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978-0-521-03445-6 - Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia

James Warren

Excerpt

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AND ATARAXIA

Von der εὐθυμία oder εὐεστώ des Demokrit zu der ἀκαταπληξία des Nausiphanes und der epikureischen ἀταραξία ist ein langer Weg.¹

The subject of this book is the philosophical background to the ethical theory of eudaimonistic hedonism proposed by Epicurus, a Hellenistic philosopher who founded a school in Athens at the very end of the fourth century BC. In particular, it describes the relationship between the philosophy of Epicurus and the tradition of philosophy founded by the earlier Greek atomist, Democritus. Although Epicurus has attracted his fair share of attention in the past, and Democritus has also been the subject of numerous works, no attempt has previously been made to give a full account of the philosophical tradition which links these two men.² Along the way this tradition takes in Pyrrho of Elis, whose importance for ancient thought is mainly due to his being chosen as the figurehead of the late and extreme scepticism of Pyrrhonist philosophers such as Sextus Empiricus. Of course, Pyrrhonism like Epicureanism advocated tranquillity, *ataraxia*, as the goal of life, *telos*. Why those two schools of thought came to promote a *telos* by this same name will also, I hope, be illuminated by examining the early history of such ideas.

¹ Sudhaus (1893) 337.

² Alfieri (1979) 160: 'Dal famoso saggio del Reinhardt, *Hekataios von Abdera und Demokrit*, che è del 1912, si può dire che non sia più stata studiata, almeno con indagini particolari, la questione dei rapporti tra il pensiero di Democrito e quello di Epicuro... Insomma, o si studia Epicuro da solo, cercando di inserire la sua dottrina nell'ambiente di pensiero dell'età sua e di spiegarne l'origine nelle polemiche contro platonismo e aristotelismo...; o si studia Democrito da solo... come fanno in generale quei pochissimi che si occupano della scuola di Abdera'. The situation has improved a little since Alfieri was writing, but nevertheless no single study of the ethical tradition has been attempted.

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So this is not intended as prolegomena to the study of Epicurean ethics in the sense of being prior and auxiliary to that study. Nor is it primarily an assessment of the truth of Epicurean-style hedonism. Rather, my contention is that Epicurean ethics itself can profitably be studied through the relationships between Epicurus and other philosophers.

To call a study of a concept or idea an ‘archaeology’ risks recalling the Foucauldian ‘archaeologies’. That is not my intention.³ I use the term as a metaphor for the practice of gradual disclosure, inquiry, and reconstruction applied to the layers deposited by successive periods of history. The direction of archaeological excavation, from the most recent upper levels to the more ancient lower levels, will be paralleled in much of what follows. Our knowledge of the ethical goal of *ataraxia* is much better in the case of those Hellenistic schools, the Epicureans and the Pyrrhonists, than it is for the earlier thinkers who proposed goals related to this end. Furthermore, no clear and direct evidence has survived for the ethical thought of Democritus or his followers. No complete texts have survived, only brief quotations, summaries or anthologies of sayings in later authors. For those thinkers who precede Epicurus in the chronology of Greek philosophical history very little evidence survives which was written before Epicurus’ life. Often the evidence for those thinkers comes from hostile Epicurean sources. So more excavation is required, both to see the thesis being criticised in the text, and also to reveal the intervening reception of that thesis. Archaeology does not simply uncover ancient remains – it places and interprets them in a particular context. In this way we might fully understand the final layer of deposition by seeing it in its proper relationship with what came before.

It is clear that Epicurus’ thought was informed by what had come before and that if we wish fully to understand his thought and his hostility to this tradition, we ought to attempt to outline those pre-Epicurean philosophies. This will contribute both to a better understanding of those earlier thinkers, and also to a clearer view of their successors.

³ See Foucault (1972) Introduction and 135–40.

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EPICURUS, DEMOCRITUS, AND ATARAXIA

Before I begin by introducing the cast of characters who form the philosophical tradition on which I will focus, let me first outline the very basic aspects of Epicurean ethical thinking in which I am particularly interested. Although the interpretation of Epicurus' ethical philosophy is a matter for no little debate and disagreement, the following can be stated as relatively uncontroversial. When Epicurus describes what he takes to be the goal of life, the *telos*, that goal has two aspects. First, it is identified as the absence of pain – where pain is understood to be not only physical pain but also the mental pains of anxiety, distress, or worry. Second, it is identified as pleasure, or at least as a certain kind of pleasure. Here is Epicurus' description of the good life from his summary of ethical teachings, the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

τούτων γὰρ ἀπλανὴς θεωρία πᾶσαν αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν ἐπανάγειν οἶδεν ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ σώματος υγίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραξίαν, ἐπεὶ τοῦτο τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν ἔστι τέλος. τούτου γὰρ χάριν πάντα πράττομεν, ὅπως μὴτε ἀλγῶμεν μὴτε ταρβῶμεν. ὅταν δὲ ἀπαξ τοῦτο περὶ ἡμᾶς γένηται, λύεται πᾶς ὁ τῆς ψυχῆς χεῖμων, οὐκ ἔχοντος τοῦ ζώου βαδίζειν ὡς πρὸς ἐνδέον τι καὶ ζητεῖν ἕτερον ὧν τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος ἀγαθὸν συμπληρώσεται. τότε γὰρ ἡδονῆς χρεῖαν ἔχομεν, ὅταν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ παρῆναι τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀλγῶμεν· <ὅταν δὲ μὴ ἀλγῶμεν,>⁴ οὐκέτι τῆς ἡδονῆς δεόμεθα. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος λέγομεν εἶναι τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν. (*Ep. Men.* 128)

For an unerring understanding of these things [sc. of what desires are natural and necessary] knows how to direct every choice and avoidance towards the health of the body and the tranquillity (*ataraxia*) of the soul, since this is the goal of the blessed life. For it is for the sake of this that we do everything – so that we may feel neither pain nor anxiety. And as soon as we achieve this, the whole storm of the soul is calmed, since the animal cannot go off as if towards something it needs and in pursuit of something else with which the good of the body and soul will be fulfilled. For the time when we need pleasure is whenever we feel pain through pleasure's absence. But when we feel no pain, then we no longer need pleasure. And for that reason we say that pleasure is the starting point and the goal of the blessed life.

This passage begins by emphasising what we might call the negative aspect of the Epicurean *telos* – the absence of mental and

⁴ Suppl. Gassendi.

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physical pain. The prime motivational force which it identifies is the need to rid oneself of such pain.⁵ It goes on, however, to relate this closely to the drive for pleasure. It is pleasure which is required to take away the pain, and as soon as pain and anxiety are removed then pleasure is no longer sought after. A little later in the same text, Epicurus explicitly identifies the *telos* as a kind of pleasure – and further identifies this with the absence of pain.

ὅταν οὖν λέγωμεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὥς τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ μήτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μήτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν (*Ep. Men.* 131)

When we say that pleasure is the goal of life, then, we do not mean the pleasures of the profligates, and those which are to be found in extravagance – as some think mistakenly and in disagreement or through not understanding us correctly – but we mean neither feeling pain in the body nor being disturbed in the soul.

So the goal of life – if you are an Epicurean – is the pursuit of pleasure, understood to be the absence of physical and mental pain. We might call the Epicureans' advocacy of pleasure as the goal of life the positive aspect of their message. The combination of these two aspects – the pursuit of pleasure and the absence of disturbance – has often been thought to be an unstable mixture. The critics of Epicureanism were also quick to seize on the fact that Epicurus distinguished two species of pleasure, kinetic and katastematic. The latter he identified as the pleasure of the state of feeling no pain, the former he described as the pleasures which involve some sort of motion or change – the process of the removal of a need or lack and the variation of a state of painlessness.⁶ These critics take the admission of kinetic pleasures to be the Epicureans' concession to what hedonism ought to be seeking – episodes of pleasurable sensation – and the promotion of katastematic pleasure merely to be some sleight of hand on Epicurus' part. Surely, this state of painlessness which Epicurus promotes is not itself pleasant, but is merely an intermediary state – a state in which one is feeling neither

⁵ Other philosophers before Epicurus are known to have promoted a *telos* which can be described as the 'absence of pain', for example Speusippus (see Clem. *Strom.* 2.133) and Hieronymus of Rhodes (Clem. *Strom.* 2.127.3; Cic. *Fin.* 5.14, 19). See Dillon (1996), Dalfino (1993). Also cf. Purinton (1993) 300 n. 32.

⁶ See DL 10.136–7 and Cic. *Fin.* 2.9–10.

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pleasure nor pain? Cicero, for example, in his *De finibus* follows the general argumentative strategy of claiming that Epicurus ought to have advocated either hedonism or the avoidance of disturbance. He finds it quite implausible to identify the absence of pain as a pleasure itself – let alone the highest pleasure. And Cicero's overall stance has been supported by a number of modern commentators.⁷

My concern in this study is not to reopen the question of the coherence of Epicurus' overall ethical position, nor to offer a discussion of Epicurus' view of pleasure. Rather, I intend to offer a story which might explain how he came to advocate the position he did. In particular, I intend to show why the negative aspect of his message – namely the advocacy of a life free from disturbance – may have appealed. To do this, I will look at Epicurus' predecessors. One consequence of this approach is that it can also shed light on why it is that *ataraxia*, the absence of disturbance, was approved not only by the Epicureans. The Pyrrhonist sceptics in particular also promoted a vision of the best life which they characterised by the absence of disturbance, and they even used the same term, *ataraxia*, to describe this ideal state.⁸

Here is Sextus Empiricus' introductory description:

φαμέν δὲ ἄχρι νῦν τέλος εἶναι τοῦ σκεπτικοῦ τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριοπάθειαν. (*PH* 1.25)

We say – up until now – that the goal of life for the sceptic is tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of passion in matters which are unavoidable.

Of course, there is an enormous difference between the life which Sextus promotes and that advocated by the Epicureans. Sextus asks us not to pursue nor to avoid anything too eagerly – certainly not with some opinion in mind that this particular object is to be pursued or avoided, while Epicurus insists that we must have opinions – the correct Epicurean opinions – about such matters. My point here, however, is much more basic. Both the Epicureans

⁷ See e.g. Striker (1993). On Cicero's tactics, see Inwood (1990) and Stokes (1995). A number of approaches have been suggested in order to make Epicurus' position more plausible. Mitsis (1988) 18 argues that Epicurean *ataraxia* is an objective dispositional state – not a state immediately recognisable by introspection as 'pleasant'. For other views, see Brochard (1954), Gosling and Taylor (1982), Annas (1987) and (1993a) 334–50, Giannantoni (1984), Purinton (1993), Erler and Schofield (1999), Cooper (1999).

⁸ For a survey of *ataraxia* as an ethical ideal, see Striker (1990).

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and the Sextan Pyrrhonists, despite their other differences, promote something which they call *ataraxia* as the goal of life. Even earlier than Sextus, there is evidence of a Pyrrhonist promotion of *ataraxia*. In Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*, there is a section of Aristocles of Messene's *On Philosophy* which includes this report by Timon, the pupil of Pyrrho himself. The text is notoriously difficult to interpret, and I shall offer my own interpretation in chapter 4. However, the salient point for the moment is the following. Timon offers a description of the three things to which 'he who wishes to find *eudaimonia*' should attend. Then, he concludes:

τοῖς μέντοι γε διακειμένοις οὕτω περιέσσεσθαι Τίμων φησὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἀφασίαν, ἔπειτα δ' ἀταραξίαν. (Eus. *PE* 14.18.4)

But for those disposed in such a way, Timon says there will first arise an absence of assertion, and then tranquillity.

Why should it be the case that the Epicureans and the Pyrrhonists – even the Pyrrhonists of Timon's time – should both promote *ataraxia* as a goal of life? My answer will be that both the Epicureans and the Pyrrhonists can trace their philosophical ancestry to the same tradition of thinkers – the tradition of philosophers who began by engaging with aspects of the thought of Democritus. This tradition includes Pyrrho himself, whom the Pyrrhonists later hailed as their founding father. The transformation and reinterpretation of the philosophy of Pyrrho is one of the concerns of chapter 4.

In one respect, of course, it is neither novel nor controversial in the slightest to claim that Epicurus owed a philosophical debt to Democritus. These two are undeniably linked by their physical theories. Democritus, and the rather more shadowy figure Leucippus, originated an atomistic view of the physical nature of the world. They described how the fundamental constituents of the world were discrete particles of matter – atoms – which move constantly within an infinite void. By their combinations and rearrangements the macroscopic world of changing objects is formed.

This general view was accepted by Epicurus, and although he took exception to a number of Democritus' ideas (some of which will be discussed in what follows), and although Epicurus did – it seems – seek to deny Democritus' influence, it would be foolish

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to deny that Democritus was the most obvious source of much of Epicurus' philosophy. It is also clear that to some degree their shared physical outlook also contributed to some shared ethical views. Atomism as a physical system has a number of ethical consequences which may have lent themselves to Epicurus' drive for *ataraxia*. An atomist view of the nature of the world promotes a generally anti-teleological outlook, and perhaps more importantly a theological view which does not require interventionist gods, or a divine maker of the world. It can also contribute to a life freed from moral demands imposed by such divinities. Similarly, it is easy to see how an atomist can hold that the soul or mind is physical and mortal – decaying and dying as does the body. So no part of an individual survives death, and there is no need to be concerned with an afterlife or punishment or reward after death. Some of these issues will also resurface as I describe the Democritean tradition. I will also claim, however, that some of the specifically ethical ideas promoted in the fragments of Democritus find echoes in later Epicurean theory.

More important for the story which follows, however, is another aspect of Democritean atomism which I must introduce before we proceed. Famously, once he had identified atoms and void as the fundamental existents and constituents of the world, Democritus went on to contrast these with other classes of things. There are a number of fragments of Democritus which relate this contrast, but perhaps the best known comes from Sextus Empiricus, and is fragment B9 Diels–Kranz:

νόμῳ γλυκύ, νόμῳ πικρόν, νόμῳ θερμόν, νόμῳ ψυχρόν, νόμῳ χροίη, ἔτεῃ δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν. (Democritus B9 (SE *M.* 7.135))

By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour, but in truth atoms and void.

From the number of times it is quoted – with similar if not identical wording – it is clear that this was one of the more famous Democritean sayings.⁹ I will refer to it in the rest of this study as Democritus B9. Its exact implications, however, are not so clear.

⁹ It appears also in Galen *De medic. empir.* 15.7 (DK B125), and DL 9.72 (DK B117). See Gemelli Marciano (1998).

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To some degree I welcome this, since part of the story I will tell involves different philosophers offering their own particular interpretations of the statement.

B9 offers a contrast between two sets of things. On the one side Democritus lists atoms and void. On the other he places various phenomenal qualities. The contrast is to some extent clear. Atoms and void are fundamental. They are what exists ‘in truth’ or ‘in reality’, ἐτεῖν. Everything else exists ‘by convention’, νόμῳ. Exactly what this latter means is not so clear. Perhaps Democritus means they exist only by human *fiat*. Or perhaps he means that – strictly speaking – such things do not exist *at all*; we merely and mistakenly talk as if they do.¹⁰ Whatever the interpretation favoured, the contrast was generated as a result of Democritus’ atomist theory which had identified atoms and void as in some sense the basic constituents of the universe.

Although B9 is a consequence of Democritean atomism, the influence it exerted over the tradition of philosophy which followed was by no means limited to those who shared Democritus’ general physical theory. It is not difficult to see how it might appeal to those who are sceptically-minded, since it seems to relegate phenomenal qualities to a lesser existence or to non-existence, and so it is no surprise that Democritus was rapidly enlisted as a fore-runner of later ancient sceptical movements. Part of my story will be the description of different philosophers’ views of what Democritus meant. For example, the Epicureans themselves took the view that Democritus was denying that anything other than atoms and void exists at all. But another part of my story will be the demonstration of other philosophers’ adaptations of this claim and advocacy of related claims. Some, for example, restricted the class of things which exist merely ‘by convention’, νόμῳ, to moral properties such as ‘the fine’, or ‘the shameful’ – meaning that there is no objective existence in nature of such things; they are human constructs, and perhaps can be discarded or refashioned as we please. So the application of this contrast between reality and convention will vary from philosopher to philosopher, as will the exact terms in which it is expressed. Sometimes the contrast is between what is ‘in truth’,

¹⁰ For discussions of this principle see Furley (1993) and O’Keefe (1997).

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κατ' ἀλήθειαν, and what is 'by convention', νόμῳ. Sometimes the contrast is between what is 'in nature', φύσει, and what is 'by convention'. Each case will have to be considered individually.

In my conclusion, I will come back to examine more specifically the Epicureans' approach to Democritus' claim and will outline the particular metaphysical issues about which they felt Democritus had been in error. Their particular perspective on Democritus can only be fully understood once it is placed in the context of the entire intervening tradition.

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I

INTRODUCING THE DEMOCRITEANS

πάλιν δ' ἐν Ἀβδηροῖς ἀσύνετοι πολλοὶ, τοιοῦτοι δ' Ἀθήνησι ὀλίγοι.

Galen *QAM* 822

Again, in Abdera there are many fools, but in Athens there are few.

Democritus was born, and – so far as we know – spent most of his life, in Abdera. There is a curious irony in this fact, since in antiquity the inhabitants of this city were not known for their intelligence. Quite the opposite, in fact. The curious late-antique jokebook, the *Philogelos*, contains a number of jokes aimed at the residents of this city, and similar jokes appear regularly in Roman sources after the first century BC.¹ Nevertheless, Abdera was the centre for the group of thinkers whose rôle in the history of Greek thought is the subject of this work.

In this first chapter I introduce two sources to which I will refer constantly – Diogenes Laërtius' *Lives of the eminent philosophers* and a passage from Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* – and I begin to outline why and how they are to be used. They will introduce the cast of characters, and are examples of the practice common in later antiquity of attempting to arrange the history of philosophy into neat master–pupil relationships.

Diogenes Laërtius' succession

Diogenes Laërtius' account of the *Lives of the eminent philosophers* (DL) often provides information on a thinker otherwise lost

¹ On the *Philogelos* see Thierfelder (1968), Baldwin (1983). The 'Abderite jokes' are §§110–27. Also see Cic. *Ad Att.* 7.7.4, cf. 4.17.3, *ND* 1.120; Mart. 10.25.4; Mayor *ad Juv.* 10.50; Galen *QAM* 822; Lucian *Hist. conscr.* 1.