

Cicero as a Source for Epicurus  
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Cicero's writings are often cited as key sources for learning about the philosophy of Epicurus. In the last years of his life Cicero hatched an impressive project to bring philosophy, which had to that point been a discipline conducted entirely in Greek, into Latin. Cicero's philosophical project included examining some of the more popular ideas in circulation, discussing their content and criticizing or accepting them as Cicero himself saw fit. This was by no means a merely intellectual project nor was Cicero scrupulously impartial towards the various ideas he took up. Cicero's philosophy was answerable to his concerns as a Roman, in particular with the declining fate of the Roman republic. Though he has often been viewed as a faithful transmitter of the Greek ideas he took—if a somewhat unoriginal philosopher—in fact he does not give balanced treatment to everything he considers. Here in this paper I point out the ways Cicero mishandles Epicurean ideas and argue that he held concerns both political and literary that led him to systematically undervalue Epicurus's philosophical merits. Epicurean philosophy suffers from a combination of prejudice and neglect in Cicero's writings and as a result is very probably misrepresented in some important ways. Needless to say this has consequences for how scholars rate Cicero as a source for Epicureanism. The confidence that Cicero is sometimes shown needs to be re-thought as my conclusions call for a more skeptical appraisal of Cicero and therefore a relatively cautious use of him as a source.

This may be somewhat discouraging for those interested in the philosophy of Epicurus. Sources of Epicurus's philosophy are scarce. Although Epicurus was the writer of some forty treatises, according that is to the scholiast Diogenes Laertius, none of these survive except in a few unhelpful fragments. All that remains of his oeuvre are the three

letters to disciples and two collections of short aphorisms. For the most part these are all intended to provide the rudiments of Epicurus's philosophy to students of an introductory level or perhaps as aids to more sophisticated followers, and they rarely do more than that. The lack of sources means scholars face an immediate difficulty getting a purchase on Epicurus. Hence the sources we do have become all the more valuable and it may appear like I am reducing our information about Epicurus. But there is substantial reason to doubt the integrity of Cicero's understanding of Epicurus and as I think will come out in what follows the insight into Epicurus that Cicero would add (if he could be taken in absolute trust) is actually quite limited. Furthermore suspicion about Cicero's reliability does not begin with me. Although Cicero is often cited in contemporary scholarship because of the dearth of actual Epicurean sources, scholars are divided deeply over Cicero's trustworthiness as a source for Epicurus. Long and Sedley contend that Cicero is a trustworthy and charitable *transmitter* of Epicurus; whereas, Gosling and Taylor complain that "Cicero is clearly unsympathetic to Epicurus, and while he obviously finds it difficult to make sense of him, he is not predisposed to try too hard."<sup>1</sup> Given the disagreement over Cicero and given that his prolific and crucially extant output guarantees his near ubiquity in research related to classical philosophy, I think it's worthwhile to examine Cicero's quality as a source for Epicurus.

Reading those passages in Cicero that deal with Epicurus against the background of our extant Epicurean documents can be a fruitful exercise. I make a number of observations from evaluating Epicurus in Cicero relative to our certainties about Epicurus found in the three letters, *Kuriiai Doxai* and Vatican Sayings. What stands out has less to do with discrepancies between what Cicero reports and what Epicurus said as much as

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<sup>1</sup> Gosling and Taylor *The Greeks on Pleasure* pg. 384

what Cicero leaves out. In fact neglect to a considerable extent characterizes Cicero's treatment of Epicurus. In section one I exposit the differences I think there are between Epicurus and Cicero's Epicurus and queries the purpose of Cicero's writings about Epicureanism. What kind of interest does Cicero take in reporting Epicurean ideas? Sections two and three give two overlapping explanations of Epicurus in Cicero's philosophical writings. Section four assesses the consequences for confidence in Cicero as source for Epicurus.

## **I. Epicurus in Cicero**

What follows in this section is a list of reasons of why I think that Cicero has uncharitable motivations towards Epicurus and supporting evidence for these reasons. There are in general three points: 1) the unfair formal presentation Epicureanism receives in the dialogues 2) Cicero's reliance on relatively primitive sources for Epicureanism 3) the frequency of negative portrayals and *ad hominem* towards Epicurus, Epicureans and Epicureanism.

### *I.1 Formal Considerations*

Epicurus shows up at length in three of the Cicero's dialogues: *De Finibus*, *De Natura Deorum* and *Tusculanae Disputationes*. In addition there are mentions of

Epicurus or Epicureans in *De Legibus*<sup>2</sup>. In all three of the lengthier discussions Epicureanism is presented first, through the speech of an interlocutor who identifies with the Epicurean school. These three dialogues where Epicurus appear follow similar plots: after an introduction to the dialogic setting and theme the Epicurean summarizes the position of his school, next the other interlocutor criticizes the Epicurean doctrines and then offers his own which make up the shortcomings and inaccuracies of the Epicurean ideas. To take *De Finibus* as an example, the dialogue begins with Cicero, the author, outlining his reasons for writing on the topic of the human end, including an interesting defense of doing so in Latin, he briefly introduces the positions of the Epicurean, Stoic and Academic schools (giving, in fact, a negative appraisal of Epicureanism at this early point).<sup>3</sup> Then Cicero, speaking for himself, gives a brief outline of a polemic against Epicurean ethics, cosmology and logic. After this the Epicurean interlocutor, Torquatus, speaks in 28-72 which is followed by Cicero's criticism from II.1 to II.119 (the whole of book two). Thus the presentation of Epicureanism is sandwiched between criticisms. In *De Finibus* both exposition and criticism of Epicurus are organized according to the four-fold division of philosophy embraced by Stoic and Academic (but not Epicurean) philosophers. Afterwards Stoic and Academic views are presented in books three and four each getting about twice the space allotted to the exposition of Epicureanism.

The relatively small space allocated to the Epicurean in *De Finibus* is representative of the other two dialogues. The presentation of Epicurean theology and cosmology in *De Natura Deorum* runs from 43 to 57 in book one. This is pitifully short considering that the Stoic and Academic section comprise two books. Cicero devotes the

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<sup>2</sup> I argue that Epicureanism appears in *De Legibus* implicitly in 1.39-52.

<sup>3</sup> This is *DF* I.17-26

majority of book one to Cotta's criticism of the briefly given Epicurean view. This negative section extends from 57 to line 124, which ends book one, adding up to nearly five times the length of the positive section that it challenges. Epicurus's role in *Disputationes Tusculanae* is likewise to play the part of foil. Epicurean views on the alleviation of distress are given in III.32,33 and then refuted in 34-51. Epicurus's view of happiness is expressed in V.26 and developed in 88-117, then criticized in 28-31 and again 119-120. Cicero intersperses his presentation of Epicurean views with criticism in 93-117. Criticism is the final word for all the Epicurean views entertained in the dialogues; never does Cicero find in Epicurus any idea that he finds meritorious.

Perhaps the Epicurean interlocutors might have a larger speaking part if Cicero allowed them the same chance to criticize and rebut that Stoics and Academics have. To be sure Cicero does include a few Epicurean criticisms in the dialogues. The only place where these are fully articulated and directed at the non-Epicurean interlocutor is in *De Natura Deorum* where Epicurus's rejections of fate and divination are raised.<sup>4</sup> These two criticisms as well as the entirety of Epicurean theology are then lengthily dismissed by Cotta—who represents the Academic school. The Epicurean polemic is given in lines 54-56 and merely sets out the main idea without arguing for it *ad extendum*. Cicero gives the other schools, by contrast, opportunity to reply to Epicurean ideas. They are treated in a spirit of charity and with real interest. Epicurus is not extended either.

## *1.2 Neglect of Sophisticated Views*

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<sup>4</sup> ND I.51-56

It is fairly striking how seldom the Epicurean ideas Cicero reports go beyond what is preserved in the more rudimentary texts. Though Epicurus was a prolific author and his followers no less active in writing philosophy, the picture of Epicureanism that Cicero provides appears to heavily rely on relatively basic overviews of Epicureanism and is lacking many important aspects of Epicurean thought. Scholars have limited insight into the sources Cicero used throughout the period he wrote these compositions. It is likely that Cicero depended on synopses sent to him by correspondence with educated friends. What his sources were for Epicureanism can only be guessed. Sometimes scholars suggest that Epicurus's essay *On the End*, probably summarized, might have been used for book one of *De Finibus*; otherwise, it is usually suggested that Cicero relied on summaries of Stoic or Academic writers (especially Posidonius and Antiochus) to get information about Epicureanism. If that is the case his knowledge of Epicureanism would have been doubly mediated: once by the Stoic or Academic writer and again by the summarizer. At least the first of these two is likely to be critical of the Epicurean doctrines and have recorded them in a polemical setting.

The majority of direct quotations or explicit paraphrases of Epicurus that Cicero uses come from the *Kuriai Doxai*. Most other direct citations are other aphorisms credited to Epicurus. He does not appear to reference any of Epicurus's mature works, even though were he in fact motivated to disinterestedly convey Epicurean teachings, he would have reason to do so. This lapse becomes obvious in *De Finibus* where Cicero takes on Epicurean cosmology and logic. He reports the basics of the Epicurean position on both: atomistic materialism and dismissal of the latter as unimportant. Cicero dismisses both of these positions without giving Epicurus's reasons for them. His treatment of Epicurean

logic is especially blithe. While he remarks that Epicurus has substantiated his denial of traditional logic and given an alternative view Cicero does not report the specifics of either nor does he see himself obligated to do so. He is aware that He has brought up one of Epicurus's sophisticated opinions but puts it down without further ado.

In fact there are vast stretches of Epicurean thought that Cicero fails to even mention. Cicero mainly sticks to reporting Epicurus's ethical beliefs. While this may not be out of place considering that Cicero's primary interest in philosophy was ethical, but Epicureanism was a widely reputed contender in the epistemological debates that were of considerable importance in the philosophy of this period. Cicero did devote a dialogue to epistemology, *Academica*, and it does not so much as mention Epicurean perspectives. Likewise the example just given from *De Finibus* of Cicero's casual treatment of Epicurean cosmology and logic fails to delve into Epicurus's extensive teachings about both subjects. If the detailed speculations about natural phenomena and the cosmos in the letters to Herodotus and Pythocles are any sign, Epicurus had a developed atomistic view that he believed could be applied to explain many physical processes. The letter to Herodotus also testifies to Epicurus's epistemological concerns including his empiricist beliefs. One can only wonder what his treatises were like, some of which—again relying on the table found in Diogenes Laertius—deal with the very same topic so hastily treated by Cicero.

### *1.3 Negative Portrayals*



The figure of Epicurus as well as his followers and his school all are subject to non-argumentative, negative portrayals. Frequently these are of an *ad hominem* nature, sometimes stereotyping Epicurus as vulgar or naïve. Aspersions are also cast on the content and intent of some prominent teachings of the school. These character attacks are often used fallaciously, that is, they are substituted for substantive argument and meant to persuade against Epicurus. At least it can be said that rhetorically these non-arguments have a persuasive effect. No corresponding language is put into the mouths of the Epicureans who appear in the dialogues nor, following the trend demonstrated already, do they get to defend their school or its founder.<sup>5</sup> These negative portrayals build up a misleading image of Epicureanism as prone to immorality and unintelligent and so constitute final evidence that Epicureanism is given an unfair presentation in the dialogues.

Epicurean philosophy is described as vulgar and aimed at attracting popular opinion. Cicero supposes hedonism has an easy appeal for most people since pleasure instantly gratifies, as such Epicureanism is the common denominator philosophy. Cicero says it lines up with what the average person already believes.<sup>6</sup> The charge of being favored by common people was no compliment in the ancient world: it implied appealing to base motives rather than moral suasion, of relying on rhetorical flourish instead of reasoned argument.<sup>7</sup> Hence Epicureanism must not match the other schools for rigor and

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<sup>5</sup> This assumes that Torquatus's lengthy peroration in I.71,72 praising the greatness of Epicurus does not qualify as defense against hostile portrayals since no such portrayals had yet been made—later Cicero's reply makes a few.

<sup>6</sup> *DF* I.5.13

<sup>7</sup> Indeed Cicero captures this attitude in *De Finibus* II.15.49-50 "I hold that what is popular is often positively base, and that, if ever it is not base, this is only when the multitude happens to applaud something that is right and praiseworthy in itself"

substance. The preface of *De Finibus* introduces Epicureanism as “what is easiest.”<sup>8</sup> The charge of vulgarity is also made once to accuse the Epicureans of trying to understand virtue as merely the content of popular opinion, casting the pearls of morality to the fickleness and ignobility of the multitude. Specifically Cicero in his reply to Torquatus alleges that since Epicureanism has no real use for the virtues the fact that they are endorsed anyways forces them to be conceived as strategies to court popular opinion.<sup>9</sup> Of course it is absolutely unworthy of a philosopher to curry favor with the mob, so if the Epicureans are to be saved from that kind of baseness they must admit that morality has intrinsic value.

The charge of vulgarity leveled at the philosophy has an analogue in similar attributions directed at the man. Epicurus himself is unfairly typed as uneducated and naïve. Epicurus’s moral character is never assailed and even praised by opponent interlocutors but these commendations hardly disguise repeated personal attacks on Epicurus. These attacks translate into criticisms of his school too since they typically allege that Epicurus taught what he did because of lacks in intelligence or education. My favorite of these personal attacks occurs early in *De Finibus* Cicero ridicules Epicurean cosmology and while wrapping up, attributes Epicurus’s belief in atomism to ignorance of geometry, saying:

It is also unworthy of a natural philosopher to deny the infinite divisibility of matter; an error that assuredly Epicurus would have avoided if he had been willing to let his friend Polynaëus teach him geometry instead of making Polynaëus himself unlearn it.

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<sup>8</sup> *DF* I.5.13.

<sup>9</sup> *DF* II.15.49-52

Democritus, being an educated man and well versed in geometry thinks the sun is of vast size; Epicurus considers it perhaps a foot in diameter for he pronounces it to be exactly as large as it appears, or a little larger or smaller. Thus where Epicurus alters the doctrines of Democritus—the atoms, the void, the images...is entirely derived from Democritus...For my own part I reject these doctrines altogether; but still I could with that Democritus whom everyone else applauds had not been vilified by Epicurus who took him as his sole guide.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Epicurus is passed off as a copier of complex doctrines he does not understand. Everything intellectually plausible and of merit that is found in his philosophy is taken from Democritus while the implausible elements are due to his untutored innovations. Intriguingly Cicero cites Epicurus as holding that the sun is really the size it appears to the eye—an incredible belief similar to what someone who knew no astronomy might believe. I propose below that this attribution is spurious: Epicurus never asserted anything like this. Cicero contradicts himself, however. On the one hand he accords Democritus a certain stature as a respectable thinker with reasonable beliefs that Cicero disputes, but at the same time he blithely says that no one who denies ‘the infinite divisibility of matter’ (i.e. subscribes to an atomist cosmology) has no right to the title ‘natural philosopher.’ Democritus, of course, was the original atomist, so if he deserves respect as an intellectual then atomism ought not be held in unqualified contempt. Certainly it is ludicrous to pass off an historic and thoughtful metaphysical position as disproved by basic knowledge of geometry.

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<sup>10</sup> *DF* I.6.20-21

This passage highlights another *argumentum ad hominem* directed not at the school but the man. Epicurus is routinely painted as unintelligent. In *De Finibus* I.6.20-21, quoted above, he is said to be uneducated. His lack of education does not only redound to his own ignorance but in the passage is contagious since it spreads to Polyaenus! Thus Epicurus's lack of knowledge is quite dangerous as it threatens to infect others. Epicurus employs an artifice that frequently coaxes reasonable men to turn to Epicurean follies: he dons "the mask of a philosopher."<sup>11</sup> He is wont to speak in an 'austere and noble air.'<sup>12</sup> And this gives him the appearance of a true philosopher, hiding the unsavoriness of his ethical teachings. This two-sidedness does not only touch what Epicurus says but extends to his actions also. Cicero emphatically acknowledges that Epicurus lived a good life, one that his Academic and Stoic rivals can approve of, and also contrasts the way he lived with what he officially taught.<sup>13</sup> Thus the picture that Cicero sketches of Epicurus, the man, shows a good man who is unable to see that his deeds and his words are in conflict. This is unworthy, Cicero observes, of a philosopher who not only lives the best life but has knowledge of the best life as well. Thus Epicurus is not a real philosopher and therefore his school is not a bonafide school of philosophy. The sub-textual suggestion is obviously that one should not waste time on Epicureanism.

Hedonist theories of ethics are usually prone to charges of sensualism and holders of these theories are likewise often viewed as indulgent sensualists. Cicero scrupulously affirms Epicurus's reputation as someone who had led a worthy philosophical life,<sup>14</sup> but his followers are not accorded the same stature. Epicurus may have been a good man but

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<sup>11</sup> *TD* V.26.73

<sup>12</sup> As quoted at length below *TD* III.20.46

<sup>13</sup> For example, *TD* II.28.44-45

<sup>14</sup> In fact, Cicero argues that the founders of all the major schools agreed on the right way of life, which he puts forward in *Disputationes Tusculanae* V.31.88.

the Epicureans are not. It is very easy to peg hedonist views as corrupting and there is evidence that Cicero views Epicureanism in this way. For one thing he has the opinion that Epicureans are fond of sensory pleasures. While he acknowledges Epicurus's teaching that the class of pleasures that are natural but unnecessary are indifferent, he nonetheless alleges that Epicureans are quite enamored with them.<sup>15</sup> Epicurus himself is spared the charge of debauchery, but his disciples are given over to it. This accusation cannot but taint the reputation of Epicureanism to moral seriousness and therefore diminish it as a valuable source of ethical instruction.

There are also a number of occasions where Cicero mischaracterizes Epicurus's beliefs, attributing to him propositions he most likely did not entertain. Perhaps the most striking occurs in *Disputationes Tusculanae* when Epicureanism is portrayed as at bottom sensualist:

Someone will say: What then? Do you think Epicurus meant that sort of thing, or that his views were licentious? I certainly do not. For I see that many of his utterances breathe an austere and many a noble spirit. Consequently, as I have often said the question at issue is his intelligence not his morality. However much he may scorn the pleasures he has just approved, yet I shall remember what it was that he thinks the highest good. For he has not only used the term pleasure but stated clearly what he meant by it. "Taste," he says, "and embraces and spectacles and music and the shapes of objects fitted to give a pleasant impression to the eyes." I am not inventing, I am not misrepresenting am I? I long to be refuted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *TD* V.33.94

<sup>16</sup> *TD* III.20.46

Notice first of all how this plays into Cicero's portrayal of Epicurus as morally virtuous but unintelligent. In this case the unintelligence is severe because he approves of pleasures that he also disdains, making out the highest good to be something he avoids. Much more egregious, however, is the quote that Cicero has offered as know-down proof that Epicureanism is ultimately permission to debauch. This is almost certainly a fake. Nothing in our extant Epicurean writings resembles it and there are passages that contradict it. Epicurus was clear that the best kind of pleasure is not similar to sensory indulgence, and in fact cautions against pursuit of pleasures that are neither natural nor necessary.<sup>17</sup> Treatment of the condition of tranquility that Epicurus takes to be concomitant with the highest good (or possibly itself the highest good) is conspicuously rare. Instead Cicero sees Epicureanism encouraging either outright sensualism, as in this excerpt, or more frequently as advocating a neutral state that is between pleasure and pain but belongs to neither. This second option is absurd; given that Epicurus teaches that the best life is most pleasant, he cannot equate a state devoid of both pleasure and pain with the highest good. From what we know through the Epicurean writings this latter option is not very likely either. Never does Epicurus mention the neutral state, and he clearly thinks that pleasure is an essential part of the good life. The common scholarly interpretations of Epicurus hold that he understood lack of pain in body and mind to unlock (perhaps along with contemplation) a unique philosophical pleasure.<sup>18</sup> All interpretations are uncertain and we have next to no window into the way later Epicureans thought until Lucretius. So it is also uncertain how those sympathetic to

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<sup>17</sup> For Example see *Kuriiai Doxai* 29

<sup>18</sup> Carlo Diano and John Rist are prominent scholars who take this view.

Epicurus understood the Epicurean ethical outlook. Even so I think it is reasonable to suppose that they neither took it to be sensual gratification or pursuit of an undifferentiated neutral state. Cicero appears to have misunderstood or taken interpretative liberties that led him astray.

*De Natura Deorum* accuses Epicurean philosophy of implicit atheism. Specifically Cotta, the Academic interlocutor, argues that Epicurean principles are fatal to religion and then proceeds to suggest both that Epicurean avowals of piety and worship of the gods are insincere and that Epicurus himself was secretly atheist.<sup>19</sup> The passage is therefore a blend of genuine argument and unreasoned deprecations of Epicureanism and its founder. Cotta seems to think that without the *do ut das* formula of Roman religion any belief in the gods is obviated. Epicurean theology (truly) teaches that the gods do not intervene in human affairs but instead live a purely contemplative life. They are self-sufficient and neither require nor desire worship from men. Moreover since they do not meddle in earthly happenings the key motivation behind ancient worship, homage for benefits received, disappears. Piety was often conceived as justice towards the gods giving them praise in exchange for material blessings. Epicurean theology does away with this rationale for worship but replaces it with another. The gods should be adored for their moral and formal excellence and not for services rendered. Since this is so different from the *quid pro quo* of ordinary Pagan worship it is not unthinkable that it might have appeared inimical to religion, but the shift in worship of the divine away from motivations of worldly benefit towards motivations of adoration of divine glory prevails in all the philosophical schools that took up theology. The Stoic interlocutor, Balbus, expounds lengthily on the theology of his school and dwells at length on the excellence

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<sup>19</sup> *Natura Deorum* I.115-124

of the divine form and the virtuousness of God, and he clearly expects that these are fitting inducements to worship. Yet Cotta does not interject or offer rebuttal. It is of course true that Balbus also sees humans as indebted to the gods for the benefits they receive and there is a consequent obligation to worship, but given that divine glory is allowed to be an independent impulse to reverence, Cicero is not permitted to dismiss the Epicurean view of worship out of hand, since it is motivated by just that.

This suffices to show that the attitude towards Epicurus in this passage is uncharitable but not distorting. However Cicero presses the worry he has about Epicurean theology subverting traditional religion to making out Epicurus himself as secretly irreligious:

Epicurus is making fun of us, though he is not so much a humorist as a loose and careless writer. For how can holiness exist if the gods pay no heed to man's affairs? Yet what is the meaning of an animate being that pays no heed to anything? It is doubtless true therefore truer to say as the good friend of us all, Posidonius, argued in the fifth book of his *On the Nature of the Gods*, that Epicurus does not really believe in the gods at all and that he said what he did about the immortal gods only for the sake of deprecating popular odium.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Epicurean theology becomes another concession to popular opinion, making Epicurus not only impious for what he actually believes but also vulgar for catering yet again to the trends of the majority. Of course Epicurus never offers any indication of atheism and does have good reason to encourage worship though this is basically ignored

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<sup>20</sup> ND I.44.123



by Cotta. In fact Epicurus's theology, while perhaps obviating some common forms of religious practice, in no way cancels belief in the gods or the religious instinct to worship. The conclusion that the Academic speaker reaches at the end of book one rests on more than a misunderstanding but on a wholesale mischaracterization of Epicurean theology. Cicero is familiar enough to correctly paraphrase the core tenets of Epicurean theological teachings, but simply ignores their meaning and instead launches a polemic that does not effectively counter Epicurus's doctrines.

I think it is clear from the preponderance of evidence that Cicero is unsympathetic to Epicureanism and what is more, not adequately familiar to set forth its more sophisticated ideas. If as most scholars believe Epicurus's particular brand of hedonism requires the relationship between complicated understanding of pleasure as more than a restoration to equilibrium or simply a euphoric feeling, then it seems reasonable to think the core ethical tenets of Epicureanism were not readily accessible without dedication. The sources Cicero used likely did not help. Perhaps if Cicero's sources had included more direct material either from the master himself or one of his followers, Italian or otherwise, he might have encountered a more complete (and more challenging) doctrine, but the evidence pertaining to Cicero's sources that exists suggests that direct material largely stayed out of the dialogues' composition.

#### *1.4 Summing up*

I think the weight of evidence shows that Cicero's interest in Epicurus is not academic. Cicero's purpose in writing philosophy often is understood to be exposing a

Latin audience to the multiform riches of Hellenistic philosophy and as a major school Epicureanism might be included in such a project, but clearly Cicero does not wish to present Epicurean ideas as serious philosophy. Rather I think it's clear that Cicero is not closely familiar with Epicurus and over the course of his philosophical project never makes efforts to become better acquainted. This is confusing if Cicero's purpose in writing philosophy is to dispassionately convey the major systems of Greek thought. This prompts the question: if Epicurean doctrines do not show up in the dialogues so Cicero can elucidate them, what are they doing there?

## **II. The Dialogues as Roman Literary Achievement**

The first argument I present in answer to this question offers a theory of what Cicero is doing translating philosophy into Latin in the first place. Cicero has to be placed in the context of the first and second century republic; he was a man of letters and in this period men of letters were concerned with the excellence of Latin language and literature over and against Greek. It was felt that Greek language and culture had achieved much more than Latin yet it was also felt that Latin language and Roman culture possessed qualities that made them nobler and more beautiful than any alternatives. Writers of this period had a literary agenda defined by two conflicting characteristics. They wanted to preserve the purity of Latin yet they also wanted to emulate the literary feats of the Greeks, which they could only do by relying on Greek works as models.

Moreover the Latin literary tradition in Cicero's day was nascent having gotten its start some 150 years prior to his lifetime. It traces its origin to the efforts of transplanted Hellenes—many of them captives from the Roman conquest of Greece (completed in 221 BCE)—who depended heavily on Greek forms. Their literary accomplishments were sometimes original (like Polybius's histories) but more often copies or imitations of Greek works. The next generation of Latin writers featured more foreigners. The two leading lights, Ennius from Calabria and Pacuvius from Brundisium—both cities on the Italian peninsula but not Latin speaking—continued the trend of adapting Greek literature for Roman audiences. The list of *literati* could be filled out with Terence, Plautus, Lucilius, Naevius and Statius Caecilius, all of them born outside of Rome usually in places that had been recently absorbed by Rome's burgeoning empire. Breaking this tendency Cato the elder from Tusculum wrote prolifically in his native Latin. Cicero's generation followed and inherited a relatively small and young literary tradition that thereto had diverged little from pre-existing Greek works. Cicero was a new kind of *literati*: upper class, educated partly in Latin while in Rome and partly in Greek overseas, and native to the Roman heartland. His ties to the Greek cultural world were posterior and subordinate to the Roman one. Cicero and his contemporaries would lay the cornerstone of classical Latin literature. These men included Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Sallust, Livy—all of whom developed their language by choosing to write original works that borrowed but also exceeded Greek models.

In Cicero's time, Latin was burdened with a need to prove itself capable of matching the accomplishments of Greek language and culture. I propose that it is plausible to see Cicero's philosophical project as fitting into this broader movement such

that one of Cicero's motivations for bringing philosophy into Latin is to accomplish in Latin what erstwhile had only been accomplished in Greek and in so doing enhance the creative scope of his language and culture and vindicate its unique excellence, showing it to be as good as Greek. Cicero has a personal attachment to the pursuit in philosophy. He spent in total six years of his youth studying in Athens and remarks frequently throughout his writings on the value of studying philosophy. He certainly is interested in communicating its value to a broader Roman public. The brilliant defense of philosophy he supplies in *Hortensius* makes this definite. Further his introduction to *De Finibus* provides some support for this hypothesis. He first provides an exhortation to the study of philosophy and then moves on to explain the need for doing so in Latin. When explaining his rationale for using Latin to discuss topics already found in Greek, he champions the capacity of Latin to express serious subjects and faults educated Romans who prefer reading Greek for neglecting the literary range of their native tongue.

A more difficult task is to deal with the objection of those who profess a contempt for Latin writings as such. What astonishes me first of all about them is this,—why should they dislike their native language for serious and important subjects when they are quite willing to read Latin plays translated word for word from the Greek? Who has such a hatred, one might say for the very name Roman, as to despise and reject the *Medea* of Ennius or the *Antiope* of Pacuvius and give as his reason that though he enjoys the corresponding plays of Euripides he cannot endure books written in Latin?...For to be entirely unversed in our own poets argues either the extreme of

mental inactivity or else a refinement of taste carried to the point of caprice. To my mind no one can be styled a well-read man who does not know our native literature.<sup>21</sup>

Cicero notes the existing accomplishments of other Roman writers who have brought versions of Greek works into the Latin language as proof that Latin suffices as a medium for good literature. Romans that have carried their helleno-*philia* to the point of holding Latin in contempt therefore do so without reason. Moreover they miss out on Latin's unique excellence to the point that they should be considered culturally inept instead of more refined.

The prologue to *De Finibus* dwells for some time on the debt owed to Greek achievements. Cicero does not propose that original philosophy can be found in the Roman world. Rather he is in line with the general trend of Roman writers in this period. Much like others he sees reliance on Greek models as inevitable. The translations of Greek originals in this period were not meant to be literal transmissions but rather translators attempted to latinize the style, meter and other features. The Roman poet Horace informs us that an ideal translator is not a *fidus interpretes*, a faithful or literal interpreter; in *Ars Poetica* he says, "In ground open to all you will win private rights, if you do *not* linger along the easy and open pathway, if you do *not* seek to render word for word as a *faithful translator*, and if in your copying you do not leap into the narrow well, out of which either *shame* or the laws of your task will keep you from stirring a step."<sup>22</sup> Literally translating is held to be un-effortful and therefore shameful activity. Cicero shared this attitude. In a passage from *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* he remarks "I did not

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<sup>21</sup> *DF* I.2.4,5

<sup>22</sup> Horace *Ars Poetica* 131-135 transl. H Rushton Fairclough

translate as a translator (*interpres*) but as an orator...in language which conforms to our usage. And in so doing, I did not translate word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language.”<sup>23</sup>

Cicero states in other places that he translates *non verbum sed vim* in other words not word for word but in order to keep the ‘force’ of what he translates where by force is meant something similar but different from meaning, more like the flavor of what was meant. Furthermore his famous translations of philosophical technical vocabulary from Greek into Latin also bear out this paradigm of translation. Over centuries of doing philosophy Greek accumulated a specialist vocabulary for dealing with concepts relevant to philosophy. In order to bring philosophy into Latin, Cicero needed to replicate this vocabulary. While at first glance, it appears that Cicero is coining Latin words that directly mirror the original Greek, in fact aesthetic concerns play an important role. It is evident that Cicero wants not only a Latin word that captures the meaning of the Greek but also one that permits the elegance of the language. Cicero will sometimes grasp around for an appropriate translation and reject words that give the meaning more or less accurately but don’t sound like good Latin. When elegant translations are not available he often apologizes to the reader for being forced to coin a term that doesn’t resemble perfect Latin. For example in *Natura Deorum* while translating the Greek word for ‘blessed’ (*makarios*) Cicero tries the unwieldy *beatitudo* before settling on the better but still not beautiful *beatas*. He apologizes that a more graceful word cannot be created.

This literary context provides reason to think that Cicero’s philosophical project includes ulterior motivations. Cicero speaks of his transmission of Greek philosophy as a service to his country and this is sometimes taken by scholars to be an impartial

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<sup>23</sup> Cicero *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* 14 transl. H.M. Hubbell

intellectual gift, as though he translated Greek philosophy for the benefit of philosophically interested Romans of any school. But he is not interested in philosophy just as a purely academic exercise. Cicero wants to show that Latin is good enough for the range of Greek culture, including philosophy for which Greece was considered the center. In order to vindicate Latin, then, Cicero could have felt it necessary to include the notable arguments of all the major schools. Epicureanism had a sizeable following amongst educated Romans and expatriate Hellenes living in Rome, and these would have constituted a segment of the philosophically interested public Cicero was writing for. So in order for Cicero to demonstrate Latin to be philosophically capable he needed to include Epicurus in the dialogues, showing that Latin was suited for discussing his school as well. Yet he would not have needed to be circumspect; the relative neglect Cicero extends to Epicureanism but not other schools is consistent with this explanation.

### **III. Philosophy in Service to the Republic**

The other part of Cicero's background that is relevant to understanding his motivations for translating philosophy is political. As is well known Cicero had a central role in many of the events during the twilight of the Roman Republic. Like many others Cicero attributed the republic's decline to a lapse in social mores.<sup>24</sup> Citizens were not fulfilling their duties to the state conscientiously; an alleged deficit in civic virtues was held responsible to the proliferation of civil strife. It must be emphasized that philosophy in antiquity was in the business of teaching people how to live morally exemplary lives.

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<sup>24</sup> The famous lament 'O tempus, O mores!' from *In Verrem* comes to mind.

Most schools took their primary purpose to be to provide answers to how best to live so ethics lies close to the heart of ancient philosophy. Accordingly there is an inherent interest for devotees of any particular school's ethical outlook to spread the doctrines of their school since these doctrines and these alone teach the correct way to live and those of other schools do not. This accounts for the internecine polemics that the different ancient schools exchanged with one another constantly. Cicero believed along with other philosophers in the tight link of philosophy with ethical life, and of course part of an ethical life is right relations towards civic affairs, so Cicero has a motive for promoting philosophical positions that he believes will instruct citizens to act justly towards one another in community. Given the problems facing the republic and given that Cicero saw these as stemming from the deterioration of social morality, this motive was urgent.

It is in light of these considerations that Cicero adopts a posture of removed hostility towards Epicurus. Cicero sees Epicureanism as selfish and a-social. Selfish on the grounds that the pursuit of pleasure will always cause one to select one's own desires as the only goal of action. The judgment that Epicurus opposes taking part in society is perhaps more fair. Epicurus seems to have advocated withdrawal from rather than participation in the ordinary life of city and family when this is possible. Of course these two traits combine in Cicero's mind, insofar as selfish behaviors are behaviors that do not benefit the republic. And Cicero makes Epicurus into a symbol for these kinds of behaviors. Frequently he uses descriptions for Epicurean ethics indicative of commerce. For example he writes in *De Legibus*:



So far however as those philosophers are concerned who practice self-indulgence are slaves to their own bodies and test the desirability or undesirability of everything on the basis of pleasure and pain, let us, even if they are right (for there is no need to quarrel with them here), bid them carry on their discussions in their own gardens, and even request them to abstain for a while from taking any part in matters affecting the state, which they neither understand nor have wished to understand.<sup>25</sup>

Though not explicitly named it is clear that this passage refers to Epicureans. The mention of ‘their own gardens’ alludes to the philosophical community that Epicurus founded in Athens. The presence of sensualist stereotyping, which we saw Cicero resort to often in the dialogues that feature Epicureanism, corroborates this. Of interest here is that he represents the Epicureans as wholly unsuited for political participation on the grounds that their only sense of value consists in weighing pleasure and pain.

Despite his stated avowal to avoid polemics, Cicero interjects criticisms directed at Epicureanism a few more times in *De Legibus*. In 1.42 the discussion has moved on to the priority of universal law over written laws and the necessity of the former to ground the duties people have to obey the latter. Epicureans fail to recognize this higher law since “everything is to be measured by self-interest” and “will ignore and break the laws when he can, if he thinks it will be to his own advantage.”<sup>26</sup> The charge of egocentrism is repeated together with a reference to assessing value by measuring utility. Cicero brings measurement up one more time in 1.49 criticizing “those who measure virtue based on

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<sup>25</sup> *DL* I.13.39

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

reward.”<sup>27</sup> Such an actor never really behaves virtuously since his motives are for himself. Cicero sees Epicureans as using a kind of pleasure calculus to navigate social relationships in place of relying on interpersonal virtues. The focus on evaluating conduct based on pleasure ultimately makes the self the reason for being in community. This is dangerous, Cicero thinks, to the longevity of a republic, which requires citizens to see their efforts as cooperating towards the common good.

In the dialogues that deal with Epicureanism Cicero goes into examples of exemplary figures from the historical and mythic past all of whom are intended to showcase how seemly it is to live for virtue’s sake than for oneself. What is striking is that Cicero considers these examples to be counterarguments to Epicureanism. These moral exemplars are meant to point out the superiority of virtue by itself as the basis of moral decision making and simultaneously show the pursuit of pleasure to be at odds with commendable action. Examples abound in *De Finibus and Disputationes Tusculanae*. In book two of the latter Cicero gives an expose on the endurance of pain. The opinions of philosophers who put forward pain as the greatest evil, including of course Epicurus, is set aside larger than life characters from myth, legend and historical tale. To these more credible examples are added sometimes using morally excellent figures from recorded history. Many of these examples feature battlefield grit and the ability to persevere for the sake of country and personal honor. Both of these are traits of an ideal republican. Epicurean aversion to pain, on the other hand, Cicero considers unfit for even a man, much less a citizen.

This explains the negative portrayals of Epicurus and his school found throughout the dialogues. Cicero considers Epicureanism to be a threat to the health of the republic.

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<sup>27</sup> DL I.28.49

It explains why he is tempted to misconstrue Epicureanism as sensualist when it is not and why he exaggerates elements in Epicureanism that do not accord with ordinary moral sensibilities. Perhaps it also explains why Cicero's main strategy of argument against Epicureanism is to paint ethical hedonism as dishonorable, since it is *honestum*, a word that simultaneously denotes social and personal virtue and honor, that such a view appears to make irrelevant to the good life. Furthermore Cicero's motivation for including Epicurus could have been more purely polemical. He may have intended to persuade Epicureans in his audience to adopt a more civically responsible belief and deter readers unaligned with any school from falling into the orbit of Epicureanism. Given that Epicureanism harms the republic Cicero would perhaps want to do both of these in order to lessen its corrupting influence on Roman citizens.

#### **IV. On the Reliability of Cicero**

Thus far I have surveyed how Cicero deals with Epicureanism in the philosophical dialogues and found a definite lack of charity both in his exposition and refutation. I think the sheer amount of evidence I have quoted puts out of question any assessment of Cicero's intentions that is impartial. Cicero is commonly viewed as having presented the jewels of Greek philosophy without prejudice as a service to his native Latin-speaking countrymen. While he does put high value on the study of philosophy and extols its potential benefits for the Roman public, I cannot believe that he includes Epicurus's philosophy as a disinterested service. It is clear to me from the considerations in section one that Cicero does not consider Epicureanism as a serious philosophy nor

does he want his readers to do so. Further I have given two plausible explanations for what Epicurus is doing in the dialogues.

I pointed out some ways in which Cicero's uncharitableness caused distortions in his presentation of Epicurean philosophy such as his portrayal of Epicureanism and Epicureans as essentially directed at debauchery. These distortions are outright falsehoods or false modifications of what Epicurus actually taught. If Cicero has distorted Epicurus in some ways, then it is possible that he has distorted him in others without our knowledge. The paucity of original sources for Epicurean philosophy renders us unable to corroborate much of what Cicero attributes to him. Since we know that Cicero cannot be relied upon for impartiality, we ought to take his description of Epicureanism with skepticism, especially when he reports beliefs for which we have little to no further confirmation.

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