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# The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy

Edited by Kelly Arenson

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

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- Ethics, political theory, society, and community.
- Hellenistic philosophy's relevance to contemporary life.

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**Kelly Arenson** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Duquesne University. She is the author of *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (2019).

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# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

*Edited by Kelly Arenson*

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# CONTENTS

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <i>List of contributors</i>   | <i>ix</i>   |
| <i>Abbreviations</i>  | <i>xiii</i> |
| <br>  |             |
| Introduction<br><i>Kelly Arenson</i>  | 1           |
| <br>  |             |
| <b>PART I</b>   |             |
| <b>Methods and Background</b>   | <b>11</b>   |
| <br>  |             |
| 1 Epicurean Philosophy and Its Parts<br><i>J. Clerk Shaw</i>  | 13          |
| <br>  |             |
| 2 The Stoics and their Philosophical System<br><i>William O. Stephens</i>                                       | 25          |
| <br>  |             |
| 3 Argumentative Strategies of Pyrrhonian and Academic Skeptics<br><i>Renata Ziemińska</i>                       | 38          |
| <br>  |             |
| 4 Documenting Hellenistic Philosophy: Cicero as a Source and<br>Philosopher<br><i>Thornton C. Lockwood, Jr.</i> | 49          |
| <br>  |             |
| <b>PART II</b>  |             |
| <b>Early Influences</b>   | <b>61</b>   |
| <br>  |             |
| 5 Epicureans, Earlier Atomists, and Cyrenaics<br><i>Stefano Maso</i>  | 63          |
| <br>  |             |
| 6 Cynic Influences on Stoic Ethics<br><i>Christopher Turner</i>   | 76          |

|                 |   |            |
|-----------------|---|------------|
| 7               | Stoics and Presocratic Materialists<br><i>Ricardo Salles</i>                        | 87         |
| 8               | Aristotelian and Stoic Virtue<br><i>Jacob Klein</i>                                 | 99         |
| 9               | Socratic Ignorance and Ethics in the Stoa<br><i>René Brouwer</i>                    | 112        |
| 10              | Academic Skepticism and the Socratic Method<br><i>Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson</i>       | 124        |
| <b>PART III</b> |   |            |
|                 | <b>Soul, Perception, and Knowledge</b>  | <b>135</b> |
| 11              | Stoic Epistemology<br><i>Ian Hensley</i>  | 137        |
| 12              | The Stoic Theory of the Soul<br><i>Tamer Nawar</i>                                  | 148        |
| 13              | Impressions and Truth in Epicurean Epistemology<br><i>Andree Hahmann</i>            | 160        |
| 14              | Epicurus On Sense-Experience and the Fear of Death<br><i>Emily Austin</i>           | 171        |
| 15              | Skeptical Defenses Against the Inaction Objection<br><i>Whitney Schwab</i>          | 184        |
| 16              | Skeptical Responses to Stoics and Epicureans on the Criterion<br><i>Scott Aikin</i> | 198        |
| <b>PART IV</b>  |   |            |
|                 | <b>First Principles, Nature, and Teleology</b>                                      | <b>211</b> |
| 17              | Epicureans on What There Is<br><i>Jan Maximilian Robitzsch</i>                      | 213        |
| 18              | Epicureans on Teleology and Freedom<br><i>Attila Németh</i>                         | 224        |
| 19              | Nature, God, and Determinism in Early Stoicism<br><i>Anna Maria Ioppolo</i>         | 236        |

|  |  |            |
|--|--|------------|
| 20   | Stoics and Epicureans on Language and the World<br><i>Catherine Atherton</i>                                     | 248        |
| 21   | Free Will and Fate in Carneades' Academic Skepticism<br><i>James Allen</i>                                       | 262        |
| 22   | Piety and Theology in the Stoics, Epicureans, and Pyrrhonian Sceptics<br><i>Harald Thorsrud</i>                  | 271        |
| <b>PART V</b>  |  |            |
| <b>Ethics, Politics, and Society</b>                 |  | <b>283</b> |
| 23   | Tranquility as the Goal in Pyrrhonian Skepticism<br><i>Casey Perin</i>   | 285        |
| 24   | Epicureans on Pleasure, Desire, and Happiness<br><i>Benjamin A. Rider</i>  | 295        |
| 25   | Epicureans on Friendship, Politics, and Community<br><i>Anna B. Christensen</i>                                  | 307        |
| 26   | The Medicine of Salvation: Epicurean Education as Therapy<br><i>Michael McOsker</i>                              | 319        |
| 27   | Moral Philosophy in the Imperial Roman Stoa<br><i>Georgia Mouroutsou</i>   | 331        |
| 28   | The Academics and the Stoics on "Trying Your Best" and the Ultimate<br>End of Action<br><i>Christiana Olfert</i> | 344        |
| <b>PART VI</b>                                       |  |            |
| <b>The Hellenistic Legacy in Contemporary Issues</b> |  | <b>359</b> |
| 29   | Is Skepticism Natural? Ancient and Modern Perspectives<br><i>Richard Bett</i>                                    | 361        |
| 30   | Stoicism and Contemporary Medical Ethics<br><i>James A. Dunson III</i>   | 372        |
| 31   | Stoic Therapy for Today's Troubles<br><i>Massimo Pigliucci</i>   | 384        |

*Contents*

|    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 32 | Stoic Cosmopolitanism and Environmental Ethics<br><i>Simon Shogry</i>                      | 397 |
| 33 | Feminism and Stoic Sagehood<br><i>Lisa Hill</i>  | 410 |
| 34 | Epicurean Advice for the Modern Consumer<br><i>Tim O'Keefe</i>                             | 422 |
| 35 | Hellenistic Philosophy and the Origins of Modern Economic Thought<br><i>Phillip Mitsis</i> | 432 |
|    | <i>Index</i>   | 443 |

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# ABBREVIATIONS

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>Acad.</i>      | Cicero, <i>Academica</i> [ <i>On Academic Skepticism</i> ]   |
| <i>Adv. Col.</i>  | Plutarch, <i>Adversus Colotem</i> [ <i>Against Colotes</i> ]   |
| BS                | M. Boeri and R. Salles, <i>Los Filósofos Estoicos</i>  |
| <i>C. Cels.</i>   | Origin, <i>Contra Celsum</i> [ <i>Against Celsus</i> ]   |
| <i>Comm. Not.</i> | Plutarch, <i>De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos</i> [ <i>On Common Conceptions Against the Stoics</i> ] |
| <i>De Ab.</i>     | Porphyry, <i>De Abstinencia</i> [ <i>On Abstinence</i> ]   |
| <i>De An.</i>     | Aristotle, <i>On the Soul</i>  |
| <i>De Div.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Divinatione</i> [ <i>On Divination</i> ]   |
| <i>De Elect.</i>  | Philodemus, <i>De Electionibus et Fugis</i>  |
| <i>De Fac.</i>    | Plutarch, <i>De Facie in Orbe Lunae</i> [ <i>On the Face in the Orb of the Moon</i> ]                        |
| <i>De Fat.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Fato</i> [ <i>On Fate</i> ]  |
| <i>De Fin.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Finibus</i> [ <i>On Moral Ends</i> ]   |
| <i>De Leg.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Legibus</i> [ <i>On the Laws</i> ]   |
| <i>De Off.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Officiis</i> [ <i>On Duties</i> ]  |
| <i>De Or.</i>     | Cicero, <i>De Oratore</i> [ <i>On the Orator</i> ]   |
| <i>De Piet.</i>   | Philodemus, <i>De Pietate</i> [ <i>On Piety</i> ]  |
| <i>De Rep.</i>    | Cicero, <i>De Re Publica</i> [ <i>On the Republic</i> ]  |
| DG                | H. Diels, <i>Doxographi Graeci</i>   |
| <i>Diss.</i>      | Epictetus, <i>Dissertationes</i> [ <i>Discourses</i> ]   |
| DK                | H. Diels and W. Kranz, <i>Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i>  |
| DL                | Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>  |
| DND               | Cicero, <i>De Natura Deorum</i> [ <i>On the Nature of the Gods</i> ]   |
| DRN               | Lucretius, <i>De Rerum Natura</i> [ <i>On the Nature of Things</i> ]   |
| <i>Ecl.</i>       | Stobaeus, <i>Eclogai</i> [ <i>Selections</i> ]   |
| <i>Ench.</i>      | Epictetus, <i>Enchiridion</i> [ <i>The Handbook</i> ]  |
| <i>Ep.</i>        | Seneca, <i>Epistulae Morales</i> [ <i>Letters on Ethics</i> ]  |
| <i>Ep. Hdt.</i>   | Epicurus, <i>Epistula ad Herodotum</i> [ <i>Letter to Herodotus</i> ]  |
| <i>Ep. Men.</i>   | Epicurus, <i>Epistula ad Menoeceum</i> [ <i>Letter to Menoeceus</i> ]  |
| <i>Ep. Pyth.</i>  | Epicurus, <i>Epistula ad Pythoclem</i> [ <i>Letter to Pythocles</i> ]  |
| <i>Gen. Corr.</i> | Aristotle, <i>On Generation and Corruption</i>   |

Abbreviations

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>IG</i>          | <i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>  |
| <i>Int.</i>        | Aristotle, <i>On Interpretation</i>   |
| <i>KD</i>          | Epicurus, <i>Kuriai Doxai</i> [ <i>Principal Doctrines</i> ]  |
| <i>LM</i>          | A. Laks and G.W. Most, <i>Early Greek Philosophy</i>  |
| <i>LS</i>          | A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i>  |
| <i>M</i>           | Sextus Empiricus, <i>Adversus Mathematicos</i> [ <i>Against the Professors</i> ]  |
| <i>Med.</i>        | Marcus Aurelius, <i>Meditations</i>   |
| <i>Mem.</i>        | Xenophon, <i>Memorabilia</i>  |
| <i>Metaph.</i>     | Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i>   |
| <i>NE</i>          | Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>  |
| <i>Non Posse</i>   | Plutarch, <i>Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum</i> [ <i>That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible</i> ] |
| <i>NQ</i>          | Seneca, <i>Quaestiones Naturales</i>  |
| <i>PE</i>          | Eusebius, <i>Praeparatio Evangelica</i> [ <i>Preparation for the Gospel</i> ]   |
| <i>PH</i>          | Sextus Empiricus, <i>Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes</i> [ <i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> ]   |
| <i>PHerc.</i>      | <i>Papyri Herculenses</i> [ <i>Herculaneum Papyri</i> ]   |
| <i>Plac.</i>       | Aetius, <i>De Placita Philosophorum</i> [ <i>Opinions of the Philosophers</i> ]   |
| <i>Rep.</i>        | Plato, <i>Republic</i>  |
| <i>Stoic. Rep.</i> | Plutarch, <i>De Stoicorum Repugnantiis</i> [ <i>On the Self-contradictions of the Stoics</i> ]                                |
| <i>SV</i>          | Epicurus, <i>Sententiae Vaticanae</i> [ <i>Vatican Sayings</i> ]  |
| <i>SVF</i>         | H. von Arnim, <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>  |
| <i>Tht.</i>        | Plato, <i>Theaetetus</i>  |
| <i>Tim.</i>        | Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>   |
| <i>Tusc.</i>       | Cicero, <i>Tusculanae Disputationes</i> [ <i>Tusculan Disputations</i> ]  |
| <i>Us.</i>         | H. Usener, <i>Epicurea</i>  |

# 18

## EPICUREANS ON TELEOLOGY AND FREEDOM

*Attila Németh*

Epicurus and his followers laboriously criticized those philosophers who believed in a purposefully created and arranged cosmos administered by a divinity. According to them, a blessed and immortal god experiences no troubles himself and causes none for anyone else (cf. *KD* 1); hence, such a being cannot be involved in the tiresome creation or administration of our world. The Epicureans consequently liberated their disciples from the superstitious fear of the gods, not by denying their existence, but by denying their status as active cosmological principles. The Epicureans' material explanation of the universe, formulated in opposition to the theists, nonetheless threatened us with subjection to deterministic material laws. If our cosmos is deprived of a divine providence, being the accidental outcome of atoms purposelessly moving in the void, is it not the case that every phenomenon in the world, including ourselves and our actions, is causally determined by the underlying atomic interactions? In such a case, no room remains for freedom, even for the gods.

In formulating his anti-teleological theory, Epicurus came up with a multitude of arguments and innovative ideas, including some that explain how it is possible to preserve a genuine notion of freedom within the general framework of his materialism. In this chapter, I focus first on the philosophical background (Part I) against which Epicurus (Part II) and his followers (Part III) developed their anti-teleological arguments, before turning to the questions and tensions involved in Epicurus' conception of freedom (Part IV).

### **Part I**

Teleological explanations or accounts that recognize some kind of purpose in the natural world go back as far as the very beginnings of Western philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The term "teleology" originates from the Greek words *telos* [end, purpose] and *logos* [account, explanation]; it hence conveys the idea of an explanation of something by the goal, end, or purpose it intrinsically serves. The term is applied today to philosophical theories which contend that natural entities or cosmic phenomena have inherent, end-directed structures or purposes as a result of intelligent or natural design. Although teleological factors seem frequently to have shaped the agenda of the early Greek thinkers—for example, Anaxagoras' cosmic intelligence, mind [*nous*] which creates worlds from pre-existing stocks of matter, or Empedocles' divine forces, Love and Strife, taking their turns at rearranging our cosmos

according to their contradictory purposes—we do not have strong evidence that divine causation or natural design ever became a subject for detailed teleological arguments before Socrates or Aristotle, respectively (Sedley 2007: 79–92).

The pages of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* present Socrates as the first systematic teleological thinker (*Mem.* I.4.2–10). In order to positively change his interlocutor Aristodemus' attitude to religious practices—Xenophon tells us that he held that the gods are not in need of his worship, since they are above human affairs—Socrates catalogues the gifts of the gods to humans (such natural endowments as religious sensibility, intelligence, non-seasonal sex etc.), arguing on the strength of these for the existence of a demiurge: a beneficent, divine craftsman who made the world. Later in the book, he also develops an explicitly anthropocentric teleology by describing our favorably-orchestrated relation to the animal kingdom and the environment, both of which exist for man's sake (*Mem.* IV 3.5–15). Socrates hence comes across as having formulated the first versions of several familiar teleological arguments, which were subsequently classified as the Argument from Design (also referred to as Intelligent Design, hence ID): that is, arguments that deduce the existence of a providential god from the evidence of rational design in the natural world.<sup>2</sup> Socrates' formulation is emphatically non-scientific: he believes that true piety consists in admiring the outcomes of divine creation and expressing our gratitude by religious devotion instead of speculating about the possible material causes of such rational divine activity.

Socrates' motives for defending creationism have also been viewed as an attack on the early atomists' competing model, which emphasized the creative powers of accident (Sedley 2017, pp. 86, 90, 134–5). Leucippus and Democritus thought that there are infinitely many atoms hurtling in infinite void, and every now and then a large but finite number of atoms spontaneously separate out from the rest and form a vortex, which in turn creates an entire cosmos. Given infinite time, space and atoms, they held that it is not only a possibility but a necessity that there are infinitely many *kosmoi* generated in this fashion, including an infinite number that are identical to our own. And although the early atomists believed in the existence of gods, they did not, similarly to Aristodemus' opinion, think of them as creators.<sup>3</sup>

Plato, developing Socrates' teleological account in his cosmology, put forward a likely account of divine creation in one of his latest works, the *Timaeus-Critias* (Scolnicov 2017). Timaeus, the main speaker of his eponymous dialogue, describes an intrinsically good divine craftsman, the Demiurge, who is the cause of our cosmos' existence, having because of his goodness rearranged a pre-existing material disorder in the best possible way.<sup>4</sup> He modelled our cosmos on the eternal Form of the genus Animal to reflect the intelligible realm in the ruling motions of the world-soul of a single spherical living being, our world, which is inhabited by less pure rational souls, us, who are capable of reincarnation in mortal bodies in the perceptible realm of becoming. It has been debated since the time of Plato's own students whether Plato, accordingly, believed in an asymmetrical universe which had a beginning but no end, or whether Timaeus' creationist story was intended as an allegorical mythos of an eternal universe, cast in the chronological form of a narrative.

Aristotle, Plato's most eminent pupil, understood him in the former sense. Although he agreed that a divine being is the fundamental explanatory principle of the apparently purposive organisms in the universe, he did not think that the teleological structures of these organisms were ever created. Aristotle conceived of teleological or final causes as immanent in nature itself, as part of a natural design existing from all eternity. Such an intrinsic teleology is local but not global: Aristotle's teleological explanations account for certain features of the natural world, but they do not explain the cosmos as a whole. God, or the Unmoved Mover, could not have created these teleological structures, since he must himself

be involved in the best possible activity, contemplation. He is therefore detached from administering the universe, let alone from having ever created it. Yet, the Unmoved Mover produces motion by becoming an object of desire, a motivating factor in Aristotle's cosmology. The entire natural world strives to imitate god's eternal actuality—humans by philosophical contemplation (*NE* X 8); all animals (humans included) and plants by procreation (*De An.* II 4, *Politics* I 2); and even the non-animate elements by their natural cycles (*Meteorologica* I 9). God, as the *telos* or the final cause of the natural world himself, is nonetheless unmoved, being self-absorbed in his pure self-contemplation.

One upshot of this brief overview is that we can clearly see that Greek accounts of teleology before Epicurus had always been connected in one way or another to theology, to the study of the nature of God. It is thus appropriate to characterize Epicurus and his followers' arguments against creationism as having been formulated in opposition to teleology, that is: as anti-teleological. It is still, however, sometimes unclear whether the Epicureans are arguing against certain earlier thinkers, or rather against their contemporaries the Stoics, who were the first to offer systematic, formal arguments in favor of divine craftsmanship. The reason behind this lack of clarity is not only that the Epicureans do not always name their opponents, but also that ancient Greek creationist accounts of reality share certain fundamental principles, making it harder to identify which specific tenets, or whose tenets, they may have had in mind in any particular context of argument. The Stoics also thought of their material cosmos both as animated by an active divine principle and as a living being; yet their cosmos was clearly symmetrical, having a beginning and end. Since it is the best possible of worlds, perfect and complete, and one finite world could not occupy all the infinite available time, it keeps recurring endlessly, identical each time to all previous and subsequent worlds.<sup>5</sup> Although this idea of identical worlds may remind us of the atomists, it is radically different because it excludes the simultaneous existence of identical *kosmoi*, and includes an immanent deity who governs the actually existing cosmos. Both of these things are inconceivable on Epicurus' exclusively material account of the universe, to which now we will turn.

## Part II

Epicurus' central reason for wanting to refute teleology can be best described as ethical. The major objective of his philosophy was to provide the keys to a pain-free [*a-ponia*], undisturbed [*a-taraxia*] human condition, which can compare with a life of the gods, which divine blessedness he characterized in somewhat and similarly negative terms as *not* being troubled by or *not* causing trouble to others (cf. *KD* I). In order to secure the grounds for such an ideal condition, he wished to remove the two major impediments to attaining such a happy life: the fear of gods and the fear of death. To exclude the former, he had two major arguments against divine teleology on the strength of the available primary evidence: one of which, a), was cosmological, and the other b) conceptual, concerning as it did divine blessedness. Let us look at the cosmological argument first.

a) According to Epicurus, the religious opinions of the many cause great disturbances to their souls, since how they imagine the gods is hugely influenced and contaminated by such mythical portrayals as can be found, for instance, in Homer and Hesiod. These vengeful and often angry images of deities are a common source of distress and fear, making us believe that lightning is the work of Zeus, that an earthquake is that of Poseidon, or that the effects of love are brought about by Aphrodite. But these misconceived beliefs can be driven out by the light of a proper material account of the nature of things (cf. e.g. Lucretius *DRN* I 62–101). If our cosmos is conceived of as the accidental outcome of atomic

collisions into which everything eventually dissolves, then it does not require additional divine forces; consequently, if gods are driven out of our world, there is no reason to fear them. If they are not involved in creating or controlling the circumstances of our lives, they cannot punish us either after we die as some eschatological myths threateningly claimed. As well, if our body and soul are completely destroyed in death, falling apart into their atomic constituents, there is no subject left who could undergo after-life punishment.

Epicurus' argument for the infinite number of worlds provides implicit evidence against divine teleology; it becomes explicit in a further extended form by one of his followers, Lucretius. Epicurus supported the simultaneous existence of infinite worlds by arguing that the totality [*to pan*] of things is unlimited. For what is limited has an extremity, and an extremity is evident in contrast to something else; consequently, the totality of things cannot have an extremity, otherwise there would be something outside it, and it would not be a totality; therefore, it has no limit and since it has no limit, it must be unlimited and infinite (*Ep. Hdt.* 41). Consequently, the infinitely many atoms (cf. Lucretius *DRN* II 522–68) can travel any distance in void. This naturally includes those atoms which are suitable [*epité-deia spermata*] for constituting a cosmos. Given that atoms are limited in their kinds, but each kind, according to the theory, is unlimited in its numbers, there are an infinite number of “suitable seeds” able to constitute a cosmos; these thus cannot have been exhausted in one world, set within its own boundaries, or on any finite number of differentiated worlds, whether these are like ours, or entirely different. There must therefore be infinitely many worlds (*Ep. Hdt.* 45).

This conclusion excludes and thus implicitly refutes both the possibility of a single, anthropocentric, teleologically-arranged cosmos on either the Platonic or the later Stoic model, and that of a finite Aristotelian universe. Lucretius extended the conclusion of the argument with the additional point that it would be inconceivable how any such divine leader could have powers adequate to control the infinite universe (*DRN* II 1052–1104). This seems partly to rest on the assumption (Cicero, *DND* I 26–28) that an anthropomorphic divinity could not perceive and run the universe if it is infinitely extended, because perception necessarily occurs in bodily extremities through which one perceives what is outside oneself.

The argument for an infinite number of worlds does not however exclude the possibility of postulating an infinite number of gods directing them individually, an idea that would not have been absurd for the Epicureans given their principle of “distributive equality” [*isonomia*]. In their opinion (Cicero, *DND* I 50) the power of the infinite [*vis infinitatis*] is so enormous that in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart. Accordingly, if there is a great number of mortals, there must be a similarly great number of immortals as well. And considering that there must be infinitely many mortals in an infinite number of worlds, there must be infinitely many immortals as well. In view of Epicurus' desire to remove the fear of gods, it is however reasonable that he did not extend his theory towards this direction.

b) In order to strengthen the implications of his cosmological account and to demonstrate that the gods do not care about us and thus do not harm us even while we are alive, Epicurus also addressed teleology head on from the conceptual perspective of divine blessedness:

- (1) Moreover, when it comes to meteorological phenomena, one must believe that movements, turnings, eclipses, risings, settings, and related phenomena occur without any [god] helping out and ordaining or being about to ordain [things], and at the same time [gods] having complete blessedness and indestructibility; for

troubles and concerns and anger and gratitude are not consistent with blessedness, but these things involve weakness and fear and dependence on one's neighbors. (2) Nor again can they [i.e. the gods?] be in possession of blessedness if they [the gods] are at the same time balls of fire [i.e. celestial bodies] and adopt these movements by deliberate choice; rather, we must preserve the complete dignity implied in all the terms applied to such conceptions, so that we do not generate from these terms opinions inconsistent with their dignity; otherwise, the inconsistency itself will produce the greatest disturbance in our souls. Hence, one must hold the opinion that it is owing to the original inclusion of these compounds [the heavenly bodies] in the generation of the cosmos that this regularly recurring cycle too is produced.

(*Ep. Hdt.* 76–77)<sup>6</sup>

In this extract, Epicurus provides two arguments against teleology. The first, in section 1), claims that meteorological phenomena must occur naturally, without any divine assistance, since the activity of maintaining and running a cosmos involves trouble, concern, anger and favor, all of which have their origin in weakness, fear and dependence on neighbors. These attributes are incompatible with our conceptions of blessedness and imperishability; therefore, no god or group of gods could be involved in ordaining the workings of the cosmos, since they are blessed and indestructible.

The second argument, in section 2), states that swirling balls of fire—that is, celestial bodies—cannot be blessed and undertake their motions by deliberate choice simultaneously, since that would be inconsistent with the dignity implied in our notion of blessedness (also cf. *Ep. Hdt.* 81). If our conception of dignity did not exclude the tiresome administration of the cosmos, that would, consequently, produce the greatest disturbance in our souls by conceding the possibility that the gods might significantly intervene in our lives. Nonetheless, dignity is incompatible with world administration: therefore, the regular cycles of meteorological phenomena must depend on the materials included in the accidental generation of the cosmos.

Both arguments operate with the claim that certain mental states are inconsistent with our conception of blessedness. Who is “we” in this context? If “we” are only the Epicureans, then these arguments would certainly have no force against their opponents. Therefore, if we assume that Epicurus wanted to influence an audience wider than just his own, it must be taken that he is talking about a naturally-formed conception of divine blessedness shared by everyone. Epicurus’ claim in his letter to Menoeceus (*Ep. Men.* 123) that god is an indestructible and blessed animal in harmony with the general and commonly held conception of god confirms this implied assumption.

It is harder, however, to determine what in fact this commonly held conception of the divine might contain. Divine blessedness is constantly characterized in negative terms in Epicurus’ extant writings—in most cases in a pair with their indestructibility. As we have seen, divine blessedness is inconsistent with certain burdensome activities that cause mental disturbance—trouble (cf. *KD* 1), concern, anger—or with some others such as favor or gratitude.<sup>7</sup> What blessedness for the gods might positively consist of is described in a non-specific, brief imperative: “believe of him everything which is able to preserve his blessedness and indestructibility” (*Ep. Men.* 123).

If we wish to find a positive characterization of what blessedness was for Epicurus, we have to turn to his description of what it consists in for the wise, whose primary aim is a blessed life based on imitating the divine.<sup>8</sup> In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, we read that the Epicurean goal of the blessed life is the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from

disturbance (*ataraxia*), the start and endpoint of which is pleasure (*Ep. Men.* 128). This is, however, certainly not a universally accepted opinion, but Epicurus' central ethical idea—the reason why his philosophy has been considered hedonistic<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, it cannot lay claim to universal acknowledgement.

Epicurus' ancient critics (notably the Sceptics: cf. Sextus Emp. IX 3–4) were quick to point out not only that the positive characteristics of blessedness pose an unresolved problem in his writings, but also that it is foolish to suppose that you can know the attributes (blessed, indestructible) of something unless you really *know* the thing in question. You cannot know, for example, what “neighing” is unless you have a conception of a horse, which you can only acquire by coming into contact with a neighing horse (cf. Sextus Emp. IX 3. 173–4). But how does one get direct experience of god? Even if we grant that gods are conceivable, Sextus argues that it is not clear that they exist, since if they have made an impression on us in themselves, then the dogmatic philosophers would agree as to what they are, what form they have, and where they dwell (cf. Sextus Emp. IX 3. 6). The irresolvable debate between the schools evidently means that the gods themselves are unclear and in need of proof; therefore, even the Epicurean claim to an innate and supposedly universal conception of the gods that implies blessedness and indestructibility (Cicero *DND* I. 43–56) is untenable. Consequently, Epicurus' primary arguments against teleology based on his concept of divine blessedness turn out to be rock solid only for those who have already converted to his teachings.<sup>10</sup>

We can, nevertheless, perhaps save Epicurus from the sceptics' criticism by reading his arguments in combination with Cicero's testimony on the principle of charity—that is, by interpreting his ideas in the most rational and strongest possible way. After all, Epicurus' cosmological arguments for the infinitely many worlds had already liberated the gods from their commonly-held creationist and cosmological responsibilities; consequently, Cicero's Epicurean protagonist Velleius (*DND* I 52–53) can correctly conclude that the gods must be “free from duty” [*nullis occupationibus est implicatus, nulla opera molitur*], which habit he then can successfully integrate into his conception of divine blessedness. However, this characterization, which nicely follows from Epicurus' cosmology and is certainly incompatible with a list of things mentioned in Epicurus' arguments against teleology, is still a negative description. Thus, the basic discrepancy pointed out by the sceptics remains: several different conceptions of divine blessedness exist—the Stoics' idea, for example, that blessedness is exhibited in the rational order which pervades the entire cosmos—and in order to accept Epicurus' notion of it, we need to subscribe to his atomism in the first place.

We may add however that Epicurus might intentionally have avoided positively characterizing divine blessedness in order not to put forward a dogmatist claim, which might bar him from claiming that a universally shared concept of god exists. Instead, he simply appealed to the *consensus omnium*: the agreement of everyone (*DND* I 44) that the gods are blessed and indestructible.

### Part III

Epicurus' teachings lived on and flourished in Republican Rome under the stylus of such prominent and prolific followers as Lucretius and Philodemus. In book V of his grand and beautiful didactic poem in six books, *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius developed a number of specific arguments against creationism, depending on writings of Epicurus that today are only available in fragments (cf. the two copies of the remnants of *On Nature* XI, *PHerc.* 1149/993 and *PHerc.* 1010, on which much of *DRN* V depended).<sup>11</sup> After the initial praise of Epicurus in the proem, Lucretius sets out his task, which is to demonstrate

the formation of the cosmos and civilization. However, before explaining the mortality of the cosmos, he wishes to prove that it is not made of divine matter or created and run by any divinities. His first point concerns the connection between mind and matter (*DRN* V 110–145):

In actuality it is not possible to find  
In every single body an intelligence and mind—127  
...  
But since within our bodies we see there is set aside 138  
A certain area where spirit and the mind abide,  
And where they grow, all the more reason that we must not claim 140  
That they can thrive outside the flesh, without a living frame,  
In rotting clumps of dirt, or conflagrations of the sun,  
Or water, or the towering reaches of heaven—therefore none  
Of these bodies is endowed with the divine sensation, seeing  
None of these can be animated into a living being.<sup>12</sup> 145

As intelligence cannot be present in any and every kind of matter (cf. also Cicero's testimony, *DND* I 23), so it must be in the case of divine sensation: it cannot just be operative in any medium, e.g. in rocks or fiery celestial bodies, but it requires its own appropriate frame. For the same functional and material reason, Lucretius finds it inconceivable that the holy abodes of the gods could be inside our cosmos: in order for them to remain effective, the different, tenuous nature of the Epicurean deities, who appear exclusively to the human mind but are unable to come in contact with anything we can touch, must have a home unlike ours—in the spaces between worlds [*intermundia*]<sup>13</sup>—in accordance with the fine essence of their nature (*DRN* V 146–55). Lucretius, therefore, also implicitly rules out the possibility that our cosmos could have been created by a divine being, given the limited physical interaction deities can have with our world.

Next, in order to ridicule the idea of anthropocentric design, Lucretius poses a series of challenges to his opponents by raising a number of questions (*DRN* V 156–86):

- Q1 What profit could the gods gain from our gratitude for their providence?
- Q2 Why did they desire to change their lifestyle at so late a stage?
- Q3 What harm would it have been to us if we had not been created?
- Q4 Where did they get a model for the creation of the world and a preconception for men?
- Q5 How did they know the powers of matter?

Who are the targets of these questions? Since Lucretius names only three of his Presocratic opponents in his entire poem (*DRN* I, 635–920), the identification of his adversaries in book V has become a sort of battlefield (cf. Sedley 1998 pp. 73–5).

In general, Epicurus' own opponents in his philosophical polemics were the Presocratics and Plato. The Stoics, his contemporaries, became prominent later on, so it was left to his successors to engage with them. Cicero's Epicurean protagonist Velleius criticizes Platonic and Stoic theology side by side (cf. *DND* I 18–23), and Philodemus attacked both earlier thinkers and his near contemporaries, the Peripatetics and Stoics. But Lucretius, somewhat oddly, remained faithful not only to the ideas but even to the contents and targets of Epicurus' writings. With these questions he most likely targeted Plato's ideas in the *Timaeus*.<sup>13</sup> As we have seen in section I, Plato's Demiurge modelled his cosmos on an eternal paradigm, which contains all animal species, humans included. For the Epicureans, however,

there cannot be a concept of anything before we have come into contact with that thing and learned about it through experience: hence Q4 and Q5, which questions also assume—legitimately even on Plato’s own anthropomorphizing account of the Demiurge—that the gods are subject to the same sort of epistemological constraints as humans are. On the literal interpretation of Timaeus’ creationist myth—that is, that our cosmos was created in time—Lucretius could reasonably ask what sufficient reason there was for creation to occur at a certain point in time, given the infinite past time available (Q2).<sup>14</sup> Since Plato’s dialogue—as we can gather from the evidence of Lucretius’ contemporary Antiochus of Ascalon<sup>15</sup>—was read as anthropocentric by the end of the fourth century in the Academy under Epicurus’ contemporary Polemo, we can assume that Lucretius is again referring to the *Timaeus* when he mocks the exchange of divine providence for human gratitude (Q1), an idea which was incompatible with the Epicureans’ conception of divine blessedness. Invoking Lucretius’ famous symmetry argument (*DRN* III 843–861)—just as we were not harmed by our past nonexistence in all the centuries before we were born, we will not be harmed in our future state of nonexistence after we die—Q3 draws a parallel symmetry between our pre-natal and post mortem non-existences.<sup>16</sup> Just as we could not have had any desires before we were born, we will not have any after we die, since in both cases there is no existing subject who could have those desires; and such a subject, as non-existent, cannot thus suffer any harm. Hence, Plato’s conception that god by his nature wanted to make everything as good as possible is an object of indifference to an Epicurean, who does not believe in any pre-natal or post mortem existence of the soul.

Lucretius continues to demolish the idea of a divine providence by turning the evidence for the supposedly beneficially and anthropocentrically-arranged nature of the universe against its proponents, the advocates of Intelligent Design (ID). When Lucretius looks around, he says, he sees many obvious flaws in the cosmos—to mention a few of his abundant examples (*DRN* V 187–234): the difficulties that mountains and forests full of wild beasts impose, or the vast sea that keeps the shores of lands far apart, or extreme weather conditions which make a large part of the land uninhabitable to us. Lucretius had already addressed the proponents of ID earlier, in *DRN* IV 823–57, where in the context of explaining sensation and thought he pointed out that the functional character of sense-organs, used as evidence for design, rests on an erroneous analogy with artefacts. While the latter are invented to enhance pre-existing functions for which there is already a natural model, natural organs cannot have been preconceived in a similar way (cf. Q 4–5 above), and their apparent functionality should be attributed to a process of natural selection instead (cf. Sedley 2007 pp. 150–5).

If god or an intelligent creator did not fashion our world, which is instead an accidental yet—given infinite time—inevitable outcome of the atomic motions of matter, where does that leave human agency? At what cost did Epicurus and the Epicureans free us from religious superstitions? Is it in our power, for example, to act voluntarily if our body and soul—just like the whole universe—are constituted from, and causally determined by, certain underlying atomic motions that are themselves fixed by their previous interactions? Is freedom, therefore, only an illusion? And what, at all, was Epicurus’ conception of freedom?

#### **Part IV**

Epicurus famously held that “it would be better to adhere to the lore about the gods than be the slave to fate posited by the natural philosophers” (*Ep. Men.* 134). Fate may be a mistress [*despotis*] for some philosophers, but in Epicurus’ opinion the wise man believes a) that

although some things come through unaccountable environmental necessity, and b) that others happen by chance, c) some things most importantly happen because of us (they are *par' hémas*). The results of our actions are free or literally have no master [*a-despoton*] other than us: therefore, they are subject to praise and blame. As a result, Epicurus' conception of freedom seems to have been connected to moral accountability or responsibility. This sort of freedom means that agents themselves, and not something else, are the causes of their actions. But what sort of traits did Epicurus attribute to our agency in order that it be considered the kind of cause of any action to which moral responsibility can be ascribed?

In modern discussions, one concept of moral responsibility turns often on the agent's ability to do otherwise even in the same set of circumstances. But Epicurus did not conceive of it in this way.<sup>17</sup> Instead, he thought that an agent is morally responsible and can be regarded as the cause of an action a) if he is not forced to bring it about; b) if his action is based on his desire or impulse to carry it out, and c) if he can act accordingly; and finally d) if his action rests on his own beliefs—with b) thus actually stemming from d). This last criterion is the most fundamental to Epicurus' ethical conception, because without the ability to change our beliefs, e.g. as a result of philosophical training, we could not eventually alter or moderate some of our primary desires in harmony with what is appropriate to our rational development, and hence act virtuously. Without this we could not, in turn, achieve the most pleasurable human condition. Thus, the foundation of Epicurus' conception of freedom is the idea that an agent is responsible for his beliefs because

as one proceeds in age it is not by necessity that this sort of thing [i.e. the sort of occurrent, rational mental state which can include certain sets of beliefs] is produced in one, but as a result of oneself and as a result of the cause out of oneself that one is able to exert some power.

(*PHerc.* 1191)<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, if we have the capacity to shape our beliefs as grownup rational animals and, based on our beliefs, have some desires that lead us to act in certain ways, we can be held accountable for what we do under no compulsion, and praised or blamed for our actions and moral character.

But how could Epicurus explain the real causal efficacy of an agent within the framework of his atomistic theory? Is it not the case that, even if we are the cause of certain actions based on our beliefs which are carried out freely without any external compulsion in harmony with our desires, we are still determined internally by the atomic motions of our constituent matter to such an extent that theoretically what we are going to believe and consequently do is predictable? If what we do is necessitated by the internal causal atomic framework of our constituent matter, can we properly be praised or blamed for our actions? Can we consider ourselves free if we are internally determined? This worry arises in any theory of causal determinism, according to which all events are determined by prior causes: taking any event E, given the causal laws that govern the universe—whatever they are—and the prior state of the world before E occurred, E was inevitable. Epicurus did not think that such a causally determined understanding of the world would be compatible with his conception of freedom: hence, in order to solve the above worry, he introduced the atomic swerve. In theory, atoms swerve randomly, that is to say, at no determined place or time, inserting an element of indeterminacy on the atomic level into the material universe. But how exactly this random atomic swerve which breaks the internal causal continuity of matter is meant to provide for our freedom on the phenomenal level of our world is unclear.

Since we have no surviving evidence for the swerve from Epicurus' pen,<sup>19</sup> we have to rely on the ancient reception of the theory within his school and among his opponents. Our richest account is Lucretius' bifunctional adaptation of the atomic swerve: (S1) as the principle of collisions, and (S2) as the third cause for atomic motion.<sup>20</sup> (S1) If atoms did not swerve randomly from the trajectories of their motions, eventually all would fall downwards like drops of rain through deep void, and neither any collision nor a blow could occur among them given that atoms move with equal speed in void (cf. *DRN* II 225–242); consequently, nature would produce nothing (*DRN* II 216–250). Furthermore, (S2) if the atoms did not swerve, there would be a closed causal nexus on the atomic level and there would be no free volition [*libera voluntas*]; but we see that animals in our experience evidently have this *libera voluntas*, so it cannot be the case that the atoms do not swerve (*DRN* II 251–293). Therefore, the atoms swerve, and the atomic level of the material world is not causally determined.

The idea of the atomic swerve also appears in Cicero's *On Fate* (*De Fat.* 18, 22, 24, 46–8) with the further complexity that in Cicero's presentation Epicurus introduced it not only to exclude causal determinism, but also the universal applicability of future truth, since he held that the two mutually entailed each other.<sup>21</sup> A famous example of truth-to-necessity type argument was the Lazy argument (*argos logos*). If you accept the Principle of Bivalence (T[p] v F[p]) and fall sick, then

- 1 *Either* it is true and has always been true that you are going to recover from your sickness *or* it is false and has always been false that you are going to recover.
- 2 If either of the two propositions has been true from all eternity, it is certain.
- 3 If it is certain now, it is also necessary now, because the past is immutable.
- 4 Since there is no point deliberating about what is necessary, it is pointless for you to call the doctor, if your present actions cannot change the outcome one way or another.

Although these sorts of arguments start out with propositions, Epicurus seems to have made the mistake of switching from propositions to events in his conception of the argument. This shift from propositions to events inserts the idea of the necessity of causal determinism: “it” in 2), carried over to 3) and 4), provides a certain vagueness, which facilitates this fallacious shift from a proposition to an event.

Regardless of Epicurus' precise motivation, his presentation of the random atomic swerve as “an uncaused cause” for atomic motion<sup>22</sup> triggered a huge outburst of criticism in antiquity, where the notion of universal causation was ubiquitous. Already in the second century BCE, the Academic sceptic Carneades objected to the Epicureans that they could have defended their case—that a certain voluntary motion of the mind is possible—by pointing out that our volition has no external antecedent causes (*De Fat.* 24–5). Just as when the atoms fall constantly downwards in empty space because of their weight and the fact that the void is unable to lend them any support, similarly—the objection goes—voluntary motions of the mind are natural and not determined by something else. It is in the nature of the mind that it has the capacity to exert some power in harmony with its volitions. But if we think of Lucretius' argument for the swerve in (S2), Carneades' objection seems to miss the mark: Lucretius argues for the existence of the swerve as a third type of atomic motion based on the evident voluntary capacity of the mind, but his analogical reasoning does not identify the two, since that would make our volitions random. Lucretius could have replied to Carneades that, just as it is in our nature to act voluntarily, so it is in the nature of atoms to swerve their motion away from their established trajectories. The stake for the Epicureans was not whether or not the mind has a natural voluntary motion,

but how such a motion might reasonably be accommodated within an atomist framework. Epicurus' solution seems to have been a material indeterminism, in which the random atomic swerve excludes a pre-determined atomic cause for all the physical states of the universe, thus carving some space out for real mental causation or causal efficacy. How precisely the atomic swerve was supposed to secure this causal efficacy of the self is even now still highly contested.<sup>23</sup> It is, nevertheless, clear that the Epicureans thought of all rational beings, human and divine alike, as free.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 At least, if we take Philoponus' report (*In Ar. De anima* 86.29–30) about Thales of Miletus at face value, who supposedly said that “providence (*pronoia*) extends to the extremes and nothing escapes its notice, not even the smallest thing.”
- 2 It is, however, debated if Diogenes of Apollonia put forward the earliest version of the Argument from Design (see Sedley 2007: 75–8).
- 3 For more on later atomists' views on theology, see Thorsrud's chapter in this volume, “Piety and Theology in the Stoics, Epicureans, and Pyrrhonian Skeptics.”
- 4 Also cf. Theophrastus' *Opinions on Natural Philosophy* (*Physikón Doxai* in: Diels, *Doxographi graeci*, 1879, p. 485, 1–4), who—possibly under the influence of Xenocrates, the third head of Plato's Academy between 339–314 BCE, who started systematizing Plato's philosophy into a body of doctrine—interprets this reason for creation as a connection between the power of God and of the Good.
- 5 Although not all the Stoics believed in the theory of eternal recurrence: Panaetius is a notable exception (fr. 64 van Straaten = Cicero, *DND* II 118), but both Boethus of Sidon and Diogenes of Babylon seem to have shared his doubts (Philo, *De Aet. Mundi* 76–7). So, indeed, did Zeno of Tarsus (Eus. *PE* 15, 18, 2).
- 6 Translation from Inwood & Gerson 1994, pp. 16–17, with minor modifications.
- 7 Which is at odds with a later Epicurean testimony, Philodemus, who in Book 3 of his *On Gods* says that the gods are friends to each other and converse with each other for the pure pleasure of sharing experiences and feelings, see and touch one another and even exchange gifts as a sign of affection.
- 8 Even in a later source (Cic. *DND* I 52), Velleius', Cicero's Epicurean protagonist's, positive characterization of blessedness (“We [i.e. the followers of Epicurus] place the blessed life in piece of mind and in freedom from all duties”), appears as a normative statement, whose idea of blessedness is not specifically attributed to the divine.
- 9 For more on this, see Rider's chapter in this volume, “Epicureans on Pleasure, Desire, and Happiness.”
- 10 According to fr. 84 = Philodemus *De Piet.* 225–31 (Obbink) Epicurus spoke of early mankind's formation of the concept of divinity in book 12 of his *On Nature*. According to fr. 41, an anonymous Epicurean treatise (*PHerc.* 1111), Epicurus treated some of the same topics in his *On Piety* and in *On Nature* 12 and 13 (cf. Sedley 1998 p. 121).
- 11 As convincingly argued in Sedley 1998 Ch. 3–4. In fact, in *DRN* II, 167–183, there is another anti-teleological digression, but in its current form, perhaps due to a lacuna, it does not build up as an argument, but rather as a series of objections treated at greater length in Book V.
- 12 Translation from Stallings 2007.
- 13 As Sedley 1998, Ch. 3 argues convincingly.
- 14 That the Epicureans understood Timaeus' likely account [*eikos logos*] this way, see also the Roman Epicurean Velleius' puzzlement over why the world-builders suddenly appeared on the scene after sleeping through infinite past time. Although he agrees that the concept of time measured by the celestial clock—the motions of the heavenly bodies—had not existed before the creation of the cosmos (*Tim.* 37c6–38c3), he still holds it unthinkable that there should have been some time at which there was no time (*DND* I 21).
- 15 Cf. Sedley 1998, pp. 75–8.
- 16 For more on the symmetry argument in Lucretius, see Austin's chapter in this volume, “Epicurus on Sense-Experience and the Fear of Death.”
- 17 As Bobzien 2000 has convincingly argued.

- 18 Translation from Németh 2017, p. 90.
- 19 Which does not exclude the possibility of some surviving evidence in the nearly thousand, yet to be opened papyri, cf. Janko 2011.
- 20 The other two causes being 1) weight, when atoms moving downwards carried by their own weight until there is nothing to stop them, just as race horses surge forward when the gates open in front of them in the hippodrome and 2) impact, when the atoms are impelled by blows, just as a person is forced to move one direction or the other when pushed by the crowd at a horserace (cf. Lucretius *DRN* II 263–83).
- 21 Cicero makes things more complicated by presenting Epicurus' concern once about the Principle of Bivalence ( $T[p] \vee F[p]$ , where T stands for true, F for false and p for proposition) and sometimes about the Law of the Excluded Middle ( $p \vee \neg p$ ).
- 22 At least as interpreted by Cicero in *De Fato* 22.
- 23 For a fairly comprehensive summary of the different positions by 2005 cf. O'Keefe 2005; for my new, non-reductive physicalist interpretation cf. Németh 2017, Ch. 2.
- 24 I would like to thank Kelly Arenson for the invitation to her volume. I also wish to thank Péter Agócs for his stimulating comments, and the organiser, Andrew Gregory, and the audience of the 2019 London Ancient Science Conference for their constructive reflections. This article was written with the support of the Hungarian NKFI-128651 and NKFI-120375 research grants.

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