

Sedley - Epicurus and His Professional Rivals

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EPICURUS AND HIS PROFESSIONAL RIVALS

I. Introduction

For a historical appreciation of any system of thought a certain amount of biographical information is needed. Often we may derive progress beyond vague speculation about its philosophical accuracy; for the same doctrine can just as well be fostered by the negative influence of one school of thought as by the positive influence of another. If, on the other hand, we can find out whom its founder taught and what he thought of them, our hand is immediately strengthened. In this regard we are very much better furnished with data about the origins of Epicureanism than we are about those of Stoicism and Skepticism, the other two schools that grew up in the generation following the death of Aristotle. But the thing is that within the Epicureans there often appeared those (never handful) whom the two main schools.

The object of this study is to establish just what Epicurus did think of certain philosophers to whom he was especially interested.

The first essential is a brief outline of Epicurus' early career. Born in Samos in 341 B.C., he was the son of an Athenian clerk, a schoolmaster named Nectes. He turned to the study of philosophy in his early teens, in part, it was said, at his schoolmaster's inability to answer his question: «If Democritus' "Three that was created"Chaos" what was the Chaos created from?». The teacher replied that it was the job of the so-called philosophers to answer such questions. It was probably at this time that Epicurus began to attend the lectures of a local Platonic named Pamphilo. At the age of eighteen he had to travel to Athens for his year's military training. This was in 323, when Aristotle had already quit Athens for Chalcis. At the Academy, Xenocrates was in charge, and Epicurus could have attended his lectures, but did not. At some stage, probably after his year in Athens, he studied under Panaetius of Teos, a thought of Democritus. In 311/10, at the age of thirty-one, he set up his first school. This was in Mytilene, but he quickly moved on to Lampsacus, where he taught until 307/6. Then, at the age of thirty-five, he travelled to Athens, bought the plot of land which was to

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