

# Epicurean Theology

R.D. Hicks

It remains to consider the attitude of Epicurus toward religion. We have already seen that he was at once iconoclast and believer. He rejected the national polytheism but substituted for it a polytheism of his own. Ever hostile to false conceptions and utterly disbelieving the old time-honoured legends, which played so great a part in the life and thought and art of his time, he yet retained what he believed to be the essence of religion, and a religion not merely within the bounds of reason alone," to employ Kant's phrase, but even established on the solid basis of experience. Such an attitude has often been a stumbling block to students of the system, and the difficulties with which it is surrounded required to be unravelled with more than ordinary patience and insight.

Atoms and void were, as we have seen, primary ontological postulates for Epicurus, as they had been for Leucippus and Democritus. If atoms and void are postulated it is possible, they held, to account for all that exists and all that occurs in the infinite universe. Everything follows, said Democritus, by natural necessity. Epicurus agreed, with a single reservation, that, namely, which relates to the swerving of atoms at quite uncertain times and places from an absolutely straight course. Even so, he does not admit any force or power controlling the atoms from outside, since movement is their inherent and inalienable property. There is no room for divine agency so long as that agency is conceived as supernatural, and he emphatically declares that within the universe itself there are no indications of purpose or plan. If, then, anything exists to which the attribute divine can be ascribed, it is certainly not, as the Stoics held, the universe itself, and as certainly it is not conscious beings in any way controlling or interfering with the course of nature. From this it would seem to follow that the existence of gods, as ordinarily understood, must be denied, or at any rate that Epicurus would be justified in taking up an agnostic position as Protagoras had done in the memorable words: "Whether gods exist or do not exist I cannot tell, for there are many things which hinder knowledge, especially the obscurity of the problem and the shortness of human life." But neither Epicurus nor Democritus himself acquiesced in such a conclusion. On the contrary, they affirmed the existence of beings higher than man. As there can be little doubt that on this question the opinion of his great predecessor influenced Epicurus, we may give a short summary of the views of Democritus. As Aristotle

expressly testifies, he made no distinction between soul, regarded as the vital principle, and mind or intelligence. Soul in animals and mind in man was simply the most perfect form of matter, and at death the atoms composing the soul were scattered asunder.<sup>1</sup> He accordingly rejected the hypothesis of Anaxagoras that *Nous* or Mind must be assumed in order to account for the origin of motion in the material universe. Democritus held such an assumption to be both futile and unnecessary, for motion was eternal and of that which is eternal there can be no beginning.<sup>2</sup> Later writers sometimes speak as if Democritus held the spherical soul-atoms themselves to be a divine element in the universe. But this is an error against which we must carefully guard. No doubt Democritus contrasted the soul with the body as the divine with the human, but soul and body were in his view alike corporeal, and “since the corporeal substances are as various as the form and composition of the atoms of which they consist, it is also possible that one substance may have qualities which belong to no other.”<sup>3</sup> The divine element, then, if Democritus used such an expression, must be interpreted, not as a divine being or any being at all, not as a world-soul controlling the material universe from within, but simply as the substance of soul, mind-stuff, the purest and most perfect form of matter wherever it occurs in particular beings. His attitude to popular conceptions of the future life may be gathered from a remarkable fragment preserved by Stobaeus: “Some men who do not understand the dissolution of our mortal nature, but are conscious of the misery in human existence, painfully spend their allotted period of life in confusion and fear, inventing lies about the time after they are dead.”<sup>4</sup> How closely this fragment agrees with the views of Epicurus the reader will not fail to notice. In a lost work, *On Hades*, Democritus collected and probably criticised the numerous fables current in antiquity about the resuscitation of the dead. In fact, he was the first Greek thinker who in so many words denied the immortality of the soul.

With regard to the divinities of the popular faith he seems to have wavered. Sometimes he treated them as allegorical expressions of ethical or physical ideas.<sup>5</sup> Thus Pallas stood originally for wisdom, Zeus for the sky or ether. Only in later times did these conceptions assume personal existence and become endowed in the popular imagination with a bodily shape. Sometimes he ascribed the origin of religion to man's terror at

1 Stobaeus, *Anthologia*, I, p. 384, 18, Wachsmuth.

2 See Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I, 120, Diels, *Doxographi*, p. 302.

3 Zeller, *Pre-Socratics*, Vol. II, p. 262, English translation.

4 Diels 2, Fragment 297.

5 Cf. Diels 2, Fragments 2, 30.

the awe-inspiring phenomena of nature, thunder and lightning, eclipses of the sun, comets, earthquakes and the like, the phenomena which, according to Epicurus, render the study of nature indispensable, if mental composure is to be assured. Thus the popular gods were converted into natural forces or were made the assumed causes of natural phenomena. But at other times they were reduced to mere daemons, such as in Greek mythology occupied an intermediate position between gods and men. Democritus assumed that in part the popular faith rested on actual evidence of sense, and that there are in the surrounding atmosphere beings who are similar to man in form, but superior to him in size, strength, and longevity. From these beings, as from all others, emanate streams of atoms, which by contact with the organs of sense, render the beings visible and audible to men and even to the inferior animals. They are erroneously held to be divine and imperishable, although in truth they are not indestructible, but merely slower to perish than man. Of these beings and their images there were two kinds, the one kindly and beneficent, the other destructive and harmful. Hence, Democritus is said to have prayed that he might meet with such images as were kindly and beneficent. He contrived to fit this assumption to the popular belief in dreams and presages of the future, for the phantom images unfold to us the designs of the beings from which they emanate and reveal what is going on in other parts of the world. Sextus, from whom this information is drawn, expressly says that these daemons were the only gods whose existence Democritus admitted.<sup>6</sup> Scanty as are the materials, it is abundantly evident that a belief in these superhuman phantoms, gigantic, long-lived, intelligent, is quite compatible with the main principles of atomism. They are products of atoms and of atomic movements, structures, generable, and dissoluble like all the other atomic compounds which we know as particular things. In short, Democritus could believe, not only in man, but in super-man without compromising his fundamental positions, that all takes place by natural necessity, that nothing really exists but atoms eternally moving and the void space in which they move.

Let us now suppose that a materialist sincerely adopting the atomic theory sets about the task of criticising and revising this particular doctrine of long-lived daemons and phantom images. Where does it require modification? The starting-point for further inquiry would be the alleged evidence of experience, whether in sense or imagination; and, as these apparitions occur most often by night, the whole province of sleep and dreams must be investigated. A single fragment shows in what a matter-of-fact way the materialist Democritus dealt with these phenomena. The

---

<sup>6</sup> Sextus Empiricus, IX, 19; 42.

images in question had their seat in the sinews and the marrow when they aroused and played upon our souls, and by means of the veins and arteries and the brain itself they penetrated to the inmost parts of the frame.<sup>7</sup> If Epicurus had been an original thinker, if the love of knowledge for its own sake had had the smallest weight with him, a very slight advance in psychology would have suggested misgivings. But with his stereotyped canons of inquiry and his empirical theory of knowledge he had no difficulty in swallowing all that was erroneous in the view of Democritus and contrived to modify it in exactly that direction which brought it into violent conflict with the main principles of atomism. The gods of Epicurus differ from the gigantic phantoms or daemons of Democritus in three particulars. In the first place, they do not dwell in this or any other world, but in the intermundia or interspaces between world and world; secondly, they are not divided into beings beneficent and beings malignant, but are all entirely indifferent to and removed from human interests; thirdly, instead of being merely long-lived, they are indestructible and eternal. This last characteristic is incompatible with atomism, which can provide no satisfactory answer to the question:

If all be atoms, how then should the Gods, Being atomic, not be dissoluble, Not follow the great law?

The best excuse which his champions can offer (and a lame excuse it is) refers us once more to pre conceptions, mental impressions, and the canon of truth. Epicurus, we are told, felt bound to believe that to be true which was attested, or not contested, by experience; felt also bound to hold that no preconception can have arisen except through many previous impressions superposed, and that every impression corresponds to objective reality. All men have the preconception, which implies a multitude of previous impressions, of gods. Out of various attributes ascribed to the gods he selected two as fundamental, and the qualities inferred, blessedness and immortality, must belong to the real object which produced the impressions and consequent preconception. Epicurus thus comes before us as a theologian, indeed as a rationalist in theology. We can trace the steps which led him to his belief in the existence of gods. There is first the universal diffusion of the belief that gods exist. The universality of this belief appeared to him to establish its truth. This is the argument reproduced by Cicero's Epicurean authority in his treatise on the nature of the gods: "Since the belief in question was determined by no ordinance or custom or law, and since a steady unanimity continues to prevail among all men without exception, it must be

---

<sup>7</sup> Hermippus, as quoted by Diels, *Archiv Geschichte der Philosophie*, VII, p. 155 sq.

understood that the gods exist. For we have notions of them implanted, or rather innate, within us, and, as that upon which the nature of all men is agreed must needs be true, their existence must be acknowledged. If their existence is all but universally admitted, not only among philosophers, but also among those who are not philosophers, there is a further admission that must in consistency be made, namely, that we possess a preconception which makes us think of them as blessed and immortal. For nature, that gave us the notion of gods as such, has also engraved in our minds the conviction that they are blessed and eternal.”<sup>8</sup> Here it is important to remember that this preconception is not an innate idea in Locke’s sense of the term, as something stamped upon the soul at birth, but is used in its technical Epicurean sense and denotes a generic type, a permanent deposit, made by the repetition and superposition of similar impressions. In the case of the gods these impressions are always impressions upon the mind, for the emanations from the gods are atom-complexes altogether too fine to affect any sense-organ so as to be perceived by sense. As Lucretius says: “The fine substance of the gods far withdrawn from our senses is hardly seen by the thought of the mind; and, since it has ever eluded the touch and stroke of the hands, it must touch nothing which is tangible for us; for that cannot touch which does not admit of being touched in turn.”<sup>9</sup>

To proceed. If the universal preconception establishes, as Epicurus believes, the existence of gods, it also establishes the characteristic attributes, perfect happiness, and immortality, which all men agree in ascribing to the gods. Epicurus, in the letter to Menceceus already cited, says: “First believe that God is a being blessed and immortal, according to the notion of a god commonly held among men. . . . For verily there are gods and the knowledge of them is manifest.” Apparently he accepts both blessedness and immortality as characteristics given in the preconception. From these many other attributes may be inferred by reason. Both blessedness and immortality would be impaired by the possession of bodies of the same dense capacity which belongs to our own. Hence we can only assign to them a body analogous to the human, ethereal, consisting of the finest atoms. They have not body, but quasi-body, which does not contain blood, but quasi-blood.<sup>10</sup> As their opponents said jeeringly, they are mere silhouettes or gods in outline, destitute of solidity. Again, such bodies as they have could not live in this or any world without being exposed to the ruin which would, in time, overwhelm it and them, and

---

8 *De Natura Deorum*, I, c. XVII, 44.

9 Lucretius, V, 148.

10 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, c. XVIII, 49.

in the meantime they would live in a state of fear, which is incompatible with perfect bliss. Hence, Epicurus gave to them as their habitation the spaces between the worlds. Nor, again, can they be supposed to take any part in governing the course of events, for the anxieties and responsibilities of such an office would be fatal to happiness. "God does nothing, is involved in no occupations, and projects no works; he rejoices in his own wisdom and virtue, and is assured that his state will always be one of the highest felicity eternally prolonged," says the Epicurean in Cicero.<sup>11</sup> This being so, men have nothing to fear and nothing to hope from the gods, and we can now appreciate the full force of the first golden maxim: "A blessed and eternal being has no troubles itself, and brings no trouble upon any other; hence it is exempt from movements of anger and favour, for every such movement implies weakness." This maxim is paraphrased by Lucretius as follows: "For the nature of gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality together with supreme repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting aught of us, it is neither gained by favours nor moved by anger." 3 In the letter to Menoeceus the belief that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, is reckoned by Epicurus among the false assumptions of the multitude. In his view, to punish the wicked is to be moved with anger, to reward the righteous is to be moved with favour, and he pronounces both states alike incompatible with happiness. His gods are entirely indifferent to the whole course of the world, and consequently to the fortunes of humanity. Beyond these fundamental positions the authority of Epicurus himself does not carry us. But his followers would seem to have somewhat enlarged the picture. Philodemus speculated freely on the mode of divine existence. The gods would not need sleep, sleep being a partial death, only required as a means of restoration after fatigue. They must have nourishment, though this must be adapted to the peculiar constitution of their bodies. If they could not communicate with each other, they would lose the highest means of enjoyment, and they must therefore employ language, Greek or something like it. In short, he conceives of the gods as a society of Epicurean philosophers, male and female, who have everything they can desire and full opportunities of converse. Such gods as these alone inspire no fear in their worshippers, but are revered for their very perfection. Moreover, these gods are innumerable. If the number of mortal beings is infinite, the law of isonomy, counterpoise, or equal distribution requires that the number of immortals should be not

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ib.*, c. XIX., 51. 3 Lucretius, II, 646.

less.<sup>12</sup>

We do not know whether the master would have approved all these fantastic speculations. Nor are we informed of his conclusions on one other most difficult point. This is usually described as the physical constitution of the Epicurean gods. The crucial passages in Cicero are tantalising from their obscurity, and it may very possibly be that Cicero himself had only imperfectly apprehended the meaning of the words which he translated.<sup>13</sup> He does, however, commit himself to the statement that the gods, though material, are not firm and solid like the gross bodies of men and visible things, but of a far finer texture, and that they have not numerical or material, but only formal identity. This has been interpreted to mean<sup>14</sup> that the matter of which they are composed, instead of remaining fixed and identically the same through a finite space of time, as is the case with visible and tangible objects, is perpetually and instantaneously passing away, to be replaced by fresh matter. The form or arrangement, of matter alone remains unchanged. Perpetual successions of images, i.e., atom-complexes or films having arisen out of the infinite void, stream to a sort of focus, and there, by their meeting, constitute for a moment the being of the gods; then they stream away in all directions, and upon occasion pass into the material mind of man, bringing with them the notion of the blessed and eternal being whose body they for a moment helped to compose and whose form they still bear. The contrast between material or numerical identity and formal identity can be illustrated by the difference between a standing pond or artificial lake and a river or, still better, a cascade. The water in the artificial lake remains the same for a finite space of time, whereas, though the form of the flowing river and the cascade is constant, the drops of water which compose them are never for one instant materially the same or numerically identical. The water keeps flowing on and away, the form alone persists. Following this clue, the same ingenious interpreters, Lachelier, W. Scott, and Giussani, attempt to gain support for their hypothesis from the doctrine of isonomy (*aquabilis tributio*), which W. Scott expounds as follows: "It is the principle that in infinity all things have their match, *omnia omnibus paribus paria respondent*. By this Cicero seems to mean a law of averages or chances; the law, namely, that of two alternatives equally possible each will occur with equal frequency if an infinite number of cases be taken. In the present case there is a double application of this principle.

---

12 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I, 49.

13 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I, 49, 105, 109.

14 First by Lachelier (*Revue de Philologie*, 1877, p. 264), who has been followed by W. Scott (*Journal of Philology*, XII, pp. 212 sqq.) and by Giussani (*Lucretius*, Vol. I, pp. 227 sqq.).



First, the number of atoms in motion in the universe being infinite, there must, on the whole, be equal numbers of atom-motions tending on the one hand to destroy and on the other hand to feed or maintain composite bodies. Lucretius, though he does not use the word isonomy, lays great stress on the thing in this application. Thus neither can death-dealing motions (*motus exitiales*) keep the mastery always nor entomb existence for evermore, nor on the other hand can the motions which give birth and increase to things (*genitales auctificique motus*) preserve them always after they are born. Thus the war of first beginnings, waged from eternity, is carried on with dubious issue.<sup>15</sup> By the *auctifici motus* we must understand the accretion of constituent atoms to a body in the process of growth; and by the *motus exitiales* their excretion or separation from it in the process of decay. But, again, this balance of opposing tendencies may itself be preserved in two different ways. The processes of growth and of decay, of combination and of dissolution, may either prevail ultimately in each individual object, so that the result on the whole will be a perpetual decay of existing things, accompanied by a perpetual growth of fresh things in their place; or the two processes may go on simultaneously in a given object, so as to produce an equilibrium, the result of which will be eternal duration. Consequently (to apply the principle of isonomy once more), if we take an infinite number of cases (that is, if we consider the whole universe), the alternate and the simultaneous action of the two processes must go on to an equal extent. Now, in our world (and, by analogy, in all the worlds) the first alternative is that which universally prevails; that is, the motions of growth and of decay operate alternately, both on the world as a whole and (at shorter intervals) on each individual within it, thus producing universal death and universal birth. Hence, outside the worlds, or in the intermundia room must be found for the other alternative; that is, the *motus auctifici* and the *motus exitiales* must there work simultaneously and, instead of producing a succession of different beings, must result in the immortality of such beings as exist. We see that the exact point proved by the principle of isonomy is the perpetual continuance in the case of the gods, and in their case alone, of the *auctifici motus*; and that it is on this perpetual continuance that their immortality depends. The Epicurean," in *De Natura Deorum*,<sup>16</sup> "when asked how it is that the stream of matter in the form of images which goes to form the gods never fails, replies at first, that it is because there is an infinite supply of matter to draw upon; but to the objection that this argument would tell equally for the immortality of all

---

15 Lucretius, II, 569 sqq. cf. also II, 522.

16 109.



things, he answers, in effect, that the principle of isonomy determines the supply of the infinite in such a way as to produce death and birth in some beings and immortality in others."<sup>17</sup> Giussani, the Italian editor of Lucretius, adopts this hypothesis and goes a step further when he affirms that "isonomy was excogitated to prove precisely the perpetuity of the auctificimotus in the case of the gods and in their case only."<sup>18</sup> Giussani assumes that the immortality of the gods is exposed to special danger from hypertrophy or the over-assimilation of nutriment, because they live in the intermundia amid an enormous superabundance of food from the atomic ocean surrounding them. If the gods assimilate more matter than is sufficient for simple preservation, we are justified by Lucretius<sup>19</sup> in inferring that such excessive growth must be followed by a period in which the organism cannot assimilate enough to repair the waste that is going on. What is the cause of the death of men and animals? It is the fact that the matter of which they are formed is temporarily persistent. The matter forming my body, which is, for the moment, my matter, may be so suddenly injured or dispersed by an accident, or it may waste so much faster than slow assimilation of food can restore it, that death must follow. But no artillery fire, how ever violent and prolonged, could possibly destroy Niagara, though every shot in its passage through the falls temporarily dislodged drops of water. For it is the persistence of matter, which preserves a stone in being, that becomes in an organism the cause of danger and death. To make it possible for ever lasting beings composed of atoms to exist, it is not enough, Giussani maintains, that the two processes of waste and assimilation should go on simultaneously and the gain be equal to the loss. For the immortality of such beings an absolute non-persistence of matter is necessary. Such a condition is supplied if the bodies of the gods be supposed to retain identity of form amid perpetual and instantaneous change of matter in short, if they resemble the cascade or flowing river, and not the pond or artificial lake of the illustration. So far Giussani. All are agreed that in men and animals personal identity is compatible with slow but persistent change of constituent matter. It would seem, then, that, on the hypothesis proposed, the identity of these cascade-like gods would, after all, differ from human identity in degree only and not in kind.

I have thought it right to present to the reader these ingenious speculations as far as possible in the words of the scholars who have put them forward. It is highly improbable that the whole question should not have

---

17 *Journal of Philology*, XII, pp. 222 sqq.

18 Giussani, *Lucretius*, Vol. I, p. 263.

19 II, 1115-1140.

received full discussion at some time or other, if not in the voluminous works of the master himself, at any rate in those of his faithful disciples who were recognised as authoritative expounders of the system. The buried treasures of Herculaneum included many treatises by Epicurus and by Philodemus, and now that it has been decided to carry on a systematic excavation of this interesting site, we may reasonably anticipate much additional information on this and other obscure points of Epicurean belief. It may be that such information will corroborate and justify the shrewd conjectures which have been put forward. It may also be that fresh discoveries will render them obsolete and furnish us with explanations and solutions not hitherto dreamt of. With the evidence which we already possess before them, most scholars who have dealt with Epicureanism have been unable to accept as satisfactory the hypothesis proposed by Lachelier and in the main adopted by Scott and Giussani. They either give up the problem as insoluble or, like Schomann, Hirzel, and J. B. Mayor, offer suggestions of their own which, however, are not more convincing. It may be well to point out what its advocates do not explicitly emphasise that by the hypothesis of Lachelier and Scott the eternity of gods in the past as well as in the future seems to be implied. These ideals of wisdom and virtue must always have existed. If they are not perishable, neither are they generable. In a universe without purpose or plan, in which every thing is brought about by blind physical forces, this is indeed surprising. It might well have been thought that Epicurus, of all men, would be the least likely to call upon faith to redress the balance of reason and introduce as articles of belief conclusions rejected by science. But if he reasoned in the way suggested by Scott and Giussani, what he did virtually comes to this. Our experience of this world shows us beings generable and perishable. From this he is supposed to take a gigantic step; to our experience of this world he adds "and by analogy of all worlds. There are no immortal beings, then, in any one of the infinite worlds. But we have the preconception of a blessed and immortal being. Therefore, such is supposed to be his strange conclusion we are bound to believe that immortal beings exist, and, though the worlds are used up, there still remain the intermundia. Verily, the credulity of a materialist and an empiricist is not to be surpassed by the imaginative flights of all the idealists. The scoffer might well be excused his frivolous jest that Epicurus pensioned off the gods into the intermundia. The Athenian sage may have come to such conclusions on such reasoning, but the cautious inquirer will not commit himself until he receives better evidence than has hitherto been adduced.

However this may be, the letter to Menceceus lays down with clear-

ness and consistency the views of the master on the popular religion. He claims for him self and for all other dissentients from the national faith freedom of conscience, and he further claims that disbelief in the popular theology is yet compatible with true piety. "For verily there are gods," he there says, "and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them," the notions, namely, of blessedness and immortality. "Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them, is truly impious." Such a statement reveals the courageous free-thinker. He is not content with criticising the current polytheism, with its immoral fables and lying legends; he is not content with denouncing the doctrine of Providence as false and absurd. He assumes the offensive and brands as impious the acceptance of the beliefs which he rejects. It is the firm conviction that the popular religion was a degrading superstition, enslaving men's minds and causing the greatest evils; it is this which lends to the denunciations of Lucretius their moral earnestness and impassioned fervour. The origin of religion he traced, as Epicurus had done before him, to ignorance and fear. Primitive man, knowing nothing of the true causes of natural phenomena, chose to ascribe them to higher powers and naturally lived in awe and terror, ever dreading the interference of incalculable beings so mighty to harm. Lucretius expands the idea thus: "They would see the system of heaven and the different seasons of the year come round in regular succession, and could not find out by what causes this was done; therefore, they would seek a refuge in handing over all things to the gods and supposing all things to be guided by their nod. And they placed in heaven the abodes and realms of the gods, because night and moon are seen to roll through heaven, moon, day and night and night's austere constellations and night-wandering meteors of the sky and flying bodies of flame, clouds, sun, rains, snow, winds, lightning, hail, and rapid rumblings and loud threatful thunder-claps. O hapless race of men, when that they charged the gods with such acts and coupled with them bitter wrath! What groanings did they then beget for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for our children's children! No act is it of piety to be often seen with veiled head to turn to a stone and approach every altar and fall prostrate on the ground, to sprinkle the altars with much blood of beasts and link vow on to vow, but rather to be able to look on all things with a mind at peace. For when we turn our gaze on the heavenly quarters of the great upper world and ether fast above the glittering stars, and direct our thoughts to the courses of the sun and moon, then into our breasts burdened with other ills that fear as

well begins to exalt its reawakened head, the fear that we may haply find the power of the gods to be unlimited, able to wheel the bright stars in their varied motion; for lack of power to solve the question troubles the mind with doubts, whether there was ever a birth-time of the world, and whether likewise there is to be any end; how far the walls of the world can endure this strain of restless motion; or whether, gifted by the grace of the gods with an ever lasting existence, they may glide on through a never-ending tract of time and defy the strong powers of immeasurable ages. Again, who is there whose mind does not shrink into itself with fear of the gods, whose limbs do not cower in terror, when the parched earth rocks with the appalling thunderstroke and rattlings run through the great heaven? Do not people and nations quake, and proud monarchs shrink into themselves, smitten with fear of the gods, lest for any foul transgression or overweening word the heavy time of reckoning has arrived at its fullness? When, too, the utmost fury of the headstrong wind passes over the sea and sweeps over its waters the commander of a fleet, together with his mighty legions and elephants, does he not draw near with vows to seek the mercy of the gods and ask in prayer with fear and trembling a lull in the winds and propitious gales; but all in vain, since often caught up in the furious hurricane he is borne none the less to the shoals of death? So constantly does some hidden power trample on human grandeur and is seen to tread under its heel and make sport for itself of the renowned rods and cruel axes. Again, when the whole earth rocks under their feet and towns tumble with the shock or doubtfully threaten to fall, what wonder that mortal men abase themselves and make over to the gods in things here on earth high prerogatives and marvellous powers sufficient to govern all things?"<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, then, no prayers, no vows, no presage of the future ought to find a place in religion as conceived by Epicurus. The worship which alone he approves is such joyous reverence as the human spirit, unmoved by hope or fear, spontaneously and disinterestedly proffers to superhuman excellence and eternal blessedness. If fear is the basis of superstition as Petronius tersely puts it, "it was fear that first made gods in the world" then freedom from fear must be the work of enlightenment. It is as the saviour and deliverer of mankind that Epicurus is acclaimed by the Roman poet. "If we must speak as the acknowledged grandeur of the theme itself demands, a god he was, a god, most noble Memmius, who first found out that plan of life which is now termed wisdom, and who by trained skill rescued existence from such great billows and

---

20 Lucretius, V, 1183 sqq.

such thick darkness.”<sup>21</sup> “Soon as thy philosophy, issuing from a godlike intellect, has begun with loud voice to proclaim the nature of things, the terrors of the mind are dispelled, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things in operation throughout the whole void; the divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes, which neither winds do shake nor clouds drench with rains nor snow, congealed by sharp frost, harms with hoary fall; an ever cloudless ether of ercanopies them, and they laugh with light shed largely around. Nature, too, supplies all their wants and nothing ever impairs their peace of mind. But, on the other hand, the Acherusian quarters are no where to be seen, though earth is no bar to all things being descried which are in operation underneath our feet throughout the void. At all this a kind of godlike delight mixed with shuddering awe comes over me to think that nature by thy power is laid thus visibly open, is thus unveiled on every side.”<sup>22</sup> Epicurus directs his searching glance over the entire universe. In the tranquil abodes of the divinities he descries an external heaven, but nowhere can he find an external hell. The Homeric Olympus was the creation of the poet’s fancy and not the picture of any mountain summit within his experience. Even more aloof from all possible, as well as actual, experience is the philosopher’s lucid interspace of world and world, Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind, Nor ever falls the least white star of snow, Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans, Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar Their sacred everlasting calm.

With the rival school of the Stoics Epicurus agrees in holding that the true hell is the life of the wicked here upon earth. The only difference is that the Stoics emphasised the moral degradation of the sinner, the feelings of shame, the loss of self-respect, the consciousness of failure to attain man’s proper end, while Epicurus dwells most upon the boding fear of punishment and the terror of a guilty conscience. In a fine passage Lucretius at once ridicules and allegorises the current fables of punishment inflicted on the guilty in the unseen world.

“And those things, sure enough, which are fabled to be in the deep of Acheron, do all exist for us in this life. No Tantalus, numbed by groundless terror, as the story is, fears, poor wretch, a huge stone hanging in air; but in life rather a baseless dread of the gods vexes mortals: the fall they fear is such fall of luck as chance brings to each. Nor do birds eat a way into Tityos laid in Acheron, nor can they, sooth to say, find, during eternity, food to peck under his large breast. However huge the bulk of body he extends, though such as to take up with outspread limbs not

21 Lucretius, V, 7 sqq.

22 Lucretius, III, 14 sqq.

nine acres merely, but the whole earth, yet will he not be able to endure everlasting pain and supply food from his own body forever. But he is for us a Tityos, whom as he grovels in love vultures rend and bitter, bitter anguish eats up or troubled thoughts from any other passion do rive. In life, too, we have a Sisyphus before our eyes, who is bent on asking from the people the rods and cruel axes, and always retires defeated and disappointed. For to ask for power which, empty as it is, is never given, and always in the chase of it to undergo severe toil, this is forcing uphill with much effort a stone which, after all, rolls back again from the summit and seeks in headlong haste the levels of the plain. Then to be ever feeding the thankless nature of the mind, and never to fill it full and sate it with good things, as the seasons of the year do for us, when they come round and bring their fruits and varied delights, though after all we are never filled with the enjoyments of life, this, methinks, is to do what is told of the maidens in the flower of their age, to keep pouring water into a perforated vessel which, in spite of all, can never be filled full. Moreover, Cerberus and the furies and yon privation of light are idle tales, as well as all the rest, Ixion's wheel and black Tartarus belching forth hideous fires from his throat: things which nowhere are nor, sooth to say, can be. But there is in life a dread of punishment for evil deeds, signal as the deeds are signal, and for atonement of guilt, the prison and the frightful hurling down from the rock, scourgings, executioners, the dungeons of the doomed, the pitch, the metal plate, torches; and even though these are wanting, yet the conscience-stricken mind through boding fears applies to itself goads and frightens itself with whips, and sees not, meanwhile, what end there can be of ills or what limit, at last, is to be set to punishments, and fears lest these very evils be enhanced after death. The life of fools at length becomes a hell here on earth.<sup>23</sup>

The Epicureans were never tired of arguing against the conception of God as either Creator or Providence, against divine interference with the course of nature, either to create, to sustain, or to destroy. On these points their chief antagonists were the Stoics, but they argued just as fiercely against the Peripatetics, who denied Providence, upheld the eternity of the world, and yet maintained that nature in all her operations is unconsciously working to an end. On the analogy of any product of human ingenuity, the work of creation implies tools, levers, machines, agents, and materials. How, it is asked, could air, fire, water, and earth have been obedient and submissive to the architect's will? Besides, if this work began at any point in time, why did the Creator refrain from creating until just that instant, and what was his motive for starting then?

---

23 Lucretius, III, 977 sqq.

What delight can the Creator find in the variety of his work? And if it be a delight, why was he able to dispense with it for so long? If the work was undertaken for the sake of man, it has failed in its object, so far, at least, as the unwise majority of men are concerned.<sup>24</sup> Lucretius puts these arguments as follows:

“To say that for the sake of men they have willed to set in order the glorious nature of the world, and, therefore, it is meet to praise the work of the gods, calling as it does for all praise, and to believe that it will be eternal and immortal, and to invent and add other figments of the kind, Memmius, is all sheer folly. For what advantage can our gratitude bestow on immortal and blessed beings, that for our sakes they should take in hand to administer aught? And what novel incident should have induced them, hitherto at rest, so long after to desire to change their former life? For it seems natural he should rejoice in a new state of things, whom old things annoy; but for him whom no ill has befallen in times gone by, when he passed a pleasant existence, what could have kindled in such a one a love of change? Did life lie grovelling in darkness and sorrow until the first dawn of the birthtime of things? Or what evil had it been for us never to have been born? Whoever has been born must want to continue in life so long as fond pleasure shall keep him; but for him who has never tasted the love, never been on the lists of life, what harm not to have been born? Whence, again, was first implanted in the gods a pattern for begetting things in general as well as the preconception of what men are, so that they knew and saw in mind what they wanted to make? And in what way was the power of first-beginnings ever ascertained, to know what could be effected by a change in their mutual arrangements, unless nature herself gave the model for making things? But if I did not know what first-beginnings of things are, yet this, judging by the very arrangements of heaven, I would venture to affirm, and, led by many other facts, to maintain that the nature of things has by no means been made for us by divine power, so great are the defects with which it is encumbered.”<sup>25</sup>

Philosophic criticism of the popular faith was no new thing in Greece. It began with Xenophanes, was rampant in the age of the sophists and was indorsed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. As a rule, the ancients were remarkably tolerant in matters of religious belief. The prosecutions of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates at Athens were primarily political, and in succeeding centuries even avowed atheism entailed little personal risk. The Epicureans were not unwilling to join in the services of the national religion, and did not hesitate to claim that their views were

24 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, cc., VIII, IX.

25 Lucretius, V, 156-159, 165-186, 195-199.



more consistent with true piety than those of their rivals the Stoics. Their polytheism, at any rate, was sincere, and they could dispense with the artifices and allegorical interpretations by which the one living universe was converted into a hierarchy of personified natural forces. At the same time, they were free to maintain their negative attitude, to denounce and ridicule as superstitious what ever in the current beliefs was inconsistent with their own fundamental assumptions.

It is not easy to determine precisely the standing and influence which this school of free-thinkers obtained in the Greek world. It is quite certain that Epicurus, in his own lifetime, succeeded in awakening public interest and winning wide popularity, that after his death his adherents grew and multiplied, and that the question why there were so many Epicureans was constantly propounded and variously answered. We hear of jealousy and enmity between them and rival schools, but only once or twice is there any suggestion of persecution on religious grounds. At the beginning of the second century B.C. it is asserted that some Epicureans who had taken refuge at Lyttos, in Crete, were banished by a decree, which denounced them as enemies of the gods, men who had invented a womanish, ignoble, and disgraceful philosophy. The decree went on to threaten any of them who dared to return with a horrible death by torture. At Messene a similar decree outlawed the Epicureans as defilers of the temples and a disgrace to philosophy through their atheism and indifference to politics. They were ordered to be beyond the borders of Messene before sunset and the magistrates were directed to purify the city and shrines from all traces of the heretics.<sup>26</sup> It is highly probable that these are isolated cases of political rancour, and that the chief count in the indictment was not atheism, but indifference, that is, refusal to become the subservient tools of some political faction, the odium theologicum being invoked by the winning side against irreconcilable foes. At Rome, where politics was so closely bound up with religion, the profession of Epicureanism never exposed any one to pains or penalties. The circle of Cicero's friends included several convinced Epicureans, who enjoyed universal esteem. Such were his correspondent Atticus and Cassius, one of the conspirators against Caesar. The poem of Lucretius, again, exerted a powerful influence, as is seen in the evident leaning of both Virgil and Horace toward the system which he had so passionately advocated. Two centuries later Lucian gives us a vivid narrative of events in Paphlagonia, which show the Epicureans of that district to have been as fearless enemies of superstition as Epicurus or Lucretius himself

---

26 Suidas, *Lexicon*, s.v. "Epicurus."

could have desired.<sup>27</sup> A certain Alexander laid claim to prophetic powers and established his oracle at Abonuteichos. The fame of his responses, his growing power and influence, which extended even to Rome, the tricks and impostures by which he deluded those who consulted him and the violent measures which he took to put down all opposition may be read in the pages of Lucian and formed the subject of one of Froude's "Short Studies." The enemies with whom Alexander waged relentless war were the Christians and the Epicureans. Both alike he denounced as atheists, excluding them from his oracle and from the festivals which he had founded. Moreover, by his orders on a public occasion, the golden maxims of Epicurus were burnt and their ashes flung into the sea. The claims of this impostor were tacitly recognised by the Neo-Platonists, Neo-Pythagoreans, and Stoics, and, as Lucian shrewdly observes, his knaveries would have imposed upon any man who was not an intrepid inquirer after truth. Among philosophers a Democritus, Epicurus, or Metrodorus would alone have been his match, because the suspicions which such pretensions to the miraculous naturally excite would, in their case, have been fortified by the reasoned conviction that the laws of nature are invariable and admit of no capricious interference. Lucian, as his writings show, was an adherent of no philosophical school. His satire is directed against all impartially and his testimony to the important services rendered by Epicureans in the cause of truth and honesty is all the more valuable on this account. He hated charlatans as heartily as Voltaire. From some details which he mentions it may be inferred that Alexander's influence was at its height during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and while the Stoic emperor was engaged in his campaigns against the Marcomanni, 170-175 A.D.

Curiously enough, recent excavation has furnished indisputable evidence of Epicurean activity during the same century in another part of Asia Minor. In the year 1884 two French scholars, Holleaux and Paris, discovered inscriptions on the walls of the market-place of the obscure Pisidian town (Enoanda). They were copied in 1889 and again in 1895, and by publication since have been made generally accessible to scholars.<sup>28</sup> They reveal a striking story. Diogenes of (Enoanda was a zealous Epicurean teacher, who seems to have devoted his life to the exposition of his system. When advancing years and the premonitions of disease

<sup>27</sup> Lucian, *Alexander Pseudomantis*.

<sup>28</sup> *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellenique*, Vol. XVI, pp. 1-76; Vol. XXI, pp. 346-443; an annotated edition was published by Teubner in 1907, under the title *Diogenis Enoandensis Fragmenta ordinavit et explicavit Johannes William*. See also the commentary of Usener, in *Rheinisches Museum*, Vol. 47.

warned him of his approaching end he determined, as he tells us, to make one last appeal to his countrymen in a permanent form on behalf of the cause which he had so much at heart. His motives were twofold. In the first place, he had a genuine desire to benefit humanity at large, not only his contemporaries, but posterity and the casual strangers who might visit the place. But we will quote his own words: "This writing shall speak for me as if I were present, striving to prove that nature's good, viz., tranquillity of mind, is the same for one and all. There is another reason for my setting up the inscription. Old age has now brought me to the sunset of my life and on the verge of departure; while acclaiming with a paean the consummation of my pleasures, I wish now, before it is too late, to succor the discerning. If it were one or two or three or four or five or six or as many as you like of such, but not too many, who were in evil plight, I might have visited each individually and tendered them the best advice as far as in me lay.

But the vast majority of men suffer from the plague of false opinions and the number of victims increases for in mutual emulation they catch the contagion one from another, like sheep. Moreover, it is right to succour those who shall come after us, for they, too, belong to us, though as yet unborn; and it is also a dictate of humanity to help the strangers who sojourn among us. Since, then, the succour of an inscribed writing reaches a greater number, I wish to make use of this portico to exhibit in a public place the remedy which brings salvation. For thus I banish the vain terrors which hold us in subjection, eradicating some pains altogether and confining such as are due to nature within very moderate bounds and reducing them to the smallest dimensions."<sup>29</sup> He had a further motive which the course of the inscription makes sufficiently obvious, viz., to put on record an effective answer to all the adversaries of the Epicurean system. He proceeds to refute in detail the views of Socrates, who is taken as a type of all who declined to study natural science, the Heraclitean doctrine of flux and universal relativity, the early Ionians, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus, and finally the Stoics. The reader is entreated not to be content with a casual glance at the inscription, but to give it an attentive study. The author's enthusiasm and honesty of purpose are obvious, but his scholarly attainments were hardly adequate to his design, or he would never have fallen into the mistake of attributing to Aristotle himself the universal relativity which that philosopher refutes as a doctrine of Heraclitus. Even in regard to the system which he professed he seems to have been misinformed on some minor points. It was the ethical theory which he apprehended best and valued most. The

---

29 Diogenes (Enoandensis Fragmenta, Fragment I (William).

circumstances under which his singular intention was formed and carried out are sufficient proof that in his day Epicureanism had its propaganda and was a living force, and that here, as else where, it was promulgated first and foremost as a rule of life, a means of escape from human misery.