὸν ἢ φευκτόν, ὁ λόγος.

Since knowledge is of two kinds, the one of external things, and the other of what to choose or avoid, some say that as the principle and criterion of choice and avoidance we have pleasure and pain. At least the Epicureans even now still say something of this kind; it is necessary therefore to consider this too. For my part, then, I am so far from saying that affection is the principle and canon of things good and evil that I think a criterion is needed for affection itself. To be sure, it proves its own existence, but something else is wanted to judge of its nature. For perception tells whether the affection is familiar or not, but it is reason that tells whether it is to be chosen or avoided.¹⁸

¹⁶ Translation is that of R. D. Hicks, with slight modifications.

¹⁷ On this topic see the lucid remarks of Erler 2011. See also Maso 2015, 25–46 and Maso 2022, 93–107.

¹⁸ Translation is that of M. L. Chiesara.

Aristocles' passage is of great interest, in that as its terminological precision leads us to conclude not only that the Peripatetic philosopher had a good knowledge of Epicurean philosophy, but also that his criticism is specifically focused on the doctrine of πάθη as criterion of truth; for he talks about κριτήριον or κανών with reference to the πάθη. Furthermore, he employs in this passage the genuinely Epicurean sets of binary terms: οικεῖον/ἀλλότριον and αἴρεσις/φυγή. As in the case of Diogenes Laertius, it is very difficult to establish whether Aristocles had unmediated access to Epicurus' *Canon*, since the account he offers of the Epicurean theory of πάθη is not so different from what one reads in Diogenes' *Vitae*. The reader could plausibly infer that Aristocles' exposition also derives from a manual or doxographic work, even if one expression ("At least the Epicureans even now still say something of this kind") suggests that he was aware of the success (or, at least, the dissemination) of this doctrine even in his own time.¹⁹

On several occasions Aristocles arguably evinces a direct knowledge of the philosophical sources to which he refers. This familiarity applies to Epicurus and, in particular, to a letter of his on occupations and another addressed to the philosophers in Mytilene (88 F1-7 Erb), which are explicitly quoted by the philosopher (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.2.1 = F 2 Chiesara = 171 Us.). At the beginning of the passage transmitted by Eusebius, Aristocles identifies the existence of two forms of γνώσις. The first concerns the external πράγματα, the second, the criteria to be applied in matters of choice and avoidance. This distinction may recall Sextus Empiricus' description of the epistemological and practical criteria in his work *Adversus mathematicos* (*Math.* 7.29). After correctly reporting the Epicurean position according to which pleasure and pain (and more generally τὸ πάθος) provide the basic principles guiding the issue of what needs to be chosen and avoided, Aristocles addresses a sharp criticism of the precept to the effect that Epicurus was wrong to considering the affections as unique criteria of truth, since in order to determine what should be pursued and avoided the affections stand in need of a further criterion capable of legitimizing and, above all, "governing" them. In brief, according to Aristocles, the Epicurean πάθη cannot be a reliable basis for arriving at truth because they are lacking in λόγος, which is essential in determining what should be chosen and what avoided. That affection is involved in sense-perception is self-evident, but in order to determine its true nature (ὁποῖον) another "faculty" is necessary. This argument seems to be, for all intents and purposes, of Aristotelian origin. As is very often the case, Aristocles manifests a substantial measure of "Peripatetic loyalty."²⁰

19 On Aristocles' chronology (first century BCE-first century CE) see Chiesara 2001, xvi–xix.

20 See on this point Chiesara 2001, 163 and 165–167.

The topic of sense-perception in Aristotle is, of course, very complex, and cannot be treated in depth here. Suffice it to recall a few passages of the *De anima*, in which Aristotle asserts that sensation with respect to the appropriate sense-organ (e.g. sight with respect to the existence of a color) is not intrinsically deceptive (2.6.418a11–16). In 3.3.428a11–12 Aristotle concludes that sense-perceptions are “always true,” while most “appearances” (φαντασίαι) are “false.” This point is briefly explained in the sequel, where the philosopher observes that a perception made by the appropriate sense is true or, in any case, involves only minimal error (3.3.428b18–19). In addition to 2.6.418a11–16, the Aristotelian passage that is probably closer to Aristocles’ argument against Epicurus is also taken from the *De anima* and concerns the sense of sight (3.3.428b21–22): ὅτι μὲν γὰρ λευκὸν, οὐ ψεύδεται, εἰ δὲ τοῦτο τὸ λευκὸν ἢ ἄλλο τι, ψεύδεται (“For perception does not err in perceiving that an object is white, but only as to whether the white object is one thing or another,” 3.3.428b21–22; transl. W. S. Hett). Sight does not err in regard to phenomena proper to its domain (such as color); that is to say, it does not confuse them with respect to the proper domain of another sense (for example, sound in regard to hearing); nevertheless, sight can confuse one color with another, or one colored object with another. In short, sense-perception only secures the existence of white but does not judge further.²¹

It is no coincidence that Aristocles, shortly after the above-mentioned passage, stresses (against Epicurus) that the best standards of knowledge (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.21.6) are “sense-perceptions *and* the intellect” (καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις καὶ τὸν νοῦν), just as there is no *sic et simpliciter* condemnation of the αἰσθήσεις in Aristotle,²² who clearly rules out the attainment of the universal via sense-perception. Sense-perceptions, Aristocles concludes, cannot judge the truth by themselves (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.21.7): ἢ δεινὸν γ’ ἂν εἴη πεφυκότας ἀνθρώπους ἡδοναῖς καὶ πόνοις ἀλόγοις ἐπιτρέπειν ἑαυτοῦς, ἀφέντας τὸν θειότατον κριτὴν νοῦν (“Else it would be a monstrous thing for beings endowed with man’s nature to entrust themselves to irrational pleasures and pains and forsake the most divine judge, Mind”;²³ transl. M. L. Chiesara).

Aristocles’ polemic against Epicurus – based on a notion of knowledge as a combined participation of sense-perception *and* intellect (although only intellect can ultimately judge the truth) – evidently does not take into account that, according to Epicurus’ canonic, *only* αἰσθήσεις is ἄλογος (DL 10.31; cf. too Plat. *Tim.*

²¹ See too Aristot. *De sens.* 447b26–448a1.

²² Aristot. *An. post.* 1.31.87b28–33; *Metaph.* 1.1.981b10–13; *De an.* 2.5.417b21–23 and 3.4.429b14–18.

²³ For Aristocles’ νοῦς θειότατος see Aristot. *De an.* 1.5.408b29, along with the detailed annotations by Chiesara 2001, 165–166.

28a2–3), i.e. non-rational (since it is lacking in μνήμη or “memory”), whereas the other criteria (preconceptions and affections) presuppose the intervention of λογισμός (“reasoning”).²⁴ If it were not so, (1) the πρόληψις could not “store”, by elaborating them, the fundamental data of repeated sensations,²⁵ and (2) affections would not be able to judge anything in the practical sphere of action. According to Epicurus, the criteria of truth are epistemological tools and are based on the self-evidence inherent in ἐνάργεια.²⁶ These criteria do not need another corroborative entity that legitimizes their epistemological status. There is no doubt that Aristocles correctly links affections with sense-perceptions (*Men.* 124), but the most important point is that πάθη, considered as criteria of truth, are not on the same level as αἴσθησις precisely because the former “judge” (κρίνεσθαι), which is an activity that is totally impossible for sense-perception since it is devoid of λόγος. We do not know if any contemporary Epicureans replied to Aristocles’ (fundamentally Aristotelian) criticisms of the founder of the Garden. The most significant point, from our point of view, is that this Epicurean doctrine of affections was the object of debate among followers of the Peripatos – secure evidence that this was reckoned a remarkable philosophical theory (especially on account of its link to pleasure and the ethical/practical sphere), which therefore merited reasoned refutation.

Atticus’s Qualified Regard for Epicurus

Second only to Taurus, who was a thoroughly engaged critic of Epicurean ethics,²⁷ Atticus may be considered a chief exponent of Platonism in Athens.²⁸ According to the *Chronica* of Eusebius of Caesarea,²⁹ Atticus’ *floruit* was in 176 CE – the same year that Marcus Aurelius instituted the Athenian philosophical chairs. If Taurus wrote a *Περὶ τῆς τῶν δογμάτων διαφορᾶς Πλάτωνος καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους* (*On the Difference between the Doctrines of Plato and Aristotle*),³⁰ Atticus wrote a *Πρὸς τοὺς διὰ τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους τὰ Πλάτωνος ὑπίσχνουμένους* (*Praep. evang.*

²⁴ Warren 2014, 180 n. 10.

²⁵ Tsouna 2016, 162–174 and Verde 2016b on the Epicurean criterion of preconception in general.

²⁶ Ierodiakonou 2012; cf. the chapter by Hedrick in this volume for more on the role of ἐνάργεια.

²⁷ See Gell. *Noct. Att.* 9.5.8 = 18 T. Gioè = T14 Petrucci.

²⁸ Dillon 1996, 248.

²⁹ CCXXXVIII *Olymp.*, Helm 1956, 207: *Atticus Platonicae sectae philosophus agnoscitur.*

³⁰ Suda Lexicon s.v. Ταῦρος (166) = 3 T. Gioè = T3 Petrucci.

11.1.2 = 1 des Places, *Against those who Profess to Explain the Doctrines of Plato by those of Aristotle*). From the title of the latter work (unfortunately lost) it can be inferred that Atticus' purpose was to discredit the tendency to reconcile the philosophy of Plato with that of Aristotle in order to defend Plato's originality and autonomy.³¹ In the process, Atticus very often not only renders a superficial account of the doctrines of Aristotle, but also misrepresents them in accordance with his polemical purpose.³² I will not deal here, however, with Atticus' distortions of Aristotelian doctrines; rather, I shall focus on a passage in Eusebius (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.1–14 = 3 des Places = Text 11A. Boys-Stones) that transmits Atticus' criticism of the Aristotelian refutation of providence. This passage conveys important insights into our topic, because Atticus shows that he had a good knowledge of Epicurean theology by citing the crucial Epicurean doctrine of the ὄνησις (advantage, enjoyment) of divine *simulacra* (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.7 = 385 Us.).

Closely following Eusebius' discussion, Atticus asserts that faith in providence is at the basis of the philosophy of Plato, who sees all things as connected with God and dependent on God (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.2); God is responsible for the universe that has been shaped in the best possible way – an assertion that is perfectly in line with Atticus' "literal" interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*.³³ The radical mistake of Aristotle, in his view, is his rejection of the divine nature of the cosmos (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.3) and, as a consequence, the "reverence" (εὐλάβειαν) due to the gods. Atticus, who identified *Timaeus'* demiurge with the Good of the *Respublica*,³⁴ deploys an argument against Aristotle that is typical of conventional anti-Epicurean polemic: to deny the role of providence in our world is to live amorally and to legitimize injustice (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.5). It is not by chance, then, that Atticus goes on immediately to compare Epicurus and Aristotle in terms of an underlying atheistic world-view: Epicurus, by virtue of his central doctrine of pleasure, encourages humankind to live without moral guidance, while Aristotle leads us to the same kind of life through the outright denial of the divine.³⁵ That is the main reason, in Atticus' eyes, that Aristotle and Epicurus are compatible at the philosophical level (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.5.8):

31 Chiaradonna 2015b, 436 n. 33.

32 Karamanolis 2006, 160.

33 See Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 1.381.26–382.12 Diehl = 23 des Places = Text 4K. Boys-Stones, followed by Ferrari 2014, and, in more general terms, Petrucci 2015. On Plotinus and the exegetical neo-Platonic tradition on the *Timaeus*, see Chiaradonna 2016b.

34 See Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 1.305.6–16 Diehl = 12 des Places = Text 6N. Boys-Stones, followed by Opsomer 2005, 73–79. According to Dillon 2003, 107 the identification of *Timaeus'* demiurge (and the ideal Paradigm) with the Good of the *Respublica* is to be found already in Xenocrates. For more in general on this matter see, too, Ferrari 2017–2018.

35 See Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.5.7 and Karamanolis 2006, 163.

τί γὰρ διαφέρει πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἢ τοῦ κόσμου τὸ θεῖον ἐξοικίσασθαι καὶ μηδεμίαν ἡμῖν πρὸς αὐτὸ κοινωνίαν ἀπολιπεῖν, ἢ ἐν κόσμῳ τοὺς θεοὺς καθεῖρξαντα τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς πραγμάτων ἀποστη-
σαι; κατ' ἴσον γὰρ παρ' ἀμφοτέροις τὸ ἐκ θεῶν ἀμελὲς εἰς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἴση τοῖς ἀδι-
κοῦσιν ἢ ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἄδεια.

For what difference does it make to us whether you banish deity from the world and leave us no communion therewith, or shut up the gods in the world and remove them from all share in the affairs of earth? For in both cases the indifference of the gods towards men is equal, and no less equal is the security of wrong-doers from fear of the gods.³⁶

Atticus then goes into the argument in greater detail, pointing out that, if the gods' abode is in the sky (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.8), they must confer some benefit upon men; for this reason, even according to Epicurus, the gods are beneficent towards men. He adduces the Epicurean view that “the better emanations from them [sc. the gods] become the contributory causes of great blessings to those mortals who partake of them” (τὰς γοῦν βελτίονας ἀπορροίας αὐτῶν φασι τοῖς μετασχοῦσι μεγάλων ἀγαθῶν παρατίαις γίνεσθαι, *Praep. evang.* 15.5.9; Gifford's translation slightly modified). Atticus, correctly, does not attribute to the Epicurean gods any “pure causality” – this would be a clear contradiction to Epicurus' philosophy – but he more moderately speaks of contributory/“collateral” causes or παραίτια (at any rate a term used by Atticus to define Platonic ideas),³⁷ although in the Epicurean tradition there was at least one philosopher (Polyaenus of Lampsacus) who regarded the divine nature as a cause (see fr. 29 Tepedino Guerra = Philod. *Piet.* col. 38.1092–1099 Obbink).³⁸ Atticus emphasizes that the best emanations of the gods (i.e., the divine *simulacra* or images) are able to generate benefits to humans – an advantage directly linked to that imperturbability eternally experienced by the gods. For those who adopt the philosophy of Epicurus, the divine ἀταραξία of the gods is a tangible possibility that they can achieve in their own lives. That the divine *simulacra* conferred some benefits to mortals was probably already a Democritean doctrine, perhaps associated with the efficacy of prayer.³⁹

Thanks to Atticus' testimony and other parallel sources, the veneration of the gods in the Epicurean system gains a very high ethical value, though coexisting with the inactivity of the divinity and the absence of providence. Since the *simulacra* of the gods bring incidental benefits to earthlings, it follows that to take part

³⁶ The English translation of Eusebius' passages on Atticus and Dionysius is by E. H. Gifford.

³⁷ See Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.13.5 (= 9 des Places = Text. 5A. Boys-Stones). See on this topic the article by Bonuglia 2018.

³⁸ See Piergiacomini 2017, 128–131. On Epicurus' theology see Spinelli/Verde 2020. (also for further bibliography).

³⁹ See Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.19 = 68 B 166 DK = VII 27 D154 Laks/Most 2016 with Piergiacomini 2013a, 2013b and in this volume Chapter 5, n. 13. See also Verde/Zaccaria 2020.

in prayers and religious ceremonies (a practice actually followed by the Epicureans: see e.g. Philod. *Piet.* col. 27.754–772 Obbink [386 Us.]; also Diog. Oen. fr. 19. II.6–11 Smith) means to internalize successfully the divine *simulacra* and to make concrete the commitment to becoming “gods among men” (*Men.* 135).⁴⁰ In this sense, the gods are not merely ideal ethical and regulatory models introduced by Epicurus exclusively to make his own philosophical system consistent with the admission of eternally and authentically imperturbable beings. Rather, the gods become very important agents in shaping our ethical life by having an at least *indirectly* active role (albeit with no deliberate intent on their part) owing to the benefits that their *simulacra* bring us in the not always easy path towards an assimilation to godhead – an assimilation, however, that is absolutely earthly and circumscribed within the limits of human existence.⁴¹ Obviously, Atticus does not intend to champion Epicurus’ doctrine on this issue, but he certainly considers him theologically more consistent and worthy of respect than Aristotle, though ultimately, from the perspective of the Platonic philosopher, Epicurus, by denying providence and theorizing gods who only care for the preservation of their own goods, is, like Aristotle, a presumptive atheist.

Before quoting Atticus, Eusebius states that “Aristotle arrests the divine power at the moon, and marks off the remaining portions of the world from God’s government” (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.1). On this point Eusebius appears very close to Origen, who in the *Contra Celsum* (1.21.9–12) compares Aristotle and Epicurus and concludes that, on the subject of providence, the latter is less impious than the former. In this respect Atticus does not contradict Eusebius, for he affirms that, while denying providence, Aristotle maintains that the heavenly motions are arranged in a certain order and array (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.9). The core of Atticus’ anti-Aristotelian argument lies in the opinion that, in the field of theology, Epicurus shows “more reserve” (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.11) than Aristotle, not only because the *simulacra* of his gods bring benefits to men, but also because by placing the gods far away and outside of the cosmos, he could “justify” their disinterest in worldly affairs.

Epicurus would most probably disagree with Atticus’ reconstruction of his theology on the grounds that the reason the gods do not care for men is not merely a function of their remote physical location, and the conception that the gods exist outside the universe is problematic and difficult to fathom.⁴² Atticus is not interested, however, in the historically objective reconstruction of Epicurus’s

⁴⁰ Erler 2002b and Reydams-Schils 2017.

⁴¹ Drozdek 2005, 155–166 and Essler 2011, 357–358.

⁴² Essler 2011, 237–241 and 321–322.

philosophy, but uses Epicurus to counter Aristotle, who “after putting human affairs under the very eyes of the gods, yet left them uncared for and disregarded, to be administered by some natural disposition, and not by God’s reasoning” (*Praep. evang.* 15.5.12: ὑπ’ αὐτὴν τὴν ὄψιν τῶν θεῶν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα πράγματα ὑποθεῖς εἶασεν ἀτημέλητα καὶ ἀφρόντιστα, φύσει τινὶ καὶ οὐ θεοῦ λογισμῶ διοικούμενα. [Gifford’s translation slightly modified]). Aristotle is therefore more at fault than Epicurus, because though he does not place the divine outside of the universe, he ultimately leaves human affairs at the mercy of a φύσις that has nothing in common with the θεοῦ λογισμός (a likely quotation from Plato’s *Timaeus* [e.g. 34a8]).⁴³ From this perspective, the φύσις of Aristotle acquires the same features as that of Epicurus. It is not accidental, therefore, that, in contrast to the Platonic demiurge, as well as to the “intelligent design” of the Stoics, the Epicureans notably strengthened the autonomous role of nature.⁴⁴ In terms of this critique, Aristotle, like Epicurus, can be regarded as a virtual atheist (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.5.12):

ὄθεν εἰκότως ἂν καὶ αὐτὸς οὐδ’ ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἔγκλημα ἐκφυγοί, ὃ κατ’ Ἐπικούρου τινὲς μαντεύονται, ὡς ἄρα μὴ κατὰ γνώμην, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων δέος τοῖς θεοῖς κατένειμεν ἐν τῷ παντὶ χώρῳ ὡσπερ ἐν θεάτρῳ θέαν.

Wherefore he [sc. Aristotle] himself cannot fairly escape that other charge that some (τινές) level against Epicurus: i.e. it was not according to his judgement, but through fear of men, that he allotted room in the universe to the gods, just like a spectator’s place in a theatre

It is probable that the τινές mentioned in the above passage are an allusion to Posidonius,⁴⁵ for in his *De natura deorum* (1.123 = 22a Edelstein/Kidd) Cicero usefully reports the Posidonian position against Epicurean theology:⁴⁶ *Verius est igitur nimirum illud, quod familiaris omnium nostrum Posidonius disseruit in libro quinto de natura deorum, nullos esse deos Epicuro videri, quaeque is de deis immortalibus dixerit invidiae detestandae gratia dixisse* (“So what that old friend of us all, Posidonius, argued in his fifth book of *De natura deorum* is surely nearer the truth, viz. that Epicurus thought that there were no gods, and whatever he said about the immortal gods, he said to avert popular indignation”; transl. I. G. Kidd). It seems very likely that Posidonius played an essential role in the dissemination of the idea of the (alleged) atheism of Epicurus. We find essentially the same argument made by Atticus also in the work of Dionysius of Alexandria:⁴⁷ the putative

⁴³ Sharples 2002, 16.

⁴⁴ See below 127, with Opsomer 2005, 57–59; Chiaradonna 2015a, 36–40; Erler 2017, 55–57.

⁴⁵ Pease 1955, 535.

⁴⁶ Maso 2015, 85 n. 2.

⁴⁷ Fleischer 2016, 398–399.

atheism of Epicurus had become a conventional cliché of the polemic against Epicurean theology, but, as we have seen, Atticus does not refrain from using the same argumentative strategy against Aristotle.

Dionysius of Alexandria and Epicurean Theology

The figure of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, is complex and merits inclusion in scholarly debate on the philosophical and, more generally, cultural environment of Alexandria in the second and third centuries CE.⁴⁸ Dionysius was probably born in the late second century CE and died between the years 264 and 265. There are adequate grounds for the belief that Dionysius converted to Christianity and that he assumed the leadership of the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria as a presbyter beginning in 232 CE;⁴⁹ this is one key point in understanding his philosophical interests; another is the fact that he was a disciple of Origen – even though he was not a strict Origenist in the theological field, since he denied for example, the pre-existence of souls.⁵⁰ In 248 CE Dionysius became bishop of Alexandria in a period of violent persecution of the Christians, such as the persecution under Decius (emperor from 249 to 251 CE) and Valerian (emperor from 253 to 260 CE).⁵¹ From Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* (7.26.2) we know that he dedicated to his son Timothy a work entitled *De natura* that certainly comprised several books.⁵² Unfortunately, Dionysius's work does not survive in its entirety, but we learn from the same passage in Eusebius that it was epistolary in form. The largest extant segment of this work is preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica* (14.23.1–27.13 = fr. 1–7 Routh, see Fleischer [2016] 240–249 and 252–263); five short fragments are found in the *Sacra parallela* by John Damascene.⁵³ It has been persuasively shown that the portion of the *De natura* transmitted in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica* comes from the first book of that work.⁵⁴ That a Christian bishop composed a *De natura* in accordance with the oldest pagan Greek philosophical tradition might occasion initial surprise. It should be kept in mind in this regard, however, that (1) Dionysius was the dean of the Catechetical School of

48 On Dionysius' life and works see Fleischer 2016, 217–233.

49 See Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.29.4.

50 Fleischer 2016, 234–236.

51 See Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.35.1.

52 Fleischer 2016, 237–411 usefully provides the text, the German translation, and a running commentary of all the *reliquiae* of Dionysius' *De natura*.

53 Holl 1899, 361 and 363–366; see Fleischer 2016, 250–251 and 263–264.

54 Fleischer 2016, 268–270 and 457.

Alexandria (and, therefore, officially engaged in doctrinal matters), and (2) Epicureanism might well have been rather widely disseminated in Alexandria during his tenure of the position.⁵⁵ Dionysius was a Christian bishop and, as we learn from Eusebius (*Praep. evang.* 14.22.17), had become an adherent “of Christ’s philosophy” (τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν φιλοσοφίας ἐπισκόπου ἀνδρός) shortly before transmitting some portions of the *De natura*. Under these circumstances one can readily understand that Dionysius’s goal in this work was essentially polemical, since by definition a book entitled *De natura* must have had ancient physics as its main focus. The hypothesis that this was generally a polemical work directed against pagan physics in general is well founded; in any case, it is very likely that the first book was exclusively (or, at least, mainly) anti-Epicurean.⁵⁶

An overview of the Epicurean doctrinal issues faced by Dionysius in the section of the *De natura* reported by Eusebius is in order at this juncture. To begin with, the sources used by Dionysius in his polemic against Epicurus are the subject of philological dispute. It has been argued, for instance, that Dionysius obtained his knowledge of Epicureanism from Platonic and/or Stoic manuals, which, of course, already included arguments against Epicurean precepts.⁵⁷ In any event, it is very likely that Dionysius had second-hand knowledge of Epicureanism as well as of the physics of Democritus – perhaps derived from doxographies or manuals, as well as from other works critical of Epicurus’ philosophy.⁵⁸ Dionysius (or his sources) had an adequately precise knowledge of Epicurean atomism and of the main differences between the Master’s views and those of Democritus.⁵⁹ It is no less significant that Dionysius (*Praep. evang.* 14.23.4) makes some terminological connections among ancient atomic theories: Diodorus Cronus’ doctrine of ἀμερῆ (*Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* II F 8 Giannantoni 1990), and Heraclides of Pontus’ theory of the ὄγκοι (59 Schütrumpf), promulgated later by Asclepiades of Bithynia.⁶⁰ This could imply that Dionysius had access to a doxographical work on the terminology employed by the atomists.

It is important to stress that Dionysius does not engage with Epicurean physics out of an interest in natural philosophy per se; as a Christian bishop, his target is, in general, Epicurus’ ethical system and, more specifically, his theology as linked to the wholesale rejection of providence (πρόνοια) – and, by extension, of

⁵⁵ That is shown by Fleischer 2016, 23–211; see too Fleischer 2016, 437–441.

⁵⁶ See Fleischer 2016, 270–273.

⁵⁷ Marksches 2000, 211.

⁵⁸ Sources are cited in *Praep. evang.* 14.23.3 e 27.5 = 68 A 43 e B 119 DK = VII 27 R96 and D7/D274 Laks/Most 2016. See Fleischer 2016, 429–437.

⁵⁹ See on this matter Verde 2013, 22–29.

⁶⁰ Leith 2009; 2023 and Verde 2022, 173–195.

every form of theodicy, which are an emblematic *Leitmotive* of the anti-Epicurean Christian (but also pagan) polemic.⁶¹ It is well known that Aristotle in Book 4 of his *Physica* (6–9) rejects the Atomistic conception of the void on essentially physical grounds. Dionysius, on the other hand, initiates his criticism of Epicurean atomism from a physical point of view because, as a Christian philosopher, he wants primarily to refute Epicurus' scandalous denial of providence and his dishonourable conception of divinity. According to Dionysius, atoms, being without wisdom and without perception or awareness (*Praep. evang.* 14.24.5; see too Plot. *Enn.* 4.7.(2).2–3), are unable to organize themselves and to shape the universe into a κόσμος, with its beautiful, harmonious and perfect structure. To Dionysius it is inconceivable that the random state of disorder posited for the atoms could somehow be transformed into order. Moreover, Dionysius makes the strong claim that, even if atoms differ in shape or arrangement, it is difficult to understand how they can shape the sun *and* the moon (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.25.6):

Τίς οὖν ὁ φυλοκρινῶν συναγείρων τε καὶ ἀναχέων καὶ τάσδε μὲν οὕτω συντάττων εἰς ἥλιον, τάσδε δὲ ὡδι ἵνα ἡ σελήνη γένηται, καὶ ἐκάστας συμφέρων κατὰ τὴν οἰκειότητα πρὸς ἐκάστου φαῦσιν ἀστέρος; οὔτε γὰρ αἱ ἡλιακαὶ τοσαῖδε καὶ τοιαῖδε καὶ ὥδέ πως ἐνωθεῖσαι πρὸς ἐργασίαν καὶ σελήνης καταβεβήκεσαν οὔτε αἱ τῶν σεληνιακῶν ἀτόμων πλεκτάναι γεγόνασι ποτε ἥλιος·

Who is it then that distinguishes the classes, and collects them, and spreads them abroad, and arranges some in this way for a sun, and others in that way to produce the moon, and brings together the several kinds according to their fitness for the light of each separate star? For neither would the solar atoms, of such a number and kind as they are, and in such wise united, ever have condescended to the formation of a moon, nor would the combinations of the lunar atoms ever have become a sun.

In arguing against Epicurus, Dionysius cites the authority of Paul, who conversed with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers during his stay in Athens, as one reads in a famous passage of the *Acta apostolorum* (17.18). Paul emphasized the differences between the sun, moon and stars (1 Cor. 15.41). Here Dionysius introduces a crucial argument in favour of Christian “creationism”: even if one acknowledges the existence of atoms, these, being inanimate and without reason, need a skilled and wise demiurge who is able to organize them (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.25.7):

καὶ εἰ μὲν ἀνεπαίσθητος αὐτῶν ὡς ἀψύχων ἢ σύμπηξις ἐγένετο, ἐπιστήμονος αὐταῖς ἔδει δημιουργοῦ· εἰ δὲ ἀπροαίρετος καὶ κατ' ἀνάγκην ὡς ἀλόγων ἢ σύνερξις, σοφός τις αὐτὰς

⁶¹ Spinelli 2015. On the relationship between Christians and Epicureans, see for a first but updated survey Erler 2018, 203–205; still useful on the same topic Simpson 1941; more in general Schmid 1961 and Jungkuntz 1962.

ἀγελάρχης συνελαύνων ἐπεσάτησεν· εἰ δὲ ἐκουσίως ἐθελουργῆσαι συγκέκληνται, θαυμάσιός τις αὐτῶν ἀρχιτέκτων ἐργοδοτῶν προηγῆσατο.

And if their combination, as of things without life, took place unconsciously, they required a skilful artificer: and if their conjunction was involuntary and of necessity, as in things without reason, then some wise leader of the flock presided over their gathering. But if they have been willingly confined to the performance of a voluntary work, some marvellous architect took the lead in apportioning their work.

The mention of the demiurge is evidently a clear indication of a strong Platonic influence stemming from the *Timaeus*; of particular interest in this context is the metaphor of the “architect” (ἀρχιτέκτων), which appears for the first time as an attribute of God in the work of another famous Alexandrian philosopher who antedates Dionysius. In the *De opificio mundi* the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria on several occasions employs the image of the architect (17; 20) as well as that of the demiurge (18), both of which had also been ascribed to the creator God of Genesis. According to Philo, only a professional architect (*De opif.* 17) or a talented craftsman (18) could have built the intelligible world that is the archetype of the sensible one.⁶² Dionysius utilizes the same argument: since the world is an ordered cosmos, only God could have been its creator and demiurge (*Praep. evang.* 14.27.8). This was a very common charge levelled against the Epicureans in both Christian and pagan circles. It is important to note, however, that the Epicureans countered it – as a decisive fragment found during the Oinoanda excavations of 2008 attests – by refining the notion of an original demiurge⁶³ and by contending further that nature itself (and not the divinity) possesses those demiurgical abilities necessary and sufficient for the formation of the universe.⁶⁴ The mistake and the blindness of the Epicureans (in the opinion of Dionysius) are also evident in their conception of human nature: atoms, given their unlimited disorder, cannot explain the existence of human beings. The “irrational mass of atoms” (*Praep. evang.* 14.26.10: ἡ τῶν ἀτόμων ἄλογος πληθύς) could not in any way shape the human being, who instead possesses a beautiful and harmonious physical form, which can only be the outcome of divine providence.⁶⁵

Finally, a crucial element in Dionysius’s criticism is the focus on the Epicurean theological construct, which allows the existence of the gods living in the *intermundia*. These are beings who remain totally detached from the world of

⁶² For further bibliography see Fleischer 2016, 328 nn. 152–153; De Luca 2021, 145–190. See also Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.8.19.

⁶³ Diog. Oen. NF 155 = YF 200; see too Verde 2017a, 79–85, Erler 2017, 54–59; Verde 2021.

⁶⁴ See again Erler 2017, 54–59.

⁶⁵ See Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.26.4.

human beings⁶⁶ and therefore dispense neither good nor evil fortunes. Although Dionysius does concede that Epicurus not only acknowledged the existence of the gods and, above all, their beatitude (*Praep. evang.* 14.27.9), but also exhorted all men to participate in this beatitude by emulating them, he nevertheless regards him as a hypocrite and a charlatan insofar as he derides the conventional gods (*Eus. Praep. evang.* 14.27.10–11):

τοιαύτη γὰρ ἀδιανόητος ἦν αὖ ἢ παρ' αὐτῷ καὶ ματαία ὑπόκρισις ἢ τῶν θεῶν ὀνομασία. ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν πρόδηλον, ὅτι μετὰ τὸν Σωκράτους θάνατον κατεπτηχῶς Ἀθηναίους ὡς μὴ δοκοίη τοῦθ' ὅπερ ἦν ἄθεος εἶναι, κενὰς αὐτοῖς ἀνυποστάτων θεῶν τερατευσάμενος ἐζωγράφησε σκιάς.

Such an unintelligible and empty piece of acting on his part was his mentioning the name of the gods. This however is evident: after the death of Socrates he was afraid of offending the Athenians, and in order that he might not seem to be what he really was (an atheist), he played the charlatan and painted for them some empty shadows of insubstantial gods.

Adopting an earlier pre-Christian criticism, Dionysius concludes that Epicurus ultimately was an ἄθεος and that only the fear of dying like Socrates (a philosopher who was also notoriously accused of impiety) led him to admit the existence of the gods. To the bishop of Alexandria, Epicurus viewed chance as the absolute ruler of all phenomena (see *Praep. evang.* 14.27.4): hence, the existence of the gods must only have been a mere pretext. To this point Dionysius adds a further argument: whereas Epicurus theorized the existence of the gods as devoid of any occupation and disturbance that would be incompatible with their μακαριότης (see especially *Men.* 123–124), Dionysius vindicates a different conception of divinity which is wholly irreconcilable with that of Epicurus. From the vantage-point of the Christian theologian, God is God if – and only if – he is actively involved in mortal affairs (*Eus. Praep. evang.* 14.27.1):

Ἐργάζεσθαι δέ γε καὶ διοικεῖν καὶ εὐεργετεῖν τε καὶ προκίθεσθαι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα τοῖς μὲν ἀργοῖς καὶ ἄφροσι καὶ ἀσθενέσι καὶ κακούργοις ἴσως ἐπαχθῆ, οἷς ἐγκατέλεξεν ἑαυτὸν Ἐπίκουρος, τοιαῦτα φρονήσας περὶ τῶν θεῶν· τοῖς δὲ σπουδαίοις καὶ συνετοῖς καὶ δυνατοῖς καὶ σώφροσιν, οἷους εἶναι χρὴ τοὺς φιλοσόφους (πόσω γε μᾶλλον τοὺς θεούς); οὐχ ὅπως ἀηδῆ ταῦτα καὶ προσάντη, ἀλλὰ καὶ τερπνότατα καὶ πάντων μᾶλλον ἀσπαστότατα, οἷς τὸ ἀμελὲς καὶ τὸ μέλλειν τι πράττειν τῶν χρηστῶν ὄνειδος.

But to work, and to administer, to do good and to show forethought, and all such actions are burdensome perhaps to the idle and foolish, as well as to the feeble and wicked, among

⁶⁶ See on this matter the very interesting fragment by Diogenes of Oinoanda (NF 127 = YF 190; see Hammerstaedt/Smith 2014, 143–148) that contains an argument against belief in a providential god who created the world as a city and human beings as fellow citizens.

whom Epicurus enrolled himself by entertaining such thoughts of the gods; but to the earnest, able, wise and prudent, such as philosophers ought to be (how much more the gods?), not only are these things not unpleasant and arduous, but even most delightful and above all else most welcome; for to them carelessness and delay in performing any good action are judged to be a disgrace.

There is no doubt that the Epicureans could easily reply to Dionysius' strictures, but obviously what concerns the bishop is to demolish those Epicurean doctrines that could be more dangerous and disadvantageous to the Christian faith, namely, the lack of providence and the inactivity of the gods. What makes Dionysius a significant figure is the fact that he reverts to physics in order to refute Epicurus; from this point of view, the bishop shows an understanding of the basic premises of the Epicurean philosophical system and its partition, according to which physics is only useful as a foundation for ethics (see KD 11 and 12). He is perfectly convinced that, at the basis of the ethical and theological aberrations of Epicurus, there lies a blind and irrational physical materialism, which cannot in any way explain the variety, the order and the beauty of creation.

Plotinus, the Gnostics and Epicurus

Plotinus refers to Epicurus only once by name, in a passage devoted to the rejection of the (Christian) Gnostics (*Treatise 33 [Enn. 2.9.15.8]*). Nevertheless, it is possible to trace in the *Enneades* several implicit and oblique allusions to Epicurean technical vocabulary and, more generally, to that of the Atomists. From this we may infer that Epicureanism is one of Plotinus' main polemical targets.⁶⁷ In *Treatise 33* Epicurus is (paradoxically) considered almost "better" than the Gnostics, who, by their doctrine (according to Plotinus) offend the "lord of providence" (τὸν τῆς προνοίας κύριον) and even "providence itself" (αὐτὴν τὴν πρόνοιαν). With regard to the ill-defined and slippery term "Gnostic" it would be better to speak of "Gnostic galaxy," since the doctrinal orientations and tendencies of ancient Christian Gnosticism, as is well known, are varied and do not always exhibit traits in common. Plotinus here takes aim at some Christian Gnostics who, while superficially imbued with Platonism, are incapable, in his view, of constructing rational arguments embodying Plato's key conceptions regarding the structure of the cosmos.⁶⁸ Those Gnostics mainly founded their αἵρεσις on an absolute dual-

⁶⁷ On this extensive topic see the pioneering volume edited by Longo/Taormina 2016. See also Verde 2017b.

⁶⁸ Chiaradonna 2016a, 99–107.

ism that is far more comprehensive than the genuinely Platonic version normally defended by Plotinus,⁶⁹ to the extent that it leads to the complete devaluation of the sensible cosmos. This very pronounced dualism – ultimately reducible to an absolute monism, since the divine Pleroma’s integrity is the only true reality – dissolves all forms of providence and, by extension, of whatever ontological dignity may be intrinsic to the material world. Especially in relation to this last point, the Gnostics were, according to Plotinus, more at fault than Epicurus.

It is precisely in the context of his dense criticism directed against the Gnostics that Plotinus, who is usually very sparing with direct quotations, mentions Epicurus, the only post-Aristotelian philosopher cited by name in the *Enneades* (2.9.15.1–17; transl. A. H. Armstrong, slightly modified by Longo: see Longo 2016, 52–53):

Ἐκεῖνο δὲ μάλιστα δεῖ μὴ λανθάνειν ἡμᾶς, τί ποτε ποιοῦσιν οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι εἰς τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἀκουόντων καὶ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ καταφρονεῖν πεισθέντων. Δυσὶν γὰρ οὐσῶν αἰρέσεων τοῦ τυχεῖν τοῦ τέλους, μᾶς μὲν τῆς ἡδονῆς τὴν τοῦ σώματος τέλος τιθεμένης, ἑτέρας δὲ τῆς τὸ καλὸν καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν αἰρουμένης, οἷς καὶ ἐκ θεοῦ καὶ εἰς θεὸν ἀνήρηται ἡ ὄρεξις, ὡς δὲ ἐν ἄλλοις θεωρητέον, ὁ μὲν Ἐπίκουρος τὴν πρόνοιαν ἀνελὼν τὴν ἡδονὴν καὶ τὸ ἡδεσθαι, ὅπερ ἦν λοιπὸν, τοῦτο διώκειν παρακελεύεται· ὁ δὲ λόγος οὗτος ἔτι νεανικώτερον τὸν τῆς προνοίας κύριον καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν πρόνοιαν μεμψάμενος καὶ πάντας νόμους τοὺς ἐνταῦθα ἀτιμάσας καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν τὴν ἐκ παντὸς τοῦ χρόνου ἀνηρημένην τὸ τε σωφρονεῖν τοῦτο ἐν γέλῳτι θέμενος, ἵνα μὴδὲν καλὸν ἐνταῦθα δὴ ὀφθεῖν ὑπάρχον, ἀνεῖλε τὸ σωφρονεῖν καὶ τὴν ἐν τοῖς ἡθεσι σύμφυτον δικαιοσύνην τὴν τελειομένην ἐκ λόγου καὶ ἀσκήσεως καὶ ὄλως καθ’ ἃ σπουδαῖος ἀνθρώπος ἀν γένοιτο.

But there is one point which we must be particularly careful not to let escape us, and that is what these arguments do to the souls of those who hear them and are persuaded by them to despise the universe and the beings in it. For there are two schools of thought about attaining the end, one which puts forward the pleasure of the body as the end, and another which chooses nobility and virtue, for those member’s desire depends on God and leads back to God (a topic that must be explored elsewhere): Epicurus, who abolishes providence (368 Us.), exhorts us to pursue pleasure and its enjoyment (403 Us.), which is what is left, but this doctrine [sc. held by the Gnostics] which censures the lord of providence and providence itself still more crudely, and despises all the laws of this world and the virtue whose winning extends back through all time, and makes self-control here something to laugh at, so that nothing noble may be seen existing here below, abolishes self-control and the righteousness which comes to birth with men’s characters and is perfected by reason and training, and altogether everything by which a man could become nobly good.

⁶⁹ Spanu 2012. On the “dialogical familiarity” of Plotinus with the Gnostics, see in general Narbonne 2011. On the complex relationship between Gnosticism and Platonism, see Bonazzi 2016 and, more generally, Tanaseanu-Döbler 2016.

In mentioning the philosopher's name, Plotinus connects the negation of providence to the pursuit of pleasure, a conceptual link that is absent from known Epicurean texts. Nevertheless, one can find very interesting parallels to this connection not only in Celsus and Origen, but also, as we have seen, in Atticus: the negation of providence leads to the absence of actual incentives to the pursuit of moral virtue, and thus to the operation of unrestricted motivations to pleasure.⁷⁰ Despite his reference to Epicurus, then, it seems plausible to conclude that Plotinus did not possess a direct or in-depth knowledge of Epicurus, though this does not mean that he was unfamiliar with the main tenets of his philosophy; nor does it prove that he is sparing with direct quotations of Epicurus because the latter's texts were not in wide circulation in his own time. That Plotinus cites Epicurus in a more anti-Gnostic than specifically anti-Epicurean discursive context suggests rather that he may conceivably have been directly familiar, at least in part, with the philosopher's work. In *Treatise 33* the role played by Epicurus is ultimately rather secondary and, in any case, subordinate to that of the Gnostics, who are the true target of the exposition.⁷¹

Plotinus is arguably not the first to posit a relationship between Epicureanism and Gnosticism: he may indeed have appropriated it from the heresiologists. In this regard, it is pertinent to recall a significant (and, at the same time, polemical) passage from Tertullian's *Contra Marcionem* (5.19.7), where the Christian apologist does not hesitate to regard Epicurus as a sort of *πρώτος εὑρετής* of Marcion's heretical teachings. It is well known that the heresiologists had no great difficulty in tracing in Marcion's several remarkable parallelisms with Christian Gnosticism, especially in light of a fundamental dualism that, *mutatis mutandis*, is shared by Marcion and the Gnostics.⁷² Because the heresiologists generally made the Christian heresies dependent on pagan philosophy,⁷³ Epicurean theology was considered to be an excellent reference point for pagan and, consequently, Gnostic thought, at least from the point of view of the apologists who defended Christian doctrine. In the passage cited below, Tertullian describes with the term *hebes* the god of Epicurus – a convenient and suitable designation for those who, like Marcion and the Gnostics, assumed that the demiurge was an evil god, ultimately responsible for the existence of an imperfect and wicked material world.⁷⁴ Unquestionably, Plotinus (like Epicurus) could not share this view, particularly because of the absence in his philosophy of an ontologically evil principle, such as

⁷⁰ Longo 2016a.

⁷¹ Longo 2016a, 56; Longo 2016b, 92–93.

⁷² Moll 2010, 72–75.

⁷³ See, e.g., Tertullian's *De praescr. haeret.* Chapter 7; see too Karamanolis 2021, Chapter 1.

⁷⁴ Burns 2014, 32–47.

the irrational component of the ψυχή typical of some Middle-Platonic philosophers like Plutarch.⁷⁵ This observation does not, however, diminish the weight and relevance that Epicurus' thought had for Plotinus.⁷⁶

Conclusion

In the four “case studies” I have briefly examined (Aristocles, Atticus, Dionysius and Plotinus), Epicurus' philosophy is regularly treated by the authors as a target of polemic, and not as a subject of rigorous inquiry. Since none of these thinkers is interested in a precise knowledge of what Epicurus actually wrote, it is not surprising that their criticisms often reflect a distorted account of the founder's original philosophical thought. This appraisal of the basis of their respective arguments shows that the part of the Epicurean system they were bent on refuting was above all ethics – a term that includes not only the central doctrine of pleasure but also the associated theology, which rejects of role of providence in the universe. Their refutations employ differing strategies: some seek to undermine the Epicurean ethics of pleasure by focusing on Epicurus' canonic, where pleasure, together with pain, is one of the πάθη that furnish the epistemological criteria of truth (Aristocles). Others focus primarily on the Epicurean physical materialism that is conducive, in their outlook, to virtual atheism (Dionysius). Finally, there are also examples in our case-studies of a very moderate (though hardly sincere) appreciation of the Epicurean viewpoint, which is credited with more plausibility than the Aristotelian (Atticus) or the Gnostic (Plotinus) positions. But even in the latter cases (Atticus; Plotinus), it is apparent that appreciation of the merits of Epicurus does not encompass approval of or admiration for his philosophy; rather, it functions as a further means of devaluing other polemical targets such as Aristotle or the Gnostics. What is common to the different strategies is the premise that Epicurean thought, by virtue of its fundamental doctrine of pleasure, perverts the proper use of the intellect and exhorts mankind to live amorally in a world left to blind chance that is governed neither by the gods nor by divine providence. This primarily represents the fundamental feature, in my view, of the continued polemic against Epicurus from the late Republican era to the third century CE.

⁷⁵ See at least Ferrari 1996 and Sorabji 2021, 95–96.

⁷⁶ See the introduction in Longo/Taormina 2016, 1–25.