

Epicureanism and politics

Rogério Lopes dos Santos*

Abstract: This article aims to present the relation that Epicureanism had with politics in Greece and Rome. Epicurus instructed his disciples to not participate in public life which meant to not participate in politics. We will discuss the reasons why he did so and whether his disciples accurately followed this teaching. Thus we use as bibliographic source the following books: (i) *Book X* from *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* of the Greek doxographer Diogenes Laertius; (ii) *Vatican Sayings; Principal Doctrines; Letter to Menoeceus* of Epicurus; and (iii) *On Nature of the Things (De Rerum Natura)*, the book of the Roman Epicurean poet Titus Lucretius Carus.

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EPICURUS AND THE GREEK POLITICS

Epicurus was born in 341 BC, *i.e.*, three years before the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BC), the Battle that initiated Macedonian rule over the Greek people. This means that Epicurus grew up in a period of decay in the Greek economy and politics: (i) of the economy because with the rise of Alexander (356/358 BC) the new commercial centre becomes Alexandria, and no longer Athens, and this causes poverty among the Greeks; (ii) of the politics because there is no longer autonomy among the Greeks in state affairs. Epicurus founds his school in Athens in 306 BC, *i.e.*, seventeen years after Alexander's death (323 BC). In this period Greek politics is subjugated to the interests of Alexander's generals: this is the main element to understanding Epicurus' position about the politics.

In *Book X* of the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius (III AD) says that: "He [Epicurus] carried deference to others to such excess [ὑπερβολῆ γὰρ ἐπιεικείας] that he did not even enter public life"

* Rogério Lopes dos Santos (✉)
Independent Scholar, Brazil
e-mail: rogeriolopes06@hotmail.com

(D.L. X. 10). About this *hyperbolic* (*excess, overkill*) *epieíkeia* it is worth considering the following: it means not only *modesty* or *honesty* (*epieíkeia*) *excessive*, but also a way of being *équo*, i.e., *right, fair, equitable* or *balanced*. That's because, according to Miguel Spinelli, the *epieíkeia* derives from *eikós* or *eikô*, so that it can designate: (i) “[...] a convenient way of doing [...]”; (ii) “[...] a convenient way of living [...]” (Spinelli 2009, 159). Thus, the affirmation of Diogenes Laertius may mean that Epicurus did not participate in political life because: (i) he would not act in such a way that he did not always keep on the path of *justice* (of *equity*); (ii) he would not live impartially in the face of injustice (Ibid.).

In his *Commentary* on §10 of the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Cyril Bailey opposes what Diogenes Laertius affirm. According Bailey: “The true reason for Epicurus’ abstention from political life was probably not his own ‘excessive modesty’, but his strong conviction that politics were destructive of ἀταραξία and therefore to be avoided” (Bailey 1926, 408). Indeed, the Bailey’s answer also makes sense. For Epicurus and the Epicureanism, the *end* (*télos*) of human action would be *ataraxia* (ἀταραξία): a pleasurable state arising from the absence of physical and mental suffering (Epicur. *Ep. Men.*, 131). This means that, for Epicurus, everything a human being does has as its ultimate goal the absence of disturbances. Well, political life in Greece has always been fraught with disturbance – regardless of Macedonian interference. So it is really possible that Epicurus’ disinterest from political life had one reason: to escape the disturbances that would undermine his life in *ataraxia*.

Bailey’s interpretation about Epicurus’ disinterest from political life also answers another question: would not be the interference from Macedonia the real cause of that Epicurus’ disinterest? The answer is definitely no! In his book *The Faith of Epicurus*, Benjamin Farrington answers that question with this reasoning:

[...] is commonly regarded as a symptom of the universal loss of interest in politics consequent on the subjection of the free Greek cities to Macedonian rule. This generalization hardly fits Epicurus. It suggests that if Athens had remained free, he might have become a politician (Farrington 1968, 17).

With Macedonia or without Macedonia: Epicurus would never be a politician. Epicurus never wished to manage the life of the *pólis*. Actually, Epicurus was interested in presenting to people how to

manage their own lives by themselves. This aspect of Epicurus' philosophy can be understood when we study the concept of *autárkeia*.

We can find the use of the *autárkeia* concept in two very important Epicurus texts: in the *Letter to Menoeceus* and in the *Vatican Sayings*. That is the statement of Epicurus in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

[...] we regard independence [*αὐτάρκεια*] of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win (*Ep. Men.*, 130).

And in *Vatican Sayings*: “The wise man who has become accustomed to necessities knows better how to share with others than how to take from them, so great a treasure of self-sufficiency [*αὐτάρκεια*] has he found” (Epicurus, *Sent. Vat.* 44). In both the *Letter to Menoeceus* and the *Vatican Sayings*, *autárkeia* has the meaning of *independence* or *self-sufficiency* from what is really not necessary for the maintenance of life. So *autárkeia* concerns a state of mind in which the epicurean does not feel dependent *e.g.*, on banquets or expensive clothes to feel happy (Epicurus, *Ep. Men.*, 132). In an economically bankrupt Greece, and consequently with a large number of hungry people, Epicurus' philosophical proposal emerges as a plausible answer to an immediate problem for the Greeks.

There is yet another aspect of Epicurean *autárkeia*. According to Spinelli:

From an ethical viewpoint (always in an altruistic sense), *autárkeia* designates a state of mind in which the individual sees himself as responsible for himself, as one who (with freedom and independence) must manage his destiny or his own life (Spinelli 2009, 83).

This “ethical viewpoint” about *autárkeia* results in a different (but parallel) interpretation of the other interpretations mentioned above: *independence* and *self-sufficiency*. From Spinelli's reflection we have the epicurean *autárkeia* as a kind of “self-management or self-care” (Ibid., 84). As self-management or self-care, epicurean *autárkeia* is about a state of mind in which human beings do not place the responsibility of their lives on the governance of the *pólis* but on themselves. That attitude is not intended to exempt politicians from their responsibilities. What this attitude intends is: (i) show that no one is responsible for our own happiness; (ii) show that *autárkeia* (*independence, self-sufficiency, self-management* or *self-care*) must

precede what is *common to all* (*koine nóesis*): “He [Epicurus] supposed that the needs and pretensions of the particulars, or rather of the individual (as nature), had to precede the claims of wholeness” (Ibid.).

For Epicurus, just as the *pólis* would not be responsible for men’s *self-care* (*autárkeia*), the religion Greek would not be responsible either. This is why Epicurus said: “It is pointless for a man to pray to the gods for that which he has the power to obtain by himself” (*Sent. Vat.*, 65). By the way, just as Epicurus was not against politics, he was not against religion. Epicurus was not an “atheist” (*átheos*), as Plutarch (*Mor.*, 1125A) and Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* I. I. 1; I. XI. 36; VI. VIII. 509) claimed. Epicurus’ belief in the gods is recorded in his *Letter to Menoeceus*: “For verily there are gods [...]” (*Ep. Men.*, 123). What Epicurus denied was the way the “multitude” conceived the gods: “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” (Ibid.). To the epicurean mentality, the impiety of the multitude rest in the fact that the majority conceives of the gods as beings responsible for the care of human life. This kind of mentality contradicted Epicurus’ idea of the gods: “A happy and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness” (*Sent.* I).

Anyway, Epicurus was not an atheist and did not even try to destroy religion because he was against the religious mode of the Greek tradition. What Epicurus wanted was to offer his disciples some ‘tools’ that could free them from religion and politics. Titus Lucretius Carus (99–54 BC) was a faithful follower of this point of the Epicurus’ philosophy, especially in the matters related to politics. We will prove it now.

LUCRETIUS AND THE ROMAN POLITICS

In Lucretius’ poem *De Rerum Natura* we find severe criticism of Roman politics. The severity of these criticisms is curious because it is a particular characteristic of Lucretius. Epicurus himself was not so severe with Greek politics – we affirm this from the remaining texts. Lucretius is also ‘original’ when he argues that life in society has corrupted human beings.¹ This defence becomes clear when we

¹ This thesis is not found either in the remaining texts of Epicurus.

analyse *Book V* of the poem *De Rerum Natura*. In that *Book*, Lucretius talks about the origin of the *universe* (*mundum*) and living beings. In the verses in which Lucretius expounds his History of Humanity he follows a line of reasoning very close to the line of reasoning used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), *i.e.*, that life in society has corrupted man.² For Lucretius, politics (or the desire for political power) is one of the elements that have corrupted man. Thus, in order to understand Lucretius' critique of Roman politics one must also understand his History of Humanity. So let's go to it.

Lucretius argues that the principle of life on Earth began with vegetables: "In the beginning, earth gave forth, around the hills and over all the length of plains, the race of grasses and the shining green [...]" (*Fragmenta nat.* 5. vv. 785). After vegetables came the animal life: "[...] the new Earth first of all put forth grasses and shrubs, and afterward begat the mortal generations, there up sprung – innumerable in modes innumerable" (*Ibid.*, vv. 790). Like vegetables, the first humans were born from the earth:

And hence, where any fitting spot was given, there' gain to grow womb-cavities, by roots affixed to earth. And when in ripened time the age of the young within (that sought the air and fled earth's damps) had burst these wombs, o then would Nature thither turn the pores of earth and make her spurt from open veins a juice like unto milk; even as a woman now is filled, at child-bearing, with the sweet milk, because all that swift stream of aliment is thither turned unto the mother-breasts (*Ibid.*, vv. 810-815).

Lucretius describes these early earth-born humans as "far hardier" than the humans of his time:

But mortal man was then far hardier in the old campaign, as well he should be, since a hardier earth had him begotten; build too was he of bigger and more solid bones within, and knit with stalwart sinews through the flesh, nor easily seized by either heat or cold, or alien food or any ail or irk. And whilst so many lustrums of the sun rolled on across the sky, men led a life after the roving habit of wild beasts (*Ibid.*, vv. 925-930).

Lucretius' early man was also itinerant because he had no land for cultivation: "Not then were sturdy guiders of curved ploughs [...]" (*Ibid.*, vv. 935). The reason he has no land is because: "[...] "none knew then to work the fields with iron, or plant young shoots in holes of delved loam [...]" (*Ibid.*). This early man was not concerned with plant

² See Edward Wayne Younkins. *Rousseau's "General Will" and Well-Ordered Society* (2005).

cultivation because he fed on things already existing in Nature: “What sun and rains to them had given, what earth of own accord created then, was boon enough to glad their simple hearts” (Ibid.). For Lucretius, early man’s only concern was the wild beasts: “But their care was rather that the clans of savage beasts would often make their sleep-time horrible for those poor wretches; and, from home driven, they’d flee their rocky shelters at approach of boar, the spumy-lipped, or lion strong” (Ibid., vv. 985). But the greatest fear of early men was not to lose their shelter but to be eaten by the beasts. Incidentally, the way Lucretius describes the death of those caught by the beasts is masterful:

Indeed, in those days here and there a man, more oftener snatched upon, and gulped by fangs, afforded the beasts a food that roared alive, echoing through groves and hills and forest-trees, even as he viewed his living flesh entombed within a living grave; whilst those whom flight had saved, with bone and body bitten, shrieked, pressing their quivering palms to loathsome sores, with horrible voices for eternal death – until, forlorn of help, and witless what might medicine their wounds, the writhing pangs took them from life (Ibid., vv. 990-995).

The verses 990-995 precede one of Lucretius’s harshest critiques of life in society. After describing the brutal way in which early men died, Lucretius sentences this: “But not in those far times would one lone day give over unto doom a soldiery in thousands marching on beneath the battle-banners [...]” (Ibid. vv. 1000). Lucretius is implacable when he contrasts the life of early man with the life of man in society: in the past men died by the claws and teeth of beasts; at present men die defending flags, kings or the maintenance of their government. Lucretius still proposes the following contraposition: “Again, was then that lack of food gave o’er men’s fainting limbs to dissolution: now ‘tis plenty overwhelms. Unwary, they oft for themselves would then outpour the poison; now, with nicer art, themselves they give the drafts to others” (Ibid. vv. 1005). Lucretius does not ‘skimp’ verses to denounce the corruption of human nature. The poet does not make it clear, but when we follow his arguments in *Book V* we get the idea that human corruption was born with wealth and the discovery of gold:

Kings began cities to found and citadels to set, as strongholds and asylums for themselves, and flocks and fields to portion for each man after the beauty, strength, and sense of each - for beauty then imported much, and strength had its own rights supreme. Thereafter, wealth discovered was, and gold was

brought to light, which soon of honour stripped both strong and fair. For men, however beautiful in form or valorous, will follow in the main the rich man's party (Ibid. vv. 1115-1110).

For Lucretius, human greed never had limits:

[...] men wished glory for themselves and power even that their fortunes on foundations firm might rest forever, and that they themselves, the opulent, might pass a quiet life – in vain, in vain; since, in the strife to climb on to the heights of honour, men do make their pathway terrible (Ibid. vv. 1120).

Lucretius' solution to greed for wealth and political power consists of two genuinely epicurean solutions: (i) the solution to greed for riches would be this: “[...] were man to steer his life by sounder reasoning, he'd own abounding riches, if with mind content he lived by thrift; for never, as I guess, is there a lack of little in the world” (Ibid. vv. 1115); (ii) the solution to greed for political power would be this: “[...] so better far in quiet to obey, than to desire chief mastery of affairs and ownership of empires. Be it so; and let the weary sweat their life-blood out all to no end, battling in hate along the narrow path of man's ambition [...]” (Ibid. vv. 1130). Lucretius' solution is genuinely epicurean because we can find these two solutions in Epicurus' own texts, more specifically in the *Vatican Sayings* (*Sent. Vat.* 25. 43. 58. 67. 68. 81).

Among the *Vatican Sayings* that inspired Lucretius' solutions we draw attention to sentence 58. Here is the content of this sentence: “We must free ourselves from the prison of public education and politics” (Ibid. 58). This is precisely the meaning of Lucretius' solution to the desire for political power. This shows how loyal Lucretius was to Epicurus' teachings about participation in public affairs. It is true that Lucretius was far more severe than Epicurus in criticizing those who desire political power. However, Lucretius never departs from the foundations of the doctrine of Epicurus. It is possible that Lucretius' ‘poetic spirit’ has some influence on his way of criticizing the political life of Rome. But this characteristic does not move away Lucretius from Epicurus. This characteristic only reveals the genius (the originality) of a loyal follower of a philosophical doctrine.

If Lucretius is not original in his philosophical affirmations, he is original in his exposition and contextualization of a 3rd century BC Greek philosophy. This is what part of its philosophical value is. Thus, and to conclude our exposition on the relation between Epicureanism

and Politics (Greek and Roman), we find it pertinent to reproduce the following verses of Lucretius:

And, verily, those tortures said to be in Acheron, the deep, they all are ours here in this life [...] we have before our eyes here in this life also a Sisyphus in him who seecatch of the populace the rods, the axes fell, and evermore retires a beaten and a gloomy man. For to seek after power – an empty name, nor given at all – and ever in the search to endure a world of toil, o this it is to shove with shoulder up the hill a stone which yet comes rolling back from off the top, and headlong makes for levels of the plain (*Fragmenta nat.* 3. vv. 978. 995-1000).

We believe that in these verses it is evident how important Lucretius was to Epicureanism outside Greece. When Lucretius presents the teachings of epicurean philosophy he resorts to myths much older than Epicurus (*i.e.*, the myth of Sisyphus). Lucretius does this to historically and philosophically contextualize his critique of the politics of Rome and thereby renew the criticism of Epicurus himself. Thus, we believe that Lucretius' fidelity to Epicurus and the idea that disinterest in political life (even in Rome) is the best solution to the achievement of a happy life is evident.

CONCLUSION

In this article we presented the relation between Epicureanism and politics in two moments of History. The first moment consisted of Epicurus' own relation with the Greek politics of his time. When we look at this relation between Epicurus and Greek politics, we find that Epicurus did not participate in Greek political life for a single reason: because politics makes difficult the achievement of a happy life, *i.e.* a life without physical and mental suffering. The sufferings Epicurus probably refers to are various: the concern with the maintenance of public order; concern about hunger and disease that existed in Athens; living with the despotic power of Macedonia; concern for life itself, as among the Greeks it was not uncommon for unjust political accusations that culminated in the death sentence. A good example of this was Socrates (470-399 BC). Moreover, here are Socrates' words about Greek political life in *Apology of Socrates*:

I have had this from my childhood; it is a sort of voice that comes to me, and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing, but never urges me forward. This it is which opposes my engaging in politics. And I think this opposition is a very good thing; for you may be quite sure, men of Athens, that if I had undertaken to go into politics, I should have been put to death long ago and should have done no good to you or to myself. And do not

be angry with me for speaking the truth; the fact is that no man will save his life that nobly opposes you or any other populace and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the state (31d-31e).

The second moment of our article presented the relation of Lucretius with the politics of Rome. Lucretius is severely critical of politics and politicians. By the way, we can say that the criticisms of Lucretius are interesting for two reasons. The first reason is the way he makes his criticisms. Lucretius reconstructs the history of mankind to show that early man lived in peace while man in society lives in war. For Lucretius, the desire for wealth and political power was the source of all human corruption. The second reason that makes Lucretius' critiques interesting is his faithfulness to the foundations of Epicurus' philosophy. This fidelity shows how Epicurus' philosophy has remained intact for at least 171 years.³ Actually, we can claim that the Epicurus philosophy remained intact until the 2nd century AD, because the records of the epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda (II AD) faithfully reproduce the foundations of Epicureanism. The records of the epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda can be found in the work *The Philosophical Inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda* (1996) or, more recently, in the work *El Sábio Camino Hacia La Felicidad. Diógenes de Enoanda Y El Gran Mural Epicúreo* (2016).

The Epicurus philosophy endured for many centuries. However, the Epicurus philosophy succumbed to the successive attacks made by the Greek and Latin Apologists and was resumed with Pierre Gassendi only in XVII.⁴ Epicurus built his philosophy with one purpose: guarantee a happy life for all, *i.e.*, men, women, slaves, rich and poor. Epicurus did not impose any extraordinary conditions for participation in his school. Incidentally, Epicurus' school was located in the *city* (*pólis*), in Athens, *i.e.*, Epicurus sought happiness outside politics, but not outside the *city*. This shows that Epicurus was concerned with the 'health' of the *pólis* and not with the wealth or glory that politics could bring to him. Thus we can say that Epicurus was one of the most important citizens of Athens though he did not participate in Athens politics.

³ 171 years because Epicurus dies in 270/271 BC, and Lucretius is born in 99 BC.

⁴ There are two important works on this topic. See Michel Onfray. *Contre-histoire de la philosophie, tome 2: Le Christianisme hédoniste* (2008), and Miguel Spinelli. *Helenização e recriação de sentidos: a filosofia na época da expansão do cristianismo – séculos II, III e IV* (2015).

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