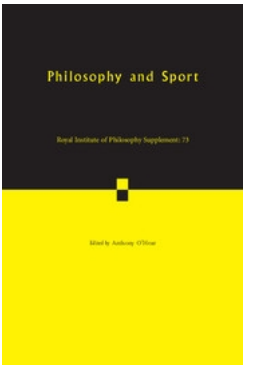


# Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing: Nietzsche and the Epicurean Tradition

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# Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing: Nietzsche and the Epicurean Tradition

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**Abstract**
This essay looks at Nietzsche in relation to the Epicurean tradition. It focuses on his middle period writings of 1878–82 – texts such as *Human, all too Human*, *Dawn*, and *The Gay Science* – and seeks to show that an ethos of Epicurean enlightenment pervades these texts, with Epicurus celebrated for his teaching of modest pleasures and cultivation of philosophical serenity. For Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have ever graced the earth and the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing'. At the same time, Nietzsche claims to understand Epicurus differently to everybody else. The essay explores the main figurations of Epicurus we find in his middle period and concludes by taking a critical look at his later and more ambivalent reception of Epicurus.

## Introduction

Some significant appropriations of Epicurus's philosophy take place in nineteenth century European thought. For Marx, writing in the 1840s, and in defiance of Hegel's negative assessment, Epicurus is the 'greatest representative of the Greek enlightenment',[1] whilst for Jean-Marie Guyau, writing in the 1870s, Epicurus is the original free spirit, 'Still today it is the spirit of old Epicurus who, combined with new doctrines, works away at and undermines Christianity.'[2] For Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have graced the earth and the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing'.[3] In this essay my focus is on the figuration of Epicurus we encounter in Nietzsche's middle period writings (1878–82). Nietzsche's interest in Epicurus, which is most prominent in these middle period writings, is, on the face of it, curious: what interest

[1] Karl Marx, 'Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature' in K. Marx & F. Engels, *Collected Works: Volume One 183–43* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 73

[2] Jean-Marie Guyau, *La Morale D'Epicure* (Paris: Librairie Gemer Baillière, 1878), 280

[3] F. Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), section 295

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does Nietzsche have in a philosopher of antiquity who was an egalitarian, offered what Cicero called a 'plebeian' philosophy, and that espoused a simple-minded hedonic theory of value? These are all positions we would expect Nietzsche to have no truck with. And yet, in the middle period he is full of praise for the figure of Epicurus. However, as we shall see, Nietzsche's interpretation of Epicurus in his middle period texts, such as *Dawn* and *The Gay Science*, is wide-ranging and, on occasion, enigmatic. Sometimes Epicurus is portrayed as a significant figure on account of him being the teacher of modest pleasures; on another occasion he is viewed by Nietzsche as having a voluptuous appreciation of, and relation to, existence. But even here it is a *modest* voluptuousness that is at play! In Epicurus's teaching Nietzsche locates an appreciation of the moment and a sublimity of existence in which the art of living or existing consists in an attention to the closest and smallest things, and even an enjoyment of simple things: here, in this simplicity, Nietzsche will identify something 'heroic'.

Like the other nineteenth century interpreters I have referred to, Nietzsche is acutely aware that Epicurean doctrine has been greatly maligned and misunderstood in the history of thought. One commentator on Epicurus's philosophy speaks of the 'slanders and fallacies of a long and unfriendly tradition' and invites us to reflect on Epicurus as at one and the same time the most revered and most reviled of all founders of philosophy in the Greco-Roman world.[4] Since the time of the negative assessment by Cicero and the early Church Fathers, 'Epicureanism has been used as a smear word – a rather general label indicating atheism, selfishness, and debauchery'.[5] As Nietzsche observes in *The Wanderer and His Shadow:*

> Epicurus has been alive in all ages and lives now, unknown to those who have called and call themselves Epicureans, and enjoying no reputation among philosophers. He has, moreover, himself forgotten his own name: it was the heaviest burden he ever cast off.[6]

Two aphorisms from *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* reveal the importance Epicurus holds for Nietzsche in his middle period. In the first Nietzsche confesses to having dwelled like Odysseus in the

[4] Norman Wentworth De Witt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 3

[5] Neven Leddy & Avi S. Lifschitz (eds), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 4

[6] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 227

underworld and says that he will often be found there again. As someone who sacrifices so as to talk to the dead he states that there are four pairs of thinkers from whom he will accept judgement, and Epicurus and Montaigne make up the first pair he mentions.[7] In the second aphorism Epicurus, along with the Stoic Epictetus, is revered as a thinker in whom wisdom assumes bodily form.[8]

In this essay I propose to build up a portrait of Nietzsche's figuration of Epicurus in his middle period writings by providing exegeses of the key aphorisms in which he appears. My contention is that an ethos of Epicurean enlightenment pervades Nietzsche's middle period texts with Epicurus celebrated for his teachings on mortality and the cultivation of modest pleasures. For Nietzsche, Epicurus's teaching can show us how to quieten our being and so help to temper a human mind that is prone to neurosis. The aim of philosophy for Nietzsche is to temper emotional and mental excess, and here Epicurean teaching has a key role to play. In addition, Nietzsche is attracted to the Epicurean emphasis on the modesty of a human existence. Nietzsche admires Epicurus for cultivating a modest existence and in two respects: first, in having 'spiritual and emotional joyfulness (*Freudigkeit*) in place of frequent individual pleasures',[9] and, second, in withdrawing from social ambition and living in a garden as opposed to living publicly in the market-place.[10] As Nietzsche stresses, 'A little garden, figs, little cheeses and in addition three or four good friends – these were the sensual pleasures of Epicurus'.[11] Nietzsche is appreciative of what one commentator has called the 'refined asceticism' we find in Epicurus, which consists in the

[7] Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), section 408. The other three pairs are: Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, and Pascal and Schopenhauer. On Montaigne's relation to Epicurean doctrine see Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 159–62.

[8] Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, section 224

[9] Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), vol. II, 400.

[10] See Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche. A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 279

[11] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 192. Young describes the asceticism advocated by Epicurus as a 'eudaemonic asceticism', which is clearly very different to ascetic practices of world denial and self-denial. Young, *Nietzsche. A Philosophical Biography*, 279

enjoyment of the smallest pleasures and the disposal of a diverse and delicate range of sensations.[12]

We can note at the outset something of the character of Nietzsche's particular appreciation of Epicurus: it is not Epicurus the atomist that he focuses attention on, but Epicurus the ethicist, that is, the philosopher who teaches a new way of life by remaining true to the earth, embracing the fact of human mortality and denying any cosmic exceptionalism on the part of the human. For Epicurus philosophy proves vital to achieving health of one's soul. As he writes in the letter to Menoeceus:

> Let no one delay the study of philosophy while young nor weary of it when old. For no one is either too young or too old for the health of the soul. He who says either that the time for philosophy has not yet come or that it has passed is like someone who says that the time for happiness has not yet come or that it has passed.[13]

It is the strength of the Epicurean attachment to the world that Nietzsche will capture in his conception of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing', and it is also encapsulated well by the young Marx when he writes that 'Epicurus is *satisfied* and *blissful in philosophy*';[14] that 'embodied in him are the serenity of thought satisfied in itself'.[15]

Although the extent of the influence of Epicurus's philosophy on Nietzsche, especially evident in the middle period texts, has been neglected in recent appreciation of Nietzsche it was fully recognized by A. H. J. Knight in, of all dates, 1933. At a time when Nietzsche was being enlisted by National Socialism as a crude philosopher of war, Knight had the foresight to see in Nietzsche something quite different and sought to reveal to his English-speaking audience the extent of Nietzsche's commitment to a philosophy of peace, goodwill, and serenity. Indeed, one of Nietzsche's texts from this time, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, closes with the idyllic motto, 'Peace all around me and goodwill to all things closest to me'.[16] Knight recognizes that for Epicurus and Nietzsche philosophy is what today, in the

[12] Richard Roos, 'Nietzsche et Épicure: l'idylle héroique', in Jean-François Balaudé and Patrick Wotling (eds), *Lectures de Nietzsche* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000), 283–350, 298

[13] Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus' in Brad Inwood & L. P. Gerson (eds), *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 28

[14] Marx, 'Difference', 41

[15] Ibid. 45

[16] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 350

wake of the pioneering work of Pierre Hadot, we would call 'a way of life'.[17] As he notes, Epicurean philosophy and Nietzsche's philosophy share many of the same principles. He refers to the definition of Epicurus, in which philosophy is said to be 'daily occupation of discourse and thought in order to attain a blissful life', that is, philosophy is essentially a practical affair with its chief concern being with the health of the soul.[18] Both are 'educators' and despise the mere erudition of the scholar. Epicurus and Nietzsche are both liberators of human life from religious superstition and mystification, and both place ethics at the centre of philosophy (even physics, or the study of nature and natural causes, is to be placed in the service of ethics). If philosophical therapeutics is centred on a concern with the healing of our own lives so as to return us to the joy of existing,[19] then in the texts of his middle period, including *Dawn*, Nietzsche can be seen to be an heir to this ancient tradition. The difference is that he is developing a therapy for the sicknesses of the soul under modern conditions of social control and discipline. Nevertheless, it is the case that Nietzsche at this time is seeking to revive an ancient conception of philosophy. In a note from 1881 he states that he considers the various moral schools of antiquity to be 'experimental laboratories' containing a number of recipes for the art of living (*Kunstgriffen der Lebensklughheit*: literally 'artifices for worldly wisdom') and holds that these experiments now belong to us as our legitimate property: 'we shall not hesitate to adopt a Stoic recipe just because we have profited in the past from Epicurean recipes'.[20]

Let me now begin to examine how Nietzsche interprets and positions Epicurus in his middle period writings.

## 1. How the teaching of Epicurus helps to temper the human mind

An overriding aim Nietzsche has in his middle period texts is to employ philosophy to temper mental and emotional excess. The

[17] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995)

[18] A. H. J. Knight, 'Nietzsche and Epicurean Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 8, 1933, 431–445, 437

[19] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 87

[20] Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 9, 15 [59])

task, as he sees it, is to help cool down the human mind. He writes in 1878:

> … shouldn't we, the *more spiritual* human beings of an age that is visibly catching fire in more and more places, have to grasp all available means for quenching and cooling, so that we will remain at least as steady, harmless, and moderate as we are now, and will thus perhaps become useful at some point in serving this age as mirror and self-regulation? –[21]

Epicurean philosophy can play a key role here. Along with science in general, it serves to make us 'colder and more sceptical', helping to cool down 'the fiery stream of belief in ultimate definitive truths', a stream that has grown so turbulent through Christianity.[22] For Lucretius 'there's no good life, no blessedness, without a mind made clear …'[23] As Lucretius further writes in *De Rerum Natura*:

> Our terrors and our darknesses of mind
> Must be dispelled, then, not by sunshine's rays,
> Not by those shining arrows of light,
> But by insight into nature, and a scheme
> Of systematic contemplation.[24]

In interpreting Epicureanism as a form of knowledge and wisdom that tempers emotional and mental excess, Nietzsche is following a tradition well-established in nineteenth century thought that appreciates this point. Marx, for example, notes that the method of explanation 'aims only at the ataraxy of self-consciousness, not at knowledge of nature in and for itself'.[25] As Lange notes in his *History of Materialism* (1866), a text that deeply impressed the young Nietzsche: 'The mere historical knowledge of natural events, without a knowledge of causes, is valueless; for it does not free us from fear nor lift us upon superstition. The more causes of change we have discovered, the more we shall attain the calmness of contemplation; and it cannot be supposed that this inquiry can be without

[21] Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human: volume one*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), section 38
[22] Ibid. section 244
[23] Lucretius, *The Way Things Are*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 158
[24] Ibid. 53.
[25] Marx, 'Difference', 45

result upon our happiness'.[26] If we can come to regard change in things as necessarily inherent in their existence we free ourselves from our natural terror at this order of change and evolution. If we believe in the old myths we live in fear of the eternal torments to come; if we are too sensible to believe in these torments we may still apprehend the loss of all feeling which comes with death as an evil, as if the soul could continue to feel this deprivation. As every student of philosophy knows death for Epicurus is an affair of indifference and precisely because it deprives us of all feeling. As Lange glosses Epicurus, 'So long as we are, there is as yet no death; but as soon as death comes, then we exist no more'.[27] If events can be explained in accordance with universal laws, with effects attributable to natural causes, an important goal of philosophy can be attained and secured, chiefly liberation from fear and anxiety.

In *The Wanderer and his Shadow* Nietzsche describes Epicurus as 'the soul-soother (*Seelen-Beschwichtiger*) of later antiquity' who had the 'wonderful insight' that to quieten our being it is not necessary to have resolved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions.[28] To those who are tormented by the fear of the gods, one points out that if the gods exist they do not concern themselves with us and that it is unnecessary to engage in 'fruitless disputation' over the ultimate question as to whether they exist or not. Furthermore, in response to the consideration of a hypothesis, half belonging to physics and half to ethics, and that may cast gloom over our spirits, it is wise to refrain from refuting the hypothesis and instead offer a rival hypothesis, even a multiplicity of hypotheses. To someone who wishes to offer consolation – for example, to the unfortunate, to ill-doers, to hypochondriacs, and so on – one can call to mind two pacifying formulae of Epicurus that are capable of being applied to many questions: 'firstly, if that is how things are they do not concern us; secondly, things may be thus but they may also be otherwise'.[29]

Nietzsche's middle period writings are marked, then, by an Epicurean enlightenment. What appeals to Nietzsche about Epicurus is the emphasis on a refined egoism, the teaching on mortality, and the general attempt to liberate the mind from unjustified fears and anxieties. The Epicureanism we can find in Nietzsche in his middle

[26] Friedrich Albert Lange, *The History of Materialism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), First Book, 102
[27] Ibid.
[28] *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 7
[29] Ibid.

period indicates his preference for individual therapy and self-cultivation over large-scale social transformation and political revolution. In *Dawn* (1881) Nietzsche explicitly writes against impatient political invalids and argues instead in favour of 'small doses' as a way of bringing about change.[30] It seems certain that at this time he sought to found a philosophical school modelled on Epicurus's garden. In a letter of 26 March 1879 he asks his amanuensis Peter Gast: '*Where* are we going to renew the garden of Epicurus?' In addition he writes that Epicurus 'is the best negative argument in favour of my challenge to all rare spirits to isolate themselves from the mass of their fellows'.[31] In 306 BC Epicurus founds his school in Athens, and this remains a presence in the city until the second century A.D. In contrast to the Stoics who philosophised in the agora of Athens, never far from the public eye, Epicurus and his followers did philosophy in a garden which bore the injunction 'live unnoticed'. Another injunction was 'do not get involved in political life'.[32] The school took the form of a community of friends who lived within the walls of the garden and worked together, studying under Epicurus, writing philosophical works, and growing their own food: going against the mores of the time it was open to both slaves and women. So, the school was a community based on friendship and friendship was considered by the Epicureans to be the most important thing of all. As one commentator has written:

> Members of the school were actively engaged in self-improvement and the improvement of others by mutual admonition and correction. The aim was to inculcate goodwill, gratitude, respect for wisdom, self-control, frankness, openness and moderation in all things. Arrogance, greed, jealousy, boastfulness, and anger were faults to be removed by gentle correction rather than by coercion or punishment.[33]

Epicureanism was an apolitical or even anti-political philosophy. The ideal mental state to attain for the Epicurean is *ataraxia* (freedom

[30] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), section 534

[31] *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin and NewYork: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), III, 1, 418

[32] See Diskin Clay, 'The Athenian Garden', in James Warren (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9–29, 16

[33] Gordon Campbell, 'Epicurus, The Garden, and the Golden Age', in D. O'Brien (ed.), *Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell), 220–232, 222

from disturbance, or imperturbability), and to achieve this the philosopher had to withdraw from the disturbances of everyday life as much as possible, including public affairs which were seen as a particular cause of mental disquiet and disturbance (this is a key difference with Stoicism which advocated involvement in public life). This apolitical, even anti-political stance, is reflected in the ethos Nietzsche adopts in his middle period texts. He writes at one point:

> Live in seclusion so that you *can* live for yourself. Live in *ignorance* about what seems most important to your age … the clamor of today, the noise of wars and revolutions should be a mere murmur for you. You will also wish to help – but only those whose distress you *understand* entirely because they share with you one suffering and one hope – your friends – and only in the manner in which you help yourself. I want to make them bolder, more persevering, simpler, gayer.[34]

'Our age', Nietzsche writes at one point in *Dawn*, 'no matter how much it talks and talks about economy, is a squanderer: it squanders what is most precious, spirit'.[35] Nietzsche succinctly articulates his concern in the following manner: 'Political and economic affairs are not worthy of being the enforced concern of society's most gifted spirits: such a wasteful use of the spirit is at bottom worse than having none at all'.[36] Today, he goes on to note, everyone feels obliged to know what is going on every day to the point of neglecting their own work or therapy and in order to feel part of things, and 'the whole arrangement has become a great and ludicrous piece of insanity'.[37] The therapy Nietzsche is proposing in *Dawn* is, then, directed at those free spirits who exist on the margin or fringes of society and seek to cultivate or fashion new ways of thinking and feeling, attempting to do this by taking the time necessary to work through their experiences.

The view that Epicureanism advocates an apolitical posture is in need of some refinement. It might be suggested that the philosophy of Epicurus offers an alternative way of organising communities, promoting practices – such as justice, friendship, and economic co-operation – that are genuinely useful to people's needs and eliminating all that promotes false conceptions of values and places our happiness in

[34] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), section 338
[35] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 179
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

danger.[38] It is the case, however, that Nietzsche appropriates Epicureanism for the ends of an ethical reformation Although he anticipates 'numerous novel experiments' taking place in 'ways of life and modes of society'[39], his model at this time for the practice of self-cultivation is Epicurus's garden.

## 2. The Inventor of Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing

In each of the different main stages of his intellectual development Nietzsche comes up with a striking conception of philosophy. In his early period he urges philosophy to hold onto to the sublime since it is the sublime, he thinks, that enables us to distinguish between what is great and what is small, and so to appreciate what is rare, extraordinary, and stupendous. Here the philosopher is seen as an abnormality and outsider in search of a new people. In the late period, and as is well-known, philosophy is defined as legislation and creative positing, and the philosopher is a lawgiver who declares 'thus it shall be!' In the middle period Nietzsche offers a conception of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing' with the philosopher conceived as a figure of great sobriety and extraordinary serenity.

The reality of the 'heroic-idyllic' struck Nietzsche with the force of a revelation. In a note from July-August 1879 he writes, for example:

> The day before yesterday, toward evening, I was completely submerged in Claude Lorrainian delights and finally broke into lengthy, intense crying. That I had still been permitted to experience this! I had not known that the earth could display this and believed that good painters had invented it. The heroic-idyllic is now the discovery of my soul; and everything bucolic of the ancients was all at once unveiled before me and became manifest – up to now, I comprehended nothing of this.[40]

In *The Wanderer and his Shadow* Nietzsche depicts an idyllic scene entitled '*Et in Arcadia ego*', involving looking down 'over waves of hills, through fir-trees and spruce trees grave with age, towards a milky green lake'.[41] Whilst cattle graze on their own and gather in groups, the narrator of the aphorism experiences 'everything at peace in the

[38] See A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: volume one* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 137

[39] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 164

[40] Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 8, 43 [3]

[41] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 295

contentment of evening.' Whilst looking upon the herders in the field, he witnesses mountain slopes and snowfields to the left and, high above him, to the right two gigantic ice-covered peaks that seem to float in a veil of sunlit vapour: 'everything big, still and bright'.[42] The beauty of the whole scene induces in him an experience of the sublime, 'a sense of awe and of adoration of the moment of its revelation'; involuntarily, as if completely natural, he inserts 'into this pure, clear world of light', free of desire and expectation, with no looking before or behind, Hellenic heroes, and he compares the feeling to that of Poussin and his pupil (probably Claude Lorrain), at one and the same time heroic and idyllic, noting to himself that some human beings have actually *lived* in accordance with this experience, having 'enduringly *felt* they existed in the world and the world existed in them'.[43] Epicurus is singled out for special mention.

The title of this aphorism is borrowed from two paintings of Poussin and was also adopted by Goethe as the motto of his Italian journey (1829). In fact, Poussin's paintings were inspired by Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) and his painting of around 1618–22 entitled 'Et in Arcadia ego'. This painting depicts the discovery of death in Arcady, a region of Greece thought to be an earthly paradise: we see two shepherds gazing out of a wood at a skull that has been placed on a masonry plinth, and underneath the skull the inscription 'Et in Arcadia ego' can be read. Such words seem to be intended as a message spoken by death itself, 'I, Death, am also in Arcady'.[44] Poussin's first painting, bearing the same title, dates from 1627–8, and the second painting, with the same title, from 1638–9. In the first painting, which features a skull and two shepherds (but also flanked by a young shepherdess and a river

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid. One might even see in this contemplation of nature, where all is peace and calm and where we have moved beyond 'desire and expectation', something of Schopenhauer's ideas on art, including the release from the subjectivity of the will. Schopenhauer, in fact, depicted such a state in Epicurean terms: 'Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us. It is the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will.' Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, in two volumes, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Press, 1966), volume one, section 38, 196. See also Schopenhauer on the 'aesthetic delight' to be had from the experience of light: 'Light is most pleasant and delightful; it has become the symbol of all that is good and salutary', 199.

[44] Henry Keazor, *Poussin* (Köln: Taschen, 2007), 57

god), the main motif is, once again, the recognition of human mortality. In the second version of the painting, from a decade later, a sarcophagus now lies in the centre of the picture and the scene depicted is much more allegorical. Although still a painting about the discovery of death in Arcadia, the foreground depiction of details such as the skull is omitted and instead we are presented 'with subtle allusions that do not disturb the atmosphere of contemplative but cheerful relaxation'.[45] In the second painting the words 'Et in Arcadia ego' are no longer uttered by death itself but might be the lament of a girl who has died young and who is buried in the sarcophagus: 'I, too, was once in Arcady.' This is how the Abbé Dubos interpreted the painting in the early eighteenth century and this interpretation then exerted an influence on writers and poets such as Schiller and Novalis, where the words are employed as a stock-phrase, being adopted in verses that sing longingly of the possibility of a better world and of resignation to the fact of having missed it.[46]

There are several striking things about Nietzsche's turn to, and portrait of, the idyllic. First, we can note the contrast with his earlier critique of the idyll in *The Birth of Tragedy* where it is equated with the superficial and the optimistic.[47] Second, in his depiction of the heroic-idyllic scene the reality of death is completely absent from it. What might be informing Nietzsche's decision to leave death out of the picture is the Epicurean inspiration that the fear of death has been conquered and death is nothing to us.[48]

[45] Ibid., 58

[46] Ibid. Schopenhauer refers to Schiller's belief that 'we are all born in Arcadia' in chapter five of his 'Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life', (1974) in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), volume one, 408. Schopenhauer interprets this as the view that we come into the world with claims to happiness and pleasure; he insists though that 'fate' soon enters the picture of life and seizes us harshly and roughly, teaching us that nothing belongs to us but everything to it. In short, our yearning after happiness and pleasure is a fanciful if noble ideal that we have to learn to modify and moderate: 'We then recognize that the best the world has to offer is a painless, quiet, and tolerable existence to which we restrict our claims in order to be the more certain of making them good. For the surest way not to become very unhappy is for us not to expect to be very happy' (ibid.).

[47] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), section 19.

[48] Richard Bett, 'Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with special reference to Aristotle and Epicurus)', *Philosophical Topics* 33(2) 2005: 45–70, 65

Thus, Nietzsche does not wish the image of the tombstone to cast a shadow over the idyll he is focusing our attention on: for this reason it is both heroic and idyllic. And third, for Nietzsche the idyll is not in any inaccessible celestial heavens but belongs in this world and is within our reach, and what takes place after death does not concern us anymore.[49] Nietzsche writes in *Dawn*: '…the after-death no longer concerns us! An unspeakable blessing … and once again, Epicurus triumphs!'[50]

The 'heroic-idyllic' is heroic, then, at least in part, because conquering the fear of death is involved and the human being has the potential to walk on the earth as a god, living a blessed life, and idyllic because Epicurus philosophised, calmly and serenely, and away from the crowd, in a garden. In *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche writes of a 'refined heroism' 'which disdains to offer itself to the veneration of the great masses … and goes silently through the world and out of the world'.[51] This is deeply Epicurean in inspiration: Epicurus taught that one should die as if one had never lived. As I have already noted, there is a modesty of human existence in Epicurean teaching that greatly appeals to the middle period Nietzsche.

## 3. Overcoming the Fear of Death

In her *Therapy of Desire* Martha Nussbaum explains well the nature of Epicurus's intervention in a society 'that values money and luxury above the health of the soul', and in which 'every enterprise is poisoned by the fear of death, a fear that will not let any of its members taste any stable joy, but turns them into the grovelling slaves of corrupt religious teachers'.[52] As Lucretius has it:

> … fear of death
> Induces hate of life and light, and men
> Are so depressed that they destroy themselves
> Having forgotten that this very fear
> Was the first cause and source of all their woe.[53]

[49] Roos, 'Nietzsche et Épicure', 322
[50] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 72
[51] Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*, section 291
[52] In *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 103
[53] Lucretius, *The Way Things Are*, 88

In his middle period Nietzsche picks up the Epicurean doctrine on death and puts it to critical effect. For Nietzsche our religions and moralities do not wed us to the earth as a site of dwelling and thinking; rather, we consider ourselves 'too good and too significant for the earth', as if we were paying it only a passing visit.[54] Several aphorisms in *Dawn* consider humanity's misguided dream of an immortal existence. *Dawn* 211 is an especially witty aphorism in which Nietzsche considers the impertinence of the dream. He notes that the actual existence of a single immortal human being would be enough to drive everyone else on earth into a rampage of death and suicide out of being sick and tired of it! He adds:

> And you earth inhabitants with your mini-notions of a few thousand mini-minutes of time want to be an eternal nuisance to eternal, universal existence! Is there anything more impertinent![55]

Nietzsche champions Epicurus as a figure who has sought to show mankind how it can conquer its fears of death. Identifying the goal of a good life with the removal of mental and physical pain Epicureans place, 'the eradication of the fears of death at the very heart of their ethical project'.[56] As a 'therapy of anguish' Epicureanism is a philosophy that aims to procure peace of mind, and an essential task here is to liberate the mind from its irrational fear of death. It seeks to do this by showing that the soul does not survive the body and that death is not and cannot be an event within life.

In the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus seeks to identify what the study of philosophy can do for the health of the soul and on the premise that, 'pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly'.[57] Epicurus stresses that he does not mean the pleasures of the profligate or of consumption; rather, the task, is to become accustomed to simple, non-extravagant ways of living. Although Epicurus regards *voluptas* as the highest good, in which we can take delight in all that nature has provided to stimulate pleasure, it is an error to suppose that for him happiness is to be found 'simply in

[54] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 425

[55] Ibid. section 211

[56] James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6

[57] *The Epicurus Reader*, page 30. As Kant notes, the pleasure of the Epicurean is the pleasure of the sage and on this point Epicurus has 'been poorly understood'. See I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46.

eating, drinking, gambling, wenching, and other such pastimes.'[58] Nietzsche seems to have fully appreciated this point. The key goal for Epicurus is to liberate the body from pain and remove disturbances from the soul. Central to his counsel is the thought that we need to accustom ourselves to believing that death is nothing to us; our longing for immortality needs to be removed: '… there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life.'[59] What appears to be the most frightening of bad things should be nothing to us, 'since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist.'[60] The wise human being 'neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad.'[61] If, as Epicurus supposes, everything good and bad consists in sense-experience, then death is simply the privation of sense-experience. The goal of philosophical training, then, is freedom from disturbance and anxiety in which we reach a state of *ataraxia* or psychic tranquillity: the body is free from pain and the soul is liberated from distress.

According to Martha Nussbaum, Epicurus's teaching amounts to an inversion of Plato because for him truth is in the body and in contrast to Plato for whom the body is the main source of delusion and bewitchment and where the task is to purify ourselves of our bodily attachments through proper mathematical and dialectical training.[62] This inversion was well understood by Nietzsche and appreciated by him. In the texts of the middle period, including and perhaps especially *Dawn*, Nietzsche highlights the dangers of a teaching of pure spirituality. By definition such a teaching is excessive and in the process destroys much nervous energy: 'it taught one to despise, ignore, or torment the body and, on account of all one's drives, to torment and despise oneself'. The teaching succeeds in producing human beings who feel melancholy and oppressed and conclude that the cause of their distress and anxiety must reside in the body, which continues to flourish. As Nietzsche points out, in such cases it is in fact the body that registers a protest against such derision. He draws attention to the irrational mode of existence that spiritual

[58] Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1989), 152

[59] *The Epicurus Reader*, 29

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 110. Nussbaum also offers an imaginative insight into Epicurus's Garden, (119ff)

excess results in: 'A pervasive, chronic hyper-excitability was eventually the lot of these virtuous pure spirits' since 'the only pleasure they could muster was in the form of ecstasy and other harbingers of madness'.[63] Their mode of being thus reaches an apogee when ecstasy is accepted as the highest goal in life and the as the standard.[64]

*In Dawn* Epicurus is portrayed as the enemy of the idea of punishments in Hell after death, which was developed by numerous secret cults of in the Roman Empire and was taken up by Christianity. For Nietzsche the triumph of Epicurus's teaching resounds most beautifully in the mouth of the sombre Roman Lucretius but comes too early. Christianity takes the belief in 'subterranean terrors' under its special protection and this foray into heathendom enables it to carry the day over the popularity of the Mithras and Isis cults, winning to its side the rank of the timorous as the most zealous adherents of the new faith (Nietzsche notes that because of the extent of the Jews' attachment to life such an idea fell on barren ground). However, the teaching of Epicurus triumphs anew in the guise of modern science which has rejected 'any other representation of death and any life beyond it'.[65] Nietzsche, then, is keen to encourage human beings to cultivate an attitude towards existence in which they accept their mortality and attain a new serenity about their dwelling on the earth, to conquer unjustified fears, and to reinstitute the role played by chance and chance events in the world and in human existence.[66] As Hadot notes, for the Epicurean sage the world is the product of chance, not divine intervention, and this brings with it pleasure and peace of mind, freeing him from an unreasonable fear of the gods and allowing him to consider each moment as an unexpected miracle. Each moment of existence can be greeted with immense gratitude.[67]

Nietzsche finds in Epicurus a victory over pessimism in which death becomes the last celebration of a life which is constantly embellished.[68] This last of the Greek philosophers teaches the joy of living in the midst of a world in decay and where all moral doctrines preach suffering. As Richard Roos puts it, 'The example of Epicurus teaches that a life filled with pain and renunciation prepares one to savour the little joys of the everyday better. Relinquishing Dionysian

[63] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 39
[64] See also Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 50
[65] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 72
[66] See Nietzsche, *Dawn*, sections 13, 33, 36. On Epicurus on fear and chance see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 87, 223, and 252
[67] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 252
[68] Roos, 'Nietzsche et Épicure', 299

intoxication, Nietzsche becomes a student of this master of moderate pleasures and careful dosages'.[69] In Epicurus Nietzsche discovers what Roos calls aptly an 'irresistible power' and a rare strength of spirit, and quotes Nietzsche from 1880: 'I found strength in the very places one does not look for it, in simple, gentle and helpful men … powerful natures dominate, that is a necessity, even if those men do not move one finger. And they bury themselves, in their lifetime, in a pavilion in their garden' (KSA 9, 6 [206]).[70]

There are gaps, potentially significant ones, in Nietzsche's appreciation of the Epicurean teaching with regards to death. For example, he never subjects to critical analysis the effectiveness of Epicurus's arguments but simply assumes that the rediscovery of the certainty of death within modern science, along with the demise of the Christian afterlife, is sufficient to eliminate mortality as a source of anguish. But the triumph of the Epicurean view that we are mortal and need not live in fear of an after-life is not necessarily a triumph for the Epicurean view that we should not fear death: one can eliminate fear of the after-life by exposing it as a myth, but this does not liberate us from the fear of extinction. Nietzsche does not make it clear whether he thinks the Epicurean arguments suffice to console us for the fact of our mortality, though there are places in his corpus where he appears to be offering new post-religious consolations, such as the consolation we can gain from the recognition that as experimental free spirits the sacrifices we make of our lives to knowledge may lead to a more enlightened humanity in the future (others may prosper where we have not been able to).

## 4. A Gate of Hospitality

Taken as a whole, *Dawn* of 1881 perhaps represents Nietzsche's most avowedly Epicurean moment. It is an attempt to revitalise for a modern age ancient philosophical concerns, notably a teaching for mortal souls who wish to be liberated from the fear and anguish of existence, as well as from God, the metaphysical need, and are able to affirm their mortal conditions of existence. Here one might adopt Hadot's insight into the therapeutic ambitions of ancient philosophy which was, he claims, 'intended to cure mankind's anguish' (for example, anguish over our mortality).[71] This is evident in the

[69] Ibid. 309
[70] Ibid. 300
[71] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life,* 265–6

teaching of Epicurus which sought to demonstrate the mortality of the soul and whose aim was, in the words of a recent commentator, 'to free humans from "the fears of the mind" '.[72] Similarly, Nietzsche's teaching in *Dawn* is for mortal souls.[73]

*Dawn* occupies a special place in Nietzsche's development because it's with this work, he stresses in *Ecce Homo*, that there begins in earnest his 'campaign against morality', although he adds that here – and this is important – we should not detect the whiff of gunpowder but smell something quite different and much sweeter. Although at this time Nietzsche is in favour of free-minded and progressive social transformation, he is no advocate of revolution: the process of change should be a slow and gradual one, and in *Dawn* we find Nietzsche outlining a therapy made up of 'slow cures' and 'small doses'. If Nietzsche wants his readers to achieve a free-mindedness with respect to religion, the same is also the case with morality, for example, relinquishing the idea that there is a simple definition of morality and embracing the idea that there is no single moral-making morality.

Nietzsche's Epicureanism in *Dawn* is perhaps most evident in the way he polemicizes against morality. The 'campaign' centres largely on a critique of what Nietzsche sees as the modern tendency, the tendency of his own century, to identify morality with the sympathetic affects, especially *Mitleid*, so as to give us a definition of morality. Nietzsche has specific arguments against the value accorded to these affects, but he also wants to advocate the view that there are several ways of living morally or ethically and the morality he wants to defend is what we can call an ethics of self-cultivation. In place of what he sees as the ruling ethic of sympathy, which he thinks can assume the form of a 'tyrannical encroachment', Nietzsche invites individuals to engage in self-fashioning, cultivating a self that others can look at with pleasure and that still gives vent to the expression, albeit in a subtle and delicate manner, of an altruistic drive. We find the allusion to Epicurus and his mode of living is made explicit:

> *Moral fashion of a commercial society* – Behind the fundamental principle of the contemporary moral fashion: 'moral actions are generated by sympathy (*Sympathie*) for others', I see the work of a collective drive toward timidity masquerading behind an

[72] Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 7

[73] Nietzsche, *Dawn*, section 501

> intellectual front: this drive desires … that life be rid of *all the dangers* it once held and that *each and every person* should help toward this end with all one's might: therefore only actions aimed at the common security and at society's sense of security may be accorded the rating 'good!' – How little pleasure people take in themselves these days, however, when such a tyranny of timidity dictates to them the uppermost moral law (*Sittengesetz*), when, without so much as a protest, they let themselves be commanded to ignore and look beyond themselves and yet have eagle-eyes for every distress and every suffering existing elsewhere! Are we not, with this prodigious intent to grate off all the rough and sharp edges from life, well on the way to turning humanity into *sand*? … In the meantime, the question itself remains open as to whether one is *more useful* to another by immediately and constantly leaping to his side and *helping* him – which can, in any case, only transpire very superficially, provided the help doesn't turn into a tyrannical encroachment and transformation – or by *fashioning* out of oneself something the other will behold with pleasure, a lovely, peaceful, self-enclosed garden, for instance, with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well.[74]

Nietzsche's ethical commitment is clear from this aphorism: a pleasure and care of self that strives for independence and self-sufficiency. One does not isolate oneself from others, but neither does one seek to effect a tyrannical encroachment on them. Instead, one offers a 'hospitable gate' through which others can freely enter and leave, and through self-cultivation one fashions a style of existing that others will behold with pleasure. As Michael Ure has helpfully shown, in opposition to the desert of undifferentiated atoms offered by modern commercial culture Nietzsche provides the image of an oasis and one that depicts neither the past glories of Homeric agonism nor the resplendent isolation of the noble individual.[75] The image Nietzsche comes up with of a self-enclosed garden clearly draws on ideas of paradise in the Western tradition (our word 'paradise' etymologically derives from the Persian for 'walled garden', *paradeiza*), and he provocatively counters the Christian idea of a locked gate or *porta clausa* with that of a hospitable one:

[74] *Dawn*, section 174

[75] Michael Ure, 'The Irony of Pity: Nietzsche contra Schopenhauer and Rousseau', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 32: 68–92, 84

'To cultivate oneself … is to create oneself as a paradise garden for the other'.[76]

## 5. The Happiness of the Afternoon of Antiquity[77]

Nietzsche writes in 1882 that he is proud of the fact that he experiences the character of Epicurus differently from perhaps everybody else: 'Whatever I hear or read of him, I enjoy the happiness of the afternoon of antiquity'. In this aphorism, entitled 'Epicurus', Nietzsche writes:

> I see his eyes gaze upon a wide, white sea, across rocks at the shore that are bathed in sunlight, while large and small animals are playing in this light, as secure and calm as the light and his eyes. Such happiness could be invented only by a man who was suffering continually. It is the happiness of eyes that have seen the sea of existence become calm, and now they can never weary of the surface and of the many hues of this tender, shuddering skin of the sea. Never before has voluptuousness (*Wollust*) been so modest.[78]

As Monika Langer has recently noted in her interpretation of this aphorism, although clearly a paean of sorts to Epicurus, Nietzsche does not elaborate on the origin or nature of his happiness and suffering, but rather tacitly encourages the reader to consider various possibilities. In the end she argues that Nietzsche is reading Epicurus as a figure who whilst standing securely on firm ground, gazes at the sea and is able to enjoy the possibility of uncertainty it offers. She writes, 'Literally and figuratively he can float on the sea.'[79] Epicurus is depicted as the antithesis of modernity's shipwrecked man since such is his liberation and serenity he can 'chart his course or simply set sail and let the wind determine his way'.[80]

[76] Ibid., 85

[77] My appreciation of this aphorism from *The Gay Science* has been greatly enriched by the MA seminar I taught on Nietzsche at Warwick University in the spring term of 2013. I benefitted from the contributions of Kamaran Abdulla, Christopher Howlett, Robert Kron, Luis Mulhall, Andrew Paull, and especially Jeffrey Pickernell. I am also deeply indebted to thoughts suggested to me by Beatrice Han-Pile and Rainer Hanshe.

[78] *The Gay Science*, section 45

[79] Monika M. Langer, *Nietzsche's Gay Science: Dancing Coherence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 67

[80] Ibid.

Although he might suffer shipwreck and drown or survive he does not live in fear of dangers and hazards: 'In taking to the sea he might lose his bearings and even his mind.' In contrast to modern man who is keen to leave behind the insecurity of the sea for the safety of dry land, 'Epicurus delights in the ever present possibility of leaving that secure land for the perils of the sea.'[81]

This interpretation misses the essential insight Nietzsche is developing into Epicurus in the aphorism. Rather than suggesting that the sea calls for further and continued exploration, hiding seductive dangers that Epicurus would not be afraid of, Nietzsche seems to hold to the view that Epicurus is the seasoned traveller of the soul who has no desire to travel anymore and for whom the meaning of the sea has changed. Rather than serving as a means of transportation or something that beckons us towards other shores, the sea has become an object of contemplation in the here and now. It is something to be looked at for its own sake and in a way that discloses its infinite nuances and colours. The scene Nietzsche depicts is one of Epicurean illumination or enlightenment: Epicurus is not estranged from nature and recognizes his kinship with animals and the elements of nature. Rather than deploying his contemplation of the sea to bolster his own ego (thinking of his own safety or taking pride in fearlessness), Epicurus abandons his sense of self altogether so that he can open himself up to the sea of existence, and perhaps here we find an alternative to Dionysian ecstasy, entailing a more peaceful and less grandiose loss of the self into the *Ur-Eine*. Unlike Christ, Epicurus does not walk on the water but floats serenely on the sea, buoyed up by it and even cradled by it, happy with the gifts life has to offer, and existing beyond fear and anxiety even though he is opening himself up to troubling realities, such as the approach of death and his personal extinction: 'We are born once and cannot be born twice, but we must be no more for all time.'[82]

As Langer rightly notes, the imagery deployed in the aphorism is striking since far from evoking boredom the serenity of Epicurus signals a kind of ecstatic bliss.[83] And yet there is much in this aphorism that merits careful exegesis and that, in the end, remains elusive. Why is the sea 'white'? What is the role being played by the animals depicted at the heart of the scene? What does Epicurus suffer from and why does he suffer continually? Let's note that the 'afternoon of antiquity' refers to the specific cultural horizon that characterizes

[81] Langer, *Nietzsche's Gay Science*, 67
[82] Epicurus, 'Vatican Sayings', number 14
[83] Langer, *Nietzsche's Gay Science*, 67

the moment of Epicurus within the history of philosophy: it is not the 'dawn' of the emergence of philosophy with the pre-Socratics, and neither is it the dark period that philosophy is plunged into with the rise of Christian morality. It would seem that the sea is white because it characterizes the tumultuous nature of human experience: the white colour of the sea comes from the froth of waves crashing against one another and serves as a metaphor for human existence in which life is fraught with difficulties and beset by fears, most notably the fear of death and anxieties about the future. The mention of sunlight is significant since it makes the entire scene clearly visible to anyone who looks upon it; the roll of the waves is obvious to anyone who cares to look and who is not suffering from myopia or a similar affliction, and so it is up to individuals to gaze on the world and attain a standpoint on existence beyond fear and anxiety. We are to learn from animals since they are tethered to the present moment and do not live in anticipation of death and the anxiety this anticipation generates for human beings. Epicurus might be suffering from physical ailments – we know these were acute at the end of his life – but he is also surely suffering from the anxiety of existence. However, Nietzsche sees the philosophical task as essentially a practical one, namely, that of conquering such anxiety, becoming serene in the process and, like a child playing with a kaleidoscope, appreciating, even being enchanted by, the many shades of colour that characterize existence.

At stake in the Epicurean way of life are those things which threaten human happiness, such as disturbances that arise from our irrational fear of death and the idea that divine decisions impact on the world and on the next life. Therefore, at the heart of Epicurean teaching is freedom from the fear of death and freedom from fear of the gods. An important distinction is made between kinetic pleasure and katastematic pleasure and that works as follows: 'kinetic' pleasure is basic instinctive pleasure produced by action to satisfy a need, such as the ingestion of food or the ejaculation of sperm; this is an unstable kind of pleasure since it is temporary and involves pain – the pleasure of eating will soon be followed by the pain of hunger, etc.; 'katastematic' pleasure is 'stable' in that it endures and involves no pain: it is the pleasure of contentment and serenity, involving the absence of need and desire, and psychic equilibrium. It is superior to the animal pursuits of food and sex and for the Epicureans is to be elevated into the highest goal of life, attaining the state of 'ataraxia'. As Gisela Striker puts it, Epicurus was perhaps the first philosopher who sought to bring this mental state into the framework of a eudaemonist theory and by arguing that it is a special sort of

pleasure.[84] It is to be reached by true insight and reasoning. James Porter describes it as the 'basal experience of pleasure' on account of it being the criterion of all pleasure'. In this sense, then, it is more than a condition of simple or mere happiness since 'it seems to operate as life's internal formal principle, as that which gives moral sense and shape to a life that is lived ...'[85]

In *The Gay Science* 45 Nietzsche makes a specific contribution to our understanding of Epicurean happiness. According to the portrait of Epicurus he provides this happiness is hard-won and has a precarious character: the sea of existence has become calm but, as one commentator has put it, 'its continued calmness cannot be guaranteed, and the "shuddering skin of the sea" is a constant reminder of the turmoil that may return.'[86] The aphorism, however, is opaque and it has to be acknowledged that Nietzsche maintains in it the distance between his portrait of Epicurus and the existence of Epicurus himself: it's far from clear if he is, in fact, offering Epicurus as some kind of philosophical ideal or whether in fact he is suggesting that the Epicurean mode of living is not available to us mere human beings. There is something god-like, even superhuman, about the Epicurean mode of living, and whilst Nietzsche may on occasion be in awe of it, it's not necessarily the case that he is recommending it to us. The critical concerns he has about it manifest themselves only in his late writings, to which I now turn in conclusion.

## 6. Conclusion

It is clear that Epicurus is a significant and inspiring philosophical figure for Nietzsche at the time of his free spirit writings. By the time of the late writings (1886–8) he is a more ambivalent figure for him, still celebrated for waging war against Christianity in its pre-existent form but also a said to be a 'typical decadent'.[87] With the return of the Dionysian in his thinking, which disappears in his

[84] G. Striker, '*Ataraxia*: Happiness as Tranquillity', in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 183–196, 185.

[85] James I. Porter, 'James I. Porter, 'Epicurean Attachments: Life, Pleasure, Beauty, Friendship, and Piety', *Cronache Ercolanesi* **33** (2003): 205–227, 218

[86] Richard Bett, 'Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness', 63

[87] See Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), section 30

middle period writings, we get the fundamental contrast between Epicurean delight (*Vergnügen*) and Dionysian joy (*Lust*): 'I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any "Epicurean delight" is out of the question, Only Dionysian joy is sufficient: *I have been the first to discover the tragic*'.[88] One commentator has suggested that for Nietzsche Epicurus is 'a point of intense equivocation', neither Dionysus nor the Crucified and yet curiously part of both of them. On the one hand, Epicurus affirms life and the moment 'against the melancholy prison of sin, the after-life and punishment'.[89] On the other hand, however, Epicurus is seen to be a romantic figure who, like Christ, offers consolation to those who suffer from the impoverishment of life, seeking a god for the sick, both a healer and saviour. On account of its fear of pain and the need for a religion of love, Epicureanism is a romanticism that 'flows smoothly into Christianity.'[90] Indeed, the late Nietzsche is suspicious of all attempts to attain philosophical beatitude through contemplative states since he thinks they represent a nihilistic flight from existence into a pure realm of being free of pain and free of appreciating the rich ambiguity of existence. The 'tragic' is for him essentially what allows for a greater attachment to life and signifies the affirmation of life beyond good and evil: it affirms and wants the total economy of life. What lies behind the change in Nietzsche's estimation of Epicurus is the fact that he has become again in his late writings a thinker of the tragic, in which suffering and happiness are intimately entwined. For Nietzsche for 'vital thinkers, still thirsty for life',[91] 'a life that is free from problems to solve, riddles to guess, or new worlds to discover, could not possibly be worth living, since it would be a life devoid of challenges for the seekers of knowledge'.[92] Thus, to prefer 'a handful of "certainty" to a whole wagonload of beautiful possibilities … a certain Nothing than … an uncertain Something … this is nihilism, and the sign of a despairing, mortally weary soul'.[93]

[88] Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 11, 25 [95]

[89] Howard Caygill, 'The Consolation of Philosophy; or neither Dionysus nor the Crucified', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* **7** (1994): 131–51, 145

[90] Ibid., 146

[91] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), section 10

[92] Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 240

[93] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 10

We might see, as Schopenhauer did, the Epicurean quest for *ataraxia* as akin to the Buddhist attainment of Nirvana.[94] This is how one commentator has seen the Epicurean philosophy, entailing the attainment of the highest enjoyment in the removal of all vivid sensations, including pain, desire, and activity.[95] However, the garden of Epicurus is not an idyll that seeks escape from being or that refuses to acknowledge the terrible character of existence. As another commentator on Nietzsche's reception of Epicurus has put it, Epicurus's denial of immortality, 'affirms the most terrible character of existence as one of the first principles of the good life'.[96] It is even suggested that we find in Epicurus a conception of human existence and the world that is more finite and hence more terrible than Nietzsche's (Epicurus lives without the consolation – if that is what it is – of eternal recurrence). Moreover, Epicurus's remaining true to the earth 'was not pathologically conditioned by his desire to put an end to suffering and pain'; rather, it is the case that his 'insight into the unity of truth and appearances arose out of a profound recognition of human finitude'.[97] In Epicurean *ataraxia* we encounter the calm of strength and nothing of the calm of weakness. Far from being the repose of the deepest sleep, such *ataraxia* is 'an awakening of the active forces of life, an affirmation of the world as an aesthetic outpouring'.[98] This is to say that for the Epicurean *ataraxia* 'is a direct experience of the intrinsic pleasure of life itself, of the active forces of a life form freed from the reactive force of desire'.[99] We now directly participate in the blessed life of the gods, 'dwelling in the divine state of forbearance from reaction'.[100] There is no rancour towards life in Epicurus, only profound gratitude. The task, with the aid of philosophy, is precisely to go beyond the rancour in our hearts, to not resent mortal fate, and to display towards life a sense of gratitude.

[94] For further insight into Nietzsche's 'Epicurus' as mediated by Schopenhauer see Fritz Bornmann, 'Nietzsches Epikur', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 13 (1984), 177–89; and Andrea Christian Bertino, 'Nietzsche und die hellenistische Philosophie: Der Übermensch und der Weise', *Nietzsche-Studien* 36 (2007), 95–131. See also Roos, 2000: 293. Roos also notes the influence of Montaigne and Jacob Burckhardt on Nietzsche's appreciation of Epicurus.

[95] See Knight, 'Nietzsche and Epicurean Philosophy', 439

[96] Joseph P. Vincenzo, 'Nietzsche and Epicurus', *Man and World*, 27 (1994), 383–97, 387.

[97] Vincenzo, 'Nietzsche and Epicurus', 390

[98] Ibid. 392

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

Nietzsche shares in this attitude of gratitude towards life. In addition, though, he has a rich appreciation of the complex character of the turbulent nature of existence. This is why he insists, I think, on the eternal recurrence of 'war and peace'.[101] For Nietzsche it is 'decadent' to suppose that we can attain a life of permanent delight and free of the need to grow through the pain of existence and the stimulus to life such pain gives rise to. As Nietzsche recognizes as early as the first edition of *The Gay Science* if one desires to diminish and lower the level of human pain, one has at the same time to want to diminish and lower the level of our capacity for joy. Nietzsche is of the view that 'new galaxies' of joy are available to us.[102] At the same time, there are weaknesses in his later appreciation. We can note two critical points in conclusion. First, it can be observed that Nietzsche too readily associates Epicurean doctrine with a simple-minded hedonism when in his middle period he is keen to dissociate it from such an easy identification. Second, the overly general character of his Dionysian conception and affirmation of life can be noted. Nietzsche rarely specifies the ends to which he is placing this affirmation and his tragic appreciation of life does not provide sufficient information as to the concrete application of destruction and negation. Rather, it seems that the late Nietzsche is espousing a philosophy of life and of life-affirmation that is designed to work against the fundamentally decadent tendencies of modern society, at least as Nietzsche sees the situation. The problem I have always had with this philosophy of life is, as I have already remarked, with its overly general character. Affirm life, including its eternal recurrence? Yes, but under what conditions of existence? Wage war and practise creation through destruction? Yes, but which wars should I wage, against which enemies and for what ends?

It is odd that Nietzsche should accuse Epicurus of decadence and nihilism, of pursuing nothingness, when it is clear, I think, that much of his thinking was directed at what one might call an incipient nihilism of his time, as when in the letter to Menoeceus he takes to task the wisdom that declares it is good not to be born and once born to then pass through the gates of death as quickly as possible. The kind of intense appreciation of life Epicurus sought to cultivate in his disciples is one that most of us experience rarely and indeed some only experience at the end of life, when life is about to vanish or disappear. In his middle period writings Nietzsche has these insights into the Epicurean appreciation of life and is awe-struck by

101 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 295.
102 Ibid., section 12.

the fact that, as he puts it, some human beings, such as Epicurus, have 'enduringly felt they existed in the world and the world existed in them'.[103] In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche has developed what I think is the key insight into Epicurus: in spite of the pain and suffering that characterize existence it remains worthy of our attachment and affirmation and there is no other world for us to seek meaning and value than in this world of mortal delights and pleasures. Here, as Nietzsche so eloquently puts it, we feel that we exist in the world and that the world exists in us; in such a condition our estrangement from life is overcome. Although the Epicurean appreciation of life may be one that is difficult to maintain, and although it may be impractical to practise it as a permanent way of life, it can inspire us in potent ways in our efforts to be equal to the event of our brief, precarious, and ephemeral existence. This seems to be the essential message of Nietzsche about the Epicurean tradition in his middle period.

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[103] Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, section 295.