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16 When Wisdom Assumes Bodily Form

There are not many of them, of these non-apologetic, truly non-religious philosophers in the history of philosophy: among the great philosophers, I can see only Epicurus, Spinoza (who is admirable), Marx, when he is properly understood, and Nietzsche. (L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*)

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. (F. Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow* 227)

Epicurean doctrine has been greatly maligned and misunderstood in the history of thought.¹ 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 (DeWitt 1954: 3). 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' (Leddy and Lifschitz 2009: 4). It is the tradition of modern materialism in philosophy that is responsible for revivifying Epicurean teaching, including notable figures such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Diderot, and La Mettrie amongst others. Although rarely noted in the literature on Epicureanism, significant receptions of Epicurean 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' (Marx 1975: 73), 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' (Guyau 1878 : 280). For Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have graced the earth and the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing' (WS 295). Epicurus, along with the Stoic Epictetus, is to be revered as a thinker in whom wisdom assumes bodily form. The point is perhaps obvious: philosophy is not simply sophistry or mere *paideia* but an incorporated wisdom that enables the individual to negotiate and affirm the most demanding and challenging questions of existence, including, and notably including, the tests of the self, such as the fact of our mortality and how to live. Pierre Hadot has written instructively about the claims of wisdom and philosophy as a way of life. He echoes Nietzsche's concerns when he writes: 'Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists' (Hadot 1995: 272). As he notes, wisdom does not cause us to know but rather makes us *be* in a different way (1995: 265).

1 Some of the material on Nietzsche in this essay was first presented in Ansell-Pearson (2013).

As a mode of being in the world and a way of life such wisdom brings a serene mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and what he calls a ‘cosmic consciousness’.² Nietzsche will re-work all three ideas in his middle period, especially the first two.

There are some striking similarities in the reception and appropriation of Epicurus we find in both Marx and Nietzsche. Ultimately, however, the two diverge in their appropriations, with Marx locating in the teaching of Epicurus an abstract individualism and a contemplative materialism, whilst Nietzsche in his middle period writings prizes Epicurus for his teaching on a refined egoism and advocating social withdrawal. In what follows I shall attempt to illuminate these similarities and points of divergence. I shall begin first with Marx and illuminate some salient features of his interpretation of Epicurus; then I shall turn my attention to Nietzsche and highlight the character of his appropriation of Epicurus.

16.1 Marx on Epicurus

According to Michael Inwood, Marx’s aim in his doctoral dissertation of 1841 was to ‘redress Hegel’s injustice to Epicurus’ (Inwood 1992: 262). For Hegel, Epicurus does not make an original contribution to philosophy with his philosophy of physics held to be essentially that of Leucippus and Democritus. Hegel’s reflections on the loss of key manuscripts of Epicurus are highly telling:

The number of his writings is said to have amounted to three hundred; it is scarcely to be regretted that they are lost to us. We may rather thank Heaven that they no longer exist; philologists at any rate would have had great trouble with them. (Hegel 1995: 280)

In spite of this negative assessment, Hegel does recognise the importance of Epicurus as an ethical teacher, finding his ethics the most interesting part of his system and the best part of his philosophy. In Epicurus’s practical philosophy we find, as we do in the Stoics, ‘the individuality of self-consciousness’ with the end or *telos* of his ethics being one of psychic tranquillity and undisturbed pure enjoyment of itself. In Epicureanism, as in Stoicism, we find individuality as ethical principle but also a universality of thinking. Hegel concurs with the Epicurean teaching on conquering the fear of death and the fear of the future. He correctly notes the modesty of an Epicurean existence:

The principle of Epicurus is to live in freedom and ease, and with the mind at rest, and to this end it is needful to renounce much of that which men allow to sway them, and in which they find their pleasure. The life of a Stoic is therefore but little different from that of an Epicurean who keeps well before his eyes what Epicurus enjoins. (Hegel 1995: 303)

2 On this ‘cosmic consciousness’ see Hadot (1995), especially p. 273.

Simple dishes afford as much enjoyment as costly banquet, should they appease hunger, and this clearly indicates that in making pleasure our aim it is not the enjoyments of the gourmand we need to have in mind, but rather freedom from both pain of body and uneasiness of mind. In spite of the individuality and universality affirmed by Epicurean and Stoic philosophies, for Hegel the two systems of thought are ultimately opponents. However, both systems are one-sided and it is the Notion that can explain this and go beyond it, ‘abrogating fixed extremes of determination such as these, [it] moves them and sets from free from a mere state of opposition’ (Hegel 1995: 310). Marx does not depart from aspects of this ultimate assessment of Epicurus, but he does radically differ from Hegel in his overall appreciation of him.

The opening lines of the dissertation show the extent to which Marx is challenging received wisdom about ancient philosophy, namely, that it culminates and in fact ends with Aristotle. As Marx points out, often seen as tendentious and one-sided eclectics, with Epicureanism taken to be a syncretic combination of Democritus’s physics with an ethics derived from the Cynics, and Stoicism as a compound of physics of Heraclitus, a cynical-ethical view of the world, and some logic derived from Aristotle. Like Nietzsche after him, Marx will challenge received conceptions of the history of philosophy and how it is to be narrated. In particular both will identify what Marx calls ‘the setting of the sun’ and Nietzsche ‘the dawn’ in novel and fertile ways. Marx asks a series of fresh and novel questions, noting how the Roman philosophies attempt a synthesis of the pre-Socratic philosophy of nature with regard to physics and the school of Socrates with regard to ethics. All the schools are united in their belief that the aim of philosophy is to produce the wise man (the *sophos*), and this man is also the free human being.

Marx divides his dissertation into two main parts, first looking into the difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature in general and then, secondly, in detail. He adds an appendix in which he subjects to critique Plutarch’s polemic against the theology of Epicurus. Marx begins his dissertation by questioning the wisdom of the view that Greek philosophy came to an end with Aristotle and with the later schools, such as the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics, to be treated ‘as an almost improper addition bearing no relation to its powerful premises’ (Marx 1975: 34). He notes in particular how these different schools are often portrayed as being one-sided and made up of tendentious eclecticism. Marx is keen to contest this reception and to revalue their relation to the older Greek philosophy. His focus is on the relation between the Epicurean and Democritean philosophy of nature and his principal aim is to contest the dominant reception of this relationship in which the physics of the two systems of thought have long been identified. One example given is the reading of Cicero who contends that most of the physics of Epicurus is already to be found in Democritus and where he adds to it he only worsens it. A similar negative appraisal can be found in Plutarch. Marx goes on to note the assessment of the Church Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria and who reinterprets the warning of Paul against philosophy in general into a warning against Epi-

curean philosophy in particular. If we turn our attention to the moderns we find a similar negative assessment of Epicurus, with Leibniz for example noting that what we know of Democritus is what we find borrowed from him in Epicurus and that this is unreliable since he did not always take what is the best. The consensus, then, as Marx reads the literature, is that Epicurus largely borrowed his physics from Democritus and that he is not a thinker who made significant innovations to the doctrine of atomism.

Marx now turn his attention to complicating the received picture of the relation between the two systems, noting that although the ‘principles’—notably atoms and the void—are the same, ‘they stand diametrically opposed in all that concerns truth, certainty, application of this science, and all that refers to the relationship between thought and reality in general’ (Marx 1975: 38). In fact, Marx sees the two philosophers opposed at every step. Democritus is a sceptic about sense perception and our knowledge of an independent external world, and Epicurus by contrast is a ‘dogmatist’. Where Democritus is only able to see the sensuous world as subjective semblance, Epicurus is able to conceive it as objective appearance. Marx elaborates further:

He who considers the sensuous world as subjective semblance applies himself to empirical natural science and to positive knowledge, and represents the unrest of observation, experimenting, learning everywhere, ranging over the wide, wide world. The other, who considers the phenomenal world to be real, scorns empiricism; embodied in him are the serenity of thought satisfied in itself, the self-sufficiency that draws its knowledge *ex principio interno* (from an inner principle). (Marx 1975: 45)

Whereas the sceptic considers existence and the world from the perspective of necessity, the dogmatist, places the emphasis on chance, with each one of them rejecting the opposing view with ‘polemical irritation’ (Marx 1975: 43). We do not need to follow the details of Marx’s interpretation here. The main point to note is that he is drawing attention to what we might call the ‘ethical imperative’ of Epicurean doctrine, in which physics is subordinated to ethics:

All that matters is the tranquillity of the explaining subject. Since everything possible is admitted as possible, which corresponds to the character of abstract possibility, the *chance of being* is clearly transferred only into the *chance of thought*. The only rule which Epicurus prescribes, namely, that ‘the explanation should *not contradict* sensation’, is self-evident; for to be abstractly possible consists precisely in being free from contradiction, which must therefore be avoided. (Marx 1975: 45)

As Marx goes on to note from this insight, the method of explanation sought by Epicurus aims at the *ataraxia* of consciousness, and ‘*not at knowledge of nature in and for itself*’ (Marx 1975: 45). And as one commentator explains, by chance here Marx means not so much pure chance, and as results from the throwing of dice, but rather the argument that recognises that the history of the universe is a contingent one and not one guided by design or providence (see Foster 2000: 45).

Why does Marx turn to Epicurus at this point in his intellectual development? According to John Bellamy Foster, Marx is interested in the relation of Epicureanism to the Enlightenment, evident not only in his doctoral dissertation but in his ‘Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy’ of 1839 (compiled whilst he was working on the dissertation) and subsequent writings such as *The Holy Family* (1845) and *The German Ideology* (1846). What Marx sees in Epicurus is an important moment in the unfolding of a philosophy of freedom, in which the human being frees itself from the bonds of fear and superstition and ‘becomes capable of forging his own happiness’ (Rubel and Manale 1975: 16–17, cited in Foster 2000: 33). In Epicurean doctrine ‘Individual will is asserted; an understanding of contingency becomes central to the wisdom of life’ (Rubel and Manale 1975: 16–17). A materialist ethics has its basis in the insights into mortality and finitude, in which the conquest of the fear of death promoted by established religion and superstition becomes paramount. Freedom begins only ‘when it was possible to ascertain by means of “natural science” the mortality of the soul and the individuals within it’ (Foster 2000: 36). Although, Epicurus advocated a ‘contemplative materialism’ this has to be seen in the context in which he was writing and operating, namely, the aftermath of the hegemony of Macedonia during which time the successors of Alexander fought it out over his empire, and so making political activity at this time seem highly ineffective (Foster 2000: 34). However, in spite of the contemplative aspects Marx was able to perceive in the doctrine radical, practical implications. In his reinterpretation of Epicurus, Marx contests the criticism we encounter in Francis Bacon (and whom Marx starts to read in the 1830s), which argues that Epicurus is an inferior philosopher to Democritus on account of his subordination of natural to moral philosophy. Marx, however, locates in this subordination a philosophy that places the emphasis on the primacy of practical freedom. Marx turns the perceived weakness of the Epicurean doctrine into its great strength and when compared with the Democritean philosophy and its explanation of all things in terms of an iron-clad necessity: ‘Like Bacon in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, Marx coupled the image of Prometheus in his dissertation with the Greek atomists, though in Marx’s case it was Epicurus rather than Democritus who was to be Prometheus’ ancient counterpart’ (Foster 2000: 52).³

Epicurus is a thinker of evolution and for him freedom is something that evolves. This is his great significance for Marx. Although his thinking may have eccentric aspects, such as the doctrine of the swerve or the declination of the atom from the straight line, he succeeds in liberating philosophy from doctrines of determinism and necessitarianism. As Foster neatly puts it:

What fascinated Marx was the fact that Epicurean philosophy ‘swerves away’ from all restrictive modes of being, just as the gods in Epicurean philosophy swerve away from the world—a world of freedom and self-determination over which they hold no sway. In Epicurus ‘the law of the

³ For a recent attempt to read Epicurus in the light of his Democritean background, and focused on ethics, see Warren (2002).

atom' is 'repulsion', the collision of elements; it no longer needs fixation in any form. (Foster 2000: 55)

For Marx, the essential insight here is contained in Lucretius when he notes that the swerve or declination breaks the *fati foedera* or the bonds of fate (Marx 1975: 49). Nietzsche too, we may note, comes to appreciate Epicureanism as a liberating doctrine on the importance played by the role of chance in both human affairs and the history of the universe (see D 13, D 33, and D 36). As Pierre 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 (Hadot 1995: 252). So, whereas for Democritus the world is characterised by necessity, in Epicurean doctrine the emphasis is placed on chance, contingency, and the evolution of freedom. For Marx, Epicurus places the emphasis on a doctrine of freedom that knows no final constraints; his importance is that he frees philosophy both from determinism *and* from the teleological principles of religion (Foster 2000: 56). Of course, Epicurus does not deny necessity completely, since this would mean that everything could come from anything; rather, his aim is to affirm the possibility of freedom that breaks with the bounds of such necessity (2000: 56).

For Marx, Epicureanism shows that sensuousness is a temporal process, indeed, that human sensuousness is what he calls '*embodied time*' in which our perception through the senses is only possible because we are active beings in the world and in relation to nature (Marx 1975: 64). The human being is the site of the disclosure of nature: 'In hearing nature hears itself, in smelling it smells itself, in seeing it sees itself' (1975: 65). At the same time we also experience nature and life as the passing away of all things: the senses are activated by external stimuli that are transitory. This means for Marx that the pure form of the world of appearance is time, and it's on the basis of such an insight that it's possible to credit Epicurus with being the first philosopher to truly grasp appearance as appearance, namely the 'alienation of the essence, activating itself in reality as such an alienation' (1975: 65).

This is a significant move to make and of great importance for our appreciation of the history of philosophy and the events that inform it, such as the Epicurean moment. Typically we associate materialism with a mechanical determinism and that places human beings in a passive relation to nature and the world. We then identify idealism with the counter-doctrine that places the emphasis on our active constitution of nature and the world. Epicureanism is a strict materialism but it is one, on Marx's interpretation, that clearly sees the active dimension of human existence, in which sensation is related to change and passing away, in short, to finitude. As Foster writes:

Already there is an understanding of the existence of alienated self-consciousness, and of knowledge involving both sensation and intellectual abstraction (a complex relation that

Marx was to refer to in his notes as ‘the dialectic of sensuous certitude’). Moreover, in Epicurus is found even the view that our consciousness of the world (for example, our language) develops in relation to the evolution of the material conditions governing subsistence. (Foster 2000: 55)

This explains why Marx is able to say that in spite of its contradictions the philosophy of atomism reaches an apogee with Epicurus in which it is completed as ‘*the natural science of self-consciousness*’. In Epicurus, then, human beings are no longer depicted as being either the products of simple nature or of supernatural forces; rather than relating to a different form of existence they relate to each other, and so instead of providing an ‘ordinary logic’, as Hegel claimed, Epicurus provides this dialectic of self-consciousness, albeit in a contemplative mode. Epicurus is the great teacher for both Marx and Nietzsche of liberation from fear, especially the inner fear that is so hard to extinguish, and in which the human being finds itself incapable of self-determination. This, for Marx, is the greatest sin of religion: to hold back the human being from its freedom, or at least its potentiality for freedom. In this respect Epicureanism is a deeply subversive, and radically atheistic, philosophy, one that Christianity despises and seeks to combat. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels will praise Epicurus for overthrowing the gods and trampling religion underfoot.

Let me draw this section on Marx to a close by noting a key point: for Marx, Democritus and Epicurus represent two different intellectual types. Democritus is in search of knowledge and is an encyclopaedic seeker; by contrast, Epicurus is ‘*satisfied and blissful in philosophy*’ (Marx 1975: 41). Marx cites Epicurus when he suggests that to serve philosophy is freedom itself. The study of philosophy is not something to be delayed and it is never too early or too late to undertake this study. Democritus is prepared to sacrifice philosophy for the positive sciences modelled on an ideal, and idealised, conception of empirical knowledge. Epicurus, by contrast, has contempt for the positive sciences and is essentially self-taught. And, furthermore, whilst Democritus travels the corners of the world in search of this encyclopaedic knowledge, Epicurus leaves his garden rarely. The rumour is that Democritus blinds himself at the end of his life on account of feeling despair over the acquisition of knowledge, whilst Epicurus, who felt the hour of death approaching, took a warm bath, called for some wine, and advised his friends to remain faithful to philosophy. Philosophy, for Epicurus, is not *paideia* but an *ethopoiesis* in which wisdom assumes bodily form.

16.2 Nietzsche on Epicurus

In a note from 1872–73 Nietzsche describes Democritus as ‘the freest human being’ (NL 1872–73, KSA 7, 23[17]). Nietzsche had been preoccupied with him in the 1860s, especially the period 1866–68, in his so-called ‘Democritea’ project where his main concern was with establishing the authenticity of his corpus. As James Porter notes, the story of his involvement with Democritus has been a matter of near total neglect and yet the encounter is of major importance since, in Porter’s words, ‘Nietzsche

trades heavily on the critical potentials of atomism' (Porter 2000: 23). According to Porter, a recuperation of Democritean doctrine from the fragments means inevitably recuperating some of its critical and subversive force—Plato is completely silent on Democritus and atomism, which is an omission noted in antiquity. However, the middle period Nietzsche shows little interest in the innovations of Epicurus's atomism and focuses his attention largely on how Epicurus represents a new ethical awakening.⁴ 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. Nietzsche confesses to having dwelled like Odysseus in the underworld and says that he will often be found there again. As a 'sacrificer' 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 (AOM 408).⁵ Epicurus, along with the Stoic Epictetus, is revered as a thinker in whom wisdom assumes bodily form (HH II 224). Nietzsche admits at this time to being inspired by the example of Epicurus whom he calls one of the greatest human beings to have ever graced the earth and the inventor of a 'heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing' (WS 295). It is heroic 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' (HH I 291). This is deeply Epicurean in inspiration: Epicurus taught that one should die as if one had never lived. There is a modesty of human existence in Epicurean teaching that greatly appeals to the middle period Nietzsche.

In his late writings, such as *The Anti-Christian*, Epicurus is depicted by Nietzsche as a decadent, indeed, a 'typical' decadent (A 30),⁶ and in one note Nietzsche informs his readers that he has presented such terrible images of knowledge to humanity that any Epicurean delight is out of the question and only Dionysian joy is sufficient: he has been the first to discover the tragic. In the neglected middle period texts, however, the picture is quite different with Nietzsche drawing heavily, if selectively, on the example of Epicurus and core aspects of Epicurean teaching. The question is: for what ends and for what ultimate purpose does he do this in these texts? To answer this question we need to understand further something of the set of con-

4 It should perhaps be noted that Nietzsche has engaged with Democritean atomism in his early philosophy, notably his lectures on the pre-Platonic philosophers. In his middle period writings he does not take up the philosophy of atomism again and Epicurus is appropriated as an essentially ethical thinker. See Nietzsche (2001: 120–131) and also Caygill (2006).

5 The other three pairs are: Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, and Pascal and Schopenhauer. On Montaigne's relation to Epicurean doctrine see Jones (1992: 159–62).

6 For insight into this characterisation of Epicurus we encounter in the late Nietzsche, see Choulet (1998). On decadence, see McCarthy (1994), and Conway (1997), especially chapter two.

cerns and anxieties he has in his middle period. My contention is that these concerns and anxieties have not been sufficiently attended to in the literature, so that we fail to understand the extent to which an ethos of Epicurean enlightenment informs these texts. Let me list what I see as some of Nietzsche's principal concerns in his middle period writings and that serve to inspire him to pursue an Epicurean path:

- A critique of commercial society and an emerging consumer culture.
- A commitment to stable pleasures and mental equilibrium over the need for *constant* change.
- An attempt to live free of the delusions of human exceptionalism, and free from the gods, especially the fear of the gods.
- An emphasis on a therapy of slowness and the *vita contemplativa*, including a tempering of the human mind in order to liberate it from moral and religious fanaticism.
- The search for a simpler existence purified of the metaphysical need with an attention to the importance of the closest things.
- A care of self that is intended to be coextensive with the whole of life, suggesting an ecological rather than atomistic approach to the art of living.
- The need to conquer unjustified fears and to reinstitute the role played by chance and chance events in the world and in human existence. As Pierre Hadot (1995: 252) 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.
- In contrast to a teaching on the salvation of the soul Nietzsche favours one that attends to the needs of the body and that takes the body as its starting-point. A neglect of the body, for example, through a teaching of pure spirituality, leads one to self-hatred and produces melancholic individuals.

In his middle period, then, Epicurus is one of Nietzsche's chief inspirations in his effort to liberate himself from the metaphysical need and to aid humanity in its need to now cure its neuroses. Some of the 'heroic-idyllic' aspects of Epicurean philosophising are captured in the appreciation we find in Marx's doctoral dissertation of 1841. Marx notes, for example, that 'embodied' in Epicurus 'are the serenity of thought satisfied in itself' (Marx 1975: 41, 45). Here Marx is referring to Epicurus's subordination of physics to ethics, that is, that the method of explanation 'aims only at the *ataraxy of self-consciousness, not at knowledge of nature in and for itself*' (1975: 45). This is also part of Nietzsche's appreciation of Epicurus in his middle period. Epicurus and Nietzsche are both profound liberators of human life from religious superstition and mystification, and both place ethics at the centre of philosophy. Both are educators and despise the mere erudition of the scholar (see Knight 1933: 437).

Let me say something about the character of Nietzsche's thinking in his middle period. What's going on in these texts? Is there a core project being developed? There is and it centres on Nietzsche's efforts to temper emotional and mental excess. This concern explains Nietzsche's commitment to an enlightenment project. The task of philosophy, as Nietzsche sees it at this time, 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? – (HH I 38)

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 (HH I 244). 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. 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' (WS 7).

In the middle period, Nietzsche turns to Epicurean teaching in a concerted effort to advance the cause of a renewed enlightenment. However, it's not an enlightenment in support of a revolutionary transformation of society but one that favours change through 'slow cures' and 'small doses' (D 462, D 534). Nietzsche is an admirer of the critical and rationalist spirit of the Enlightenment, of both the eighteenth-century version, as we find it in the likes of Voltaire and Lessing, and earlier incarnations, such as we find it in the likes of Epicurus, Petrarch, and Erasmus.⁷ Nietzsche shares many of the ideas and commitments of the modern Enlightenment, including the attack on superstition, religious dogmatism, rigid class structures, outmoded forms of governance and rule, and so on. He does not deny that revolutions can be a source of vital energy for a humanity that has grown feeble, but he contests

7 For insight into the relation between Epicureanism and enlightenment thinking, see the classic study by Gay (1966). More recently, see Leddy and Lifschitz (2009).

the idea that it can work as an organiser and perfecter of human nature. He thus appeals to Voltaire over Rousseau, that is, in his eyes to a nature that knows how to organise, purify, and reconstruct, as opposed to a nature that is full of passionate follies and half-lies. It is the spirit of revolution that frightens off the spirit of enlightenment and of progressive development, and it is this spirit Nietzsche calls upon his readers to cultivate and nurture. Nietzsche locates in the French Revolution's 'historicism', a 'bestial cruelty', as well as a 'sentimentality' and 'self-intoxication', and holds Rousseau responsible for being its intellectual inspiration and for setting the Enlightenment on 'its fanatical [*fanatische*] head' and with 'perfidious enthusiasm [*Begeisterung*]' (WS 221). He sees the Enlightenment as being, in fact, alien to the Revolution, which if it had been left to itself would have 'passed quietly along like a gleam in the clouds and for long been content to address itself only to the individual' (WS 221).

It is certain that at this time Nietzsche 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 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' (Clay 2009: 16). 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. (Campbell 2010: 222)

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

tirely 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. (GS 338)

‘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’ (D 179). He 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’ (D 179). 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’ (D 179). 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 danger (see Long and Sedley 1987: 137). What is the case, however, is that Nietzsche appropriates Epicureanism for the end of an ethical reformation. Although he anticipates ‘numerous novel experiments’ taking place in ‘ways of life and modes of society’ (D 164), his model at this time for the practice of self-cultivation is Epicurus’s garden.

In 1882 Nietzsche writes in a beautiful aphorism entitled ‘Epicurus’:

Yes, I am proud of the fact that I experience the character of Epicurus quite differently from perhaps everybody else. Whenever I hear or read of him, I enjoy the happiness of the afternoon of antiquity. 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. (GS 45)

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’ (Langer 2010: 67). 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’ (2010: 67). 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’ (2010: 67). 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’ (Langer 2010: 67).

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.⁸

Nietzsche champions Epicurus, then, 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’ (Warren 2004: 6). 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. 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).

What is clear, though, is that 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 joyfulness [*Freudigkeit*] in

⁸ Thanks to Beatrice Han-Pile for inspiration here.

place of frequent indulgence in single pleasures' (NL 1879, KSA 8, 41[48]), and, second, in withdrawing from social ambition and living in a garden as opposed to living publicly in the market-place (Young 2010: 279). As Nietzsche stresses, 'A little garden, figs, little cheeses and in addition three or four good friends—these were the sensual pleasures of Epicurus' (WS 192).⁹ Nietzsche is appreciative of what one commentator has called the 'refined asceticism' we find in Epicurus, which consists in the enjoyment of the smallest pleasures and the disposal of a diverse and delicate range of sensations (Roos 2000: 298).

In this period Epicurus is deployed by Nietzsche as a way of breaking with fanatical enthusiasms and intoxications, including quite possibly Nietzsche's own early Dionysian ones. The serene teaching of Epicurus provides Nietzsche with one way of shedding his previous skin, that of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and now conducting the patient labour of self-analysis and self-cultivation as a therapy of body and soul. Nietzsche finds in Epicurus a victory over pessimism in which death becomes the last celebration of a life that is constantly embellished (Roos 2000: 299). 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 intoxication, Nietzsche becomes a student of this master of moderate pleasures and careful dosages' (Roos 2000: 309).

For what ends might we wish to promote an Epicurean Nietzsche today? The principal end is one of demonstrating that Nietzsche is an enlightenment thinker seeking the liberation of humanity from its neuroses and unjustified fears and anxieties. In the middle period we encounter a Nietzsche quite different to the legend that circulates in popular culture and even academic culture. This is a Nietzsche committed to human emancipation through individual and social enlightenment and experimentation—but a project that stresses the need for slow cures and small doses. In several respects Nietzsche shares in the appreciation of Epicurus and Epicurean enlightenment we find in the young Marx. The main difference, of course, is that Marx sees the incendiary political effects of Epicurean philosophy, whilst Nietzsche places the emphasis on a moral—or immoral—avant-garde of free spirits. Nietzsche stresses that his 'campaign against morality' is *not* a gunpowder campaign; rather, and provided we have the necessary subtlety in our nostrils, we are to smell in it much sweeter scents. Nietzsche sees social change coming about gradually through small-scale individual experimentation and a free-spirited avant-garde who aim to provide a new ploughshare of potential universal benefit (D 146). He writes of the need to constitute ourselves as small, experimental states in which we aim to fashion out of ourselves a way of being that others will behold with pleasure, providing 'a lovely, peaceful self-

⁹ 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 2010: 279).

enclosed garden' and with a gate of hospitality (D 174). In his middle period Nietzsche is not a political thinker: he is appropriating Epicurus for specific ends, ones centred on an ethical reformation. By contrast, Marx is locating a revolutionary potential in Epicurus's teaching. Although Marx is correct to see in Epicurean doctrine a largely 'contemplative' materialism and an appeal to a principle of abstract individuality, he is also correct to locate in it a genuinely revolutionary force, one that has the potential to radically transform the world and grant the human being a specifically human form of freedom, entailing liberation from religious fear and superstition. Epicurean philosophy disillusioned the world, freeing us from fear of the gods, and shows us that the world is our friend. However, as Marx recognises, serenity can only be construed an end goal when philosophy has helped to create a world in which once again it feels at home (Breckman 1999: 270).

16.3 Late Nietzsche

Nietzsche appreciates Epicurus as one of those rare spirits who remain true to the earth by demythologising nature, embrace human mortality, and accept human non-exceptionalism. What Nietzsche does seem ambivalent about in the course of his writings is the kind of 'happiness' symbolised by Epicurean delight. Sometime he depicts this, as in *The Gay Science*, as a happiness that is hard-won, conscious of its precarious character, and inseparable from suffering: 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' (Bett 2005: 63). At other times, especially in his late writings, he depicts it as a form of tranquillity, a kind of Schopenhauerian release from the turmoil of existence and the cravings of the will. When he reads it in these terms it is viewed as an expression of decadence (A 30). Only in his late writings does Nietzsche come to express a disquiet over the contemplative aspects of the Epicurean doctrine on philosophy as a way of life. Nietzsche articulates two main concerns over Epicurean teaching in his late writings: that its promotion of contemplation as a way of life amounts to a form of nihilism, or a flight from the realities of existence; and, second, it is a decadent teaching. Let me look at the critical and clinical point about decadence first.

In *The Anti-Christian* Epicurus is described as a decadent, indeed, as a 'typical decadent' whose decadence prepares the way for the coming religion of love. (A 30) In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche refers to both Epicureanism and Christianity as offering a medicine that tranquillises (BGE 200), whilst in the *Genealogy* he refers to the super cool but 'suffering Epicurus' as one who may have been hypnotised by the 'feeling of nothingness' and the 'repose of deepest sleep', that is, the promise of the absence of suffering (GM III 17). In Epicurus himself, Nietzsche claims, there is a fear of pain that leads to the religion of love. He thus interprets Epicurus as a philosophical figure whose doctrine conceals an aversion to aspects of reality and an in-

ability to affirm life at its most terrible and questionable. In *The Gay Science* we encounter a basic contrast between the human being that is richest in the fullness of life ('the Dionysian god and human being') (GS 370), and the one who suffers most and is poorest in life; the former can afford the sight of the terrible and questionable as well as the terrible deed and luxury of destruction and negation; the latter, however, needs first and foremost goodness in thought and deed.¹⁰ Nietzsche contends that those who are poorest in life are the ones who need mildness and peacefulness, as well as logic, or the 'conceptual understandability of existence' since this gives calm and confidence, providing a 'warm narrowness that keeps away fear and encloses one in optimistic horizons' (GS 370). It is insight into this type, Nietzsche confides, that enabled him to *gradually* learn to understand Epicurus, 'the opposite of a Dionysian pessimist; also the "Christian" who is actually only a kind of Epicurean ...' (GS 370). 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.

Nietzsche further argues contra Epicurus that a doctrine of redemption grows on the basis of physiological realities; in the case of Epicureanism, which contains a strong dose of Greek 'vitality and nerves', we find a refined development of hedonism on a morbid foundation. 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 he recognises 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 (GS 12).

Let me look, all too briefly, at Nietzsche's concern over the contemplative life. In his text *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) Bergson expresses the worry that there is too much contemplation in philosophy and in particular he locates self-absorption in both the Epicurean and the Stoic practices of philosophy. Nietzsche expresses the same concern, although he registers his concern in a different style to Bergson. Consider this note from 1885–86 that runs:

As a great educator, one would have to scourge such a race of 'blessed people' mercilessly into unhappiness. The danger of dwarfing, of relaxation is present at once: —*against* Spinozistic or Epicurean happiness and against all relaxation in contemplative states. (NL 1885, KSA 12, 1 [123] = WP 911)¹¹

¹⁰ See also the modified version of this aphorism in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, 'We Antipodes'.

¹¹ With regards to Spinoza Nietzsche no doubt has in mind here his intellectual love of God which he describes in GS 372 as 'bloodless'. However, I would argue that this misses the chief innovation of Spinoza's love. Although one can see what Nietzsche means (since it is a highly intellectual love), it seems to me to miss the significance of what Spinoza has done with respect to God: when we know God adequately and properly, that is, as a substance of immanence and completely de-anthropomorphised, we experience joy for Spinoza. The more we know of nature/God and of ourselves as a part of nature, the more we feel empowered and thus experience joy. This joy in our own power is

My view is that in his later writings Nietzsche is expressing a particular concern over contemplation as a *way of life* and as the *telos* of life. For him to set as the goal of life the attainment of a state of perfected beatitude is to fall prey to nihilism and a negation of life. We, however, need to ask the question: is this the right way to view Epicurus's teaching?

Nietzsche's criticism of Epicurus, especially his claim that he is a decadent, indeed a 'typical' one, seems to miss the aim of his teaching on pleasure, namely, and as James Porter so instructively brings out, that being more than a principle of simple happiness the state of serenity or cheerfulness operates as a formal principle of life, shaping a life that is lived and enjoyed. According to the teaching of Epicurus the practice of virtue entails experiencing a precious attachment to the world and an insight into—from our point of view—into its highest reality. In part, this is what Nietzsche captures in his beautiful paean to the name 'Epicurus' in *The Gay Science*: kind of 'happiness' attained by the true Epicurean is precarious but also the most profound and it gains its richness from the fact that it is born of suffering. Virtue is not so much 'power' for Epicurus, but more a way of being in the world. We see this in Nietzsche's depiction of Epicurus in GS 45. The scene he depicts for us is one of Epicurean illumination or enlightenment: Epicurus is not estranged from nature and recognises 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* (see BT 1, 4, 5, 6, 22). 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. As Epicurus reminds us in 'Vatican Sayings' 14: 'We are born once and cannot be born twice, but we must be no more for all time.'

related to God (to an understanding of the world) and yields a free and unselfish love, one that is neither grasping nor insecure. As Spinoza says, we don't expect to be loved by God in return: strictly speaking, God neither loves nor hates anything (*Ethics* Book V, P 17). Moreover, as the highest good that follows from the dictate of reason, and as something common to all human beings, this love cannot be stained either by envy or by jealousy (P 20). Contrast this with the idea of God found in the Judeo-Christian tradition: God as divine judge in which the believer has the needy desire to be loved by God and is jealous if others are loved more. Here one is lead to fear the divine wrath, to disdain the adherents of other sects, and to construct elaborate rituals to appease the wrath of God and secure his favour. For Spinoza all of this is superstitious nonsense: the thought of God should be a source of strength and joy, not anxiety, fear, envy, and jealousy. It is this conception of God that Spinoza overturns in his idea of the intellectual love of God: rather than being bloodless, it comes from genuine (rational, scientific) knowledge and an extra-human joy (because we have transcended the level of mere animal need and desire, including a fixation on our own self-perpetuation and narrow perspectives). See Cook (2007: 136–137).

Perhaps it is best to locate in Nietzsche's 'Epicurus' what one commentator has described as an ambivalent decadence (Shearin 2014: 72). On the one hand, Nietzsche construes Epicurus as the inventor of the heroic-idyllic style of philosophising and, on the other hand, describes him as a typical decadent who suffered from a fear of pain. Whatever we make of Nietzsche's final ambivalence towards Epicurus and his legacy, it is clear that in his middle period writings he is profoundly inspired by his teaching and example: he makes inventive use of it so as to mount what we can call an ethics of resistance, an ethics that works contra the normalising and disciplinary logic of modernity and what Nietzsche calls in *Dawn* our 'stressed, power-thirsty' societies (D 271). Although certainly not read by Nietzsche as providing a revolutionary doctrine, Epicurean teaching contains for him invaluable resources for a substantial ethical reformation.

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