

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY • SERIES 1

Epicureanism and
Scientific Debates
*Epicurean Tradition
and its
Ancient Reception*

Volume 2

Edited by
Francesca Masi
Pierre-Marie Morel
Francesco Verde



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EPICUREANISM AND SCIENTIFIC DEBATES:
EPICUREAN TRADITION AND ITS ANCIENT RECEPTION

VOLUME II. EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

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In memory of David Konstan (1940-2024)

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INTRODUCTION

Francesca Masi, Pierre-Marie Morel, and Francesco Verde

The present work collects the final results of *Science and Philosophical Debates: A New Approach Towards Ancient Epicureanism*, a project devoted to Epicurean science and led by F. Masi (PI), P.-M. Morel, and F. Verde. The volume follows the publication of the first work within the same series, titled *Epicureanism and Scientific Debates. Antiquity and Late Reception*. The research conducted in the present volume, therefore, also concerns the study of several areas of Epicurean philosophy, namely: physiology, understood as an atomistic set of doctrines about nature capable of accounting for the most complex aspects of reality; epistemology, understood as a theory of knowledge capable of precisely distinguishing the various degrees and forms of knowledge, as well as of providing criteria to verify the truth value of opinions and to formulate true and consistent judgments; and finally ethics, understood as the philosophical field concerned with the realization of the ultimate human good, in which scientific and epistemological assumptions find their fullest expression and application.

As already explained in the introduction to the first volume,¹ the investigation has been carried out from several perspectives: the reconstruction and analysis of primary sources, including ones less widely known even among specialists, such as Epicurus' work *On Nature* and Diogenes of Oinoanda's inscription; an examination of the debates and controversies in which Epicurus' school was engaged at various stages during its historical development; and a review of how Epicurean philosophy was received in later eras. The purpose of this study was to paint a new picture of Epicureanism by challenging the widespread stereotype of Epicurus' philosophy as a dogmatic, closed system of thought, resistant to any internal evolution or cultural stimuli. The philosophy of Epicurus and his heirs is actually the result of the constant reworking and deepening of doctrines through close dialectical exchanges with other currents of thought. Throughout its long history, Epicureanism proved capable of dealing with the most pressing philosophical questions and of refining its theoretical solutions in light of the main scientific orientations of its day, as well as the most advanced and up-to-date research in medicine, music, mathematics, and astronomy.

Like the previous volume, therefore, this one does not have a thematic or monographic slant. Its aim is not to deal with a specific aspect of Epicureanism or to propose an exegetical line with respect to a particular issue, but to promote a new approach to the study of Epicureanism, that is, through a rigorous multidisciplinary,

¹ F. Masi, P.-M. Morel, F. Verde (edd), *Epicureanism and Scientific Debates. Antiquity and Late Reception*, Volume 1: *Language, Medicine, Meteorology*, Leuven, 2023: Leuven University Press, 1-7.

namely, historical, philological, literary, philosophical, and scientific study based on a global approach to the sources. It thus examines certain themes from the epistemological, physiological, and ethical spheres, so as to outline the working methodology of Epicurus and the Epicureans; the dialectic underlying the elaboration of certain specific doctrines; the developments of their philosophy in the context of the debate with other schools; the deep interconnections between its constituent parts and the relation with other scientific disciplines; and the impact of Epicureanism on other philosophies.

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In particular, this volume collects the proceedings of two international conferences attended by a number of distinguished scholars. The first workshop, entitled *Theory of Language and Scientific Lexicon in Epicureanism – Théorie du langage et lexique scientifique dans l'épicurisme*, was held online on May 25-27, 2021, and organized for Université Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne, in collaboration with the research team Gramata (UMR 7219 Sphere), by F. Masi, P.-M. Morel, F. Verde, and S. Marchand. The second conference, which marked the official end of the project, was entitled *Science, Epistemology, and Ethics* and was held in Venice from May 30 to June 1, 2022. It was attended not only by the scientific board of the project, but also by all those who had contributed to it over the years: F. Bakker, M. Bonazzi, M. Cassan, F. Cacciabauda, F. G. Corsi, D. De Sanctis, T. Dorandi, J. Giovacchini, M. Erbi, M. Erler, J.-B. Gourinat, J. Hammerstaedt, J. E. Heßler, D. Konstan, G. Leone, S. Marchand, S. Maso, P. Mitsis, A. Németh, W. Nijs, A. Peralta, E. Piergiacomi, G. Roskam, C. Rover, E. Spinelli, and V. Tsouna, in addition to F. Forcignanò, G. Mingucci, F. Trabattoni, and D. Zucca.

This second volume, like the first, is divided into three parts. The first part, “Epistemology”, focuses on issues related to the scientific vocabulary used by Epicurus in his major work *On Nature*, the exegesis of technical terms, epistemological criteria along with the theory of truth, scientific research methodology, and the attitude toward science and art adopted by Epicurus and the Epicureans in general. This first section includes five contributions.

G. Leone’s article, titled “The Scientific Lexicon in Epicurus, *On Nature* XI: Some Observations”, outlines an exegetical method applicable to the technical-scientific language employed in Epicurus’ *On Nature*. The author addresses the question of the “immobility” (*mone*) of the earth, a doctrine found in *Scolium 74* on the *Letter to Herodotus* and taken up in Book V of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, yet never mentioned in the *Letter to Pythocles*. She does so in light of a passage from Book XI of *On Nature* devoted to the study of celestial and meteorological phenomena. In this passage, a key term used by Epicurus is *pyknotes*, “density”. Leone reconstructs the

meaning of this and related words through a detailed examination of the various contexts in which they occur within Epicurus' corpus. Proceeding to comment on the passage in which the notion of *pyknotes* appears to be associated with the doctrine of the Earth's *mone*, Leone first lays out her main criticisms of current translations; then, based on Brunschwig-Monet-Sedley's translation, she explains how the density of air is to be understood in relation to the immobility of the Earth, the most critical point for the demonstration of the Earth's *mone*.

In his contribution, "Epicurean *akribeia*", P.-M. Morel begins with the well-known distinction between general and particular knowledge of nature outlined by Epicurus at the beginning of his *Letter to Herodotus*. This distinction has traditionally been taken to establish a hierarchy between the two forms of knowledge, so as to identify two categories of pupils who differ in terms of their level of preparedness, ensuring that both may attain tranquillity. Morel instead suggests we interpret the difference between these two forms of knowledge in terms of an epistemological circuit, from the general to the particular and from the particular to the general – a circuit necessary for a comprehensive and continuous understanding of the science of nature. Within this virtuous circle, a key role is played by *akribeia*, or precision. Morel then analyzes the meanings and epistemological function of *akribeia*, showing that, due to its transversal function, *akribeia* is an epistemological operator that powerfully contributes to preserving, if not ensuring, the continuity of the scientific *περιοδεία*. The distinction between general and particular knowledge – understood in terms of circularity and the precision applied to various stages of the epistemological circuit – together with other epistemological tools, contributes to both happiness and the fulfilment of the scientific programme itself, which Epicurus has set.

G. Roskam's article, "Epicurus on the Arts", analyzes the attitude of Epicurus and the Epicureans towards the arts. It is divided into two parts. In the first, the essay addresses Epicurus and the Epicureans' critique of the traditional arts and sciences, as well as education more generally. In the second, in light of Plutarch's polemic against Epicurus and the Epicureans, the author highlights some of the limitations of their position. The contention is that Epicurus and the Epicureans' attitude towards art should be understood in light of the criterion of *utilitas*: only what is instrumental and functional to pleasure can be integrated into Epicurean science. Plutarch, however, makes it clear that Epicurean hedonism risks being too reductive to be able to consistently include pleasures of a merely intellectual kind.

F. Verde's article, "Τὸ προσμένον: Epicurus' *Propositional* Theory of Truth", sets out from a recent essay by Andree Hahmann and Jan Maximilian Robitzsch, *Epicurus' Non-Propositional Theory of Truth*, in which the notion of τὸ προσμένον – translated as "that which awaits confirmation", an essentially correct yet only partial translation – is analyzed within a broader argumentative context aimed at demonstrating that Epicurus upheld a non-propositional theory of truth. Hah-

mann and Robitzsch's work provides Verde with an opportunity to reflect on τὸ προσμένον, one of the least studied concepts, but one fundamental to the Epicurean Canon. The aim of his paper is twofold: first, Verde shows that τὸ προσμένον requires a propositional theory of truth; second, he investigates the function and role of τὸ προσμένον in Epicurean epistemology by referring especially to the relationship between the acquisition of truth/knowledge and time. On the basis of the occurrences of the term in the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Capital Maxims*, Verde argues that "what awaits confirmation" is a notion that was introduced by Epicurus himself and which must be identified with the content of the opinion formed in the subject through the processing of sensory experience.

In "The Elaboration of *prolepsis* between Epicurus and the Stoics: A Common Challenge to Innatism?", J.-B. Gourinat begins by noting that, despite their numerous and irreducible doctrinal differences, Stoics and Epicureans share certain patterns of thought, primarily in the domains of physics and epistemology. As the title suggests, this contribution focuses especially on the notion of *prolepsis*: the author examines its origin, function, and development in Epicurean and Stoic epistemology, highlighting similarities and differences between the two schools. Through a rigorous chronological study, Gourinat first shows how the notion, introduced by Epicurus, was later used in Stoic philosophy, beginning with Chrysippus. By analyzing the sources, the author then highlights how for both philosophers a *prolepsis* is a stored notion, a universal thought derived from sense-perception or, more precisely, arising from a memory formed by sense impressions. Moreover, every *prolepsis* is 'engraved' in our minds by nature and is in some way 'innate', insofar as it is common to all human beings; precisely for this reason, preconceptions constitute excellent criteria of truth. For the Epicureans, all perceptions are true and, as such, constitute the basis for the formation of *prolepseis*. For the Stoics, however, only some perceptions are true, and they alone form *prolepseis*. Moreover, for both schools *prolepseis* constitute a useful research tool, and both would appear to have used *prolepseis* to solve the *Meno's* problem of knowledge and offer an alternative solution to the doctrine of reminiscence and innatism.

The second part of the volume, "Ethics and Its Scientific Background", generally investigates the relationship between the scientific-epistemological realm and the practical one, explaining how the physical structure of Epicurus' atomistic world is compatible with human *praxis* and how scientific research can help ensure the realization of the ultimate human good. More specifically, this second part also includes contributions focusing on generally seldom studied sources for the reconstruction of Epicurean ethical doctrine, its development and reception, such as the fragments of Epicurus' *Symposium* transmitted by Plutarch and Diogenes of Oinoanda's letters. This section consists of four papers.

In his "Science, Ethics, and ἀνάγκη in Epicurean Thought", P. Mitsis discusses a 1952 work by C. Diano, *Form and Event. Principles for an Interpretation of the Greek World*.

On the basis of a specific textual reconstruction and interpretation of paragraph 133 of the *Letter to Menoecus*, Diano had envisaged the coexistence of necessity, chance, and the *eventum* of human freedom in the Epicurean world. Mitsis addresses some of the tensions that may arise from this reading, asking how it is possible for freedom to be supported by necessity while at the same time requiring the breakdown of natural laws as a condition of possibility. More generally, Mitsis asks how we are to understand the status of *ananke*, which on the one hand guarantees the operative structure of the world, but on the other must be abolished in order to ensure freedom.

By adopting a different textual reconstruction of the *Letter to Menoecus*, based on Dorandi's edition of Diogenes Laertius, and by reconsidering the notions of necessity and natural laws in Epicureanism, Mitsis challenges the assumption that necessity is somehow still required in the Epicurean world. Mitsis' thesis is that the *eventum* of free human action is not sustained by necessity in some unclear way, but rather depends on the very elimination of necessity. Freedom exists against the backdrop of chance, which provides us with opportunities within a world structured by variable limits.

In "*Medicina ancilla philosophiae*. The Epicurean Remedy for the Fear of a Childless Life", W. Nijs investigates the relationship between science and ethics, starting with the analysis of one particular fear, namely the fear of being childless because of infertility. As is widely known, Epicurus believed that the science of nature serves to remove the causes of major fears. Particularly emblematic in this regard is the case of the study of *meteora*, which is necessary to remove the fear of natural phenomena due to a misunderstanding of their origin and essence. In his article, W. Nijs tries to determine whether and how medical insights were combined with ethical precepts in the pursuit of Epicureanism's overarching objectives. In particular, Nijs discusses the arguments which the Epicureans used to help people get rid of their fear of childlessness. The author also reconstructs and assesses the different aspects of the Epicurean therapy for the fear of a childless life.

M. Bonazzi's article, "Plutarch on Epicurus on Wine", analyzes the surviving fragments and evidence from Epicurus' *Symposium*, a dialogue that, by its very title, invites comparison with Plato and Aristotle. Unlike his predecessors, Epicurus does not seem to show particular interest in the stylistic aspects of texts. Nevertheless, the passages handed down to us – especially those related to the topics of wine and sex and their possible interrelation – show an attention to the structure and order of the arguments. Bonazzi focuses on some fragments of the *Symposium* – especially those which are transmitted by Plutarch – that touch upon the nature of sensible qualities and the reliability of the senses. These passages turn out to be relevant from a methodological perspective, insofar as they clarify how Plutarch himself transmitted and analyzed the sources. Bonazzi's thesis is that, far from reconstructing the Epicurean position in all of its complexity, Plutarch ends up dealing with the question of the truth of sensations based on his own assumptions and prejudices.

A. Németh's paper, "Diogenes of Oinoanda and the Epicurean Epistolary Tradition", aims to investigate how Diogenes used the epistolary genre in his inscription. To this end, Németh first presents an overview of the Epicurean epistolary tradition and then scrutinizes, on the one hand, how Diogenes' letters fit into this tradition and, on the other, what function his epistles serve in the overall context of the inscription. This research concludes that Diogenes shows a considerable degree of originality in his use of letters as a means of communication compared to the earlier Epicurean tradition. Diogenes stands out on account of his rhetorical inventiveness, deep knowledge of Epicureanism, and literary skills and erudition, all of which contribute to outlining a philosophical method of teaching through texts inscribed on stone. Finally, Németh argues that Diogenes constructed his philosophical discourse – based on his knowledge of the science of nature – by paying close attention to those forms of exposition most suitable for the attainment of salvation, that is "according to art".

Finally, the third section, "Ancient Reception of Epicurean Ethics and Epistemology", focuses on the reception of Epicurus' philosophy by later authors. It illustrates how in some cases these authors understood, disseminated, and drew upon Epicurean doctrines to substantiate, supplement, and improve their own theory, while in other cases they criticized – or even misunderstood and distorted – certain aspects of the Epicurean system because of certain assumptions and prejudices that influenced their interpretation of it. The aim of this final section of the volume, comprising three chapters, is to carefully reconstruct the historical and theoretical contexts in which Epicurus' theories were taken up – often by exponents of opposing schools – and to clarify the hermeneutical perspectives and aims of the various authors.

S. Maso's article, "Epicurean Translations / Interpretations by Cicero and Seneca", provides a comparative analysis of these two authors' works and original Epicurean sources, with the aim of assessing how Cicero and Seneca contributed to the accurate and correct Latin translation and interpretation of the Epicurean scientific lexicon. The former author could rely on his knowledge of Epicurus' fundamental doctrines, perhaps based on first-hand knowledge of some of the texts. While highly critical of such doctrines, he always pays close attention to the context and displays considerable philosophical sensitivity in dealing with the issues touched upon by his opponent. In certain cases, Cicero endeavors to coin new terms (the emblematic case being *atomos*); in others, he seeks to diversify the translation of the same term to reflect its different meanings (e.g., *sophrosyne* or *prolepsis*). Seneca instead frequently uses and quotes Epicurus to address and sometimes substantiate his own Stoic ethical and physical doctrines. In doing so, he approaches Epicurean texts without biases or assumptions, showing respect for Epicurean writings from both a conceptual and stylistic perspective. As proof of this, Maso refers to certain passages from Seneca's letters that are particularly revealing of the Latin author's philological *akribeia*.

In “‘To Inquire Implies to Know’: Epicurus and Sextus on the Possibility of Knowledge”, S. Marchand focuses on the argument that inquiring necessarily implies knowing or having a notion of the object of inquiry (Us. 255). More generally, he assesses the importance of the problem of the possibility of knowledge in Epicurus’ time. Sextus Empiricus is one of the sources for this fragment; but he cites this argument in different and apparently contradictory ways, either to confirm his own skeptical method or as an anti-skeptical argument. The primary objective of Marchand’s article is to assess the divergence between the two positions as regards two crucial issues at stake in this argument: the nature of inquiry and the function of preconception. This comparison makes it possible to highlight the radical conflict between the two positions in relation to the function of language and concepts. The essay is divided into two parts. In the first, Marchand establishes the significance of this argument in the Epicurean context; in the second, he analyzes Sextus’ strategy in using this argument to show that – despite the apparent convergence between the two positions on this topic – this common usage is based on a fundamental disagreement about the nature and function of concepts and, more specifically, of *prolepsis* or preconception.

Finally, in her contribution “Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Naturalness of Justice (*Mantissa* 19): An Attack against Epicurus?”, M. Bonelli examines a text by Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Mantissa* 19, which addresses the issue of the existence or non-existence of natural justice. Alexander of Aphrodisias approaches the question from an Aristotelian perspective, criticizing the Stoics, who like Aristotle hold that justice is by nature, but argue that positive laws derive their force and efficacy from a single eternal law, identifiable with divine rationality. Bonelli seeks to show that in *Mantissa* 19, Alexander is not only criticizing the Stoics, but also attacking the Epicurean thesis of social coexistence as purely conventional. Moreover, she identifies an Epicurean influence in Alexander’s own treatment of justice.

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With these two volumes devoted to Epicurus’ science, the debates in which his school was involved at various historical stages, and the later reception of his philosophy in subsequent, intellectually varied, lively, and stimulating epochs, we have offered fresh research perspectives on Epicureanism. In particular, it seems to us that the working methodology adopted – attentive both to the comparison of the various sources available (even the most difficult ones, such as the Epicurus’ *On Nature*, the Diogenes’ Inscriptions, the more hostile testimonies) and to the dialectical dimension of Epicurean philosophy – has allowed us to better delineate certain technical aspects of the vocabulary used by Epicurus and his followers; their linguistic theory; the communicative strategy of their works; many fundamental

aspects of epistemology, physiology, and ethics; as well as the relationship between philosophy and sciences (such as astronomy and medicine) or *techné*.

This perspective is less stereotypical and more respectful of a tradition that – despite the scarcity and fragmentary nature of its primary sources, as well as the discredit cast upon it by rival schools – continued to flourish for centuries, to the point of influencing the origin and development of modern science, as the contributions on Gassendi’s philosophy in the first volume sought to establish. The very foundations of modern science, which is rooted in Epicurean philosophy, disproves historiographical attempts to reduce Epicureanism to ethics: even if the sole *telos* of Epicurus’ philosophy is the concrete attainment of happiness, its theoretical core and the only possible paths to achieve lie in the knowledge and study of nature.²

Venice, Paris, Rome, March 2024

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Pierre-Marie Morel
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² We would like to sincerely thank Chiara Rover for the care she took in preparing the indexes of names.