

NeoPlatonism Basics Relevant to the Study of Epicurus

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I'm going to indulge in some wild and weird speculation here, so if it doesn't interest anyone else I understand. I imagine that if Epicureanism had persisted as a robust school into late antiquity it would have seen some very creative and controversial developments, in response to the new Platonism and other currents, that might be interesting to speculate about. For one thing, I imagine that, like with other schools, the Epicureans could well have branched into competing tendencies of interpretation, so that any response by one set of Epicureans might well be rejected as flawed or compromised by another set. Philodemus witnesses to some nascent divisions in the Epicurean movement though the differences don't seem to have hardened into rival factions.

Theurgy

Iamblichus aligned his Platonism with popular rites through his theurgic interpretation. Whereas Plotinus took a largely aloof attitude to popular cults and material piety, Iamblichus countered that, as fully embodied souls we must make use of material means to re-ascend to the gods. He said that the gods have sown *synthemata*- tokens or signatures- of their power throughout the world, so that various stones, plants, animals, sounds, etc. carry the influence radiating from specific deities. The gods did not descend to earth but by means of these tokens humans could ritually "participate" in the gods. Worship did not benefit the gods and accounts of gods' wrath or favor were interpreted as figures for the blessings or sufferings that man experienced based on the degree he aligned with the divine order. The gods did not actively order the cosmos; rather the cosmos was formed and ordered through the effortless overflowing of divinity. I believe this conception developed partly in response to Epicurean critiques of traditional religion.

On the matter of theurgy I think some Epicureans would have seen an opening to assert and expand on their own piety, as certain parallels of the theurgic idea are already present, at least implicitly, in the Epicurean theology. Like the Platonic theurgists the Epicureans saw worship as a way to emulate the gods, which was of benefit only to the worshipper. Like the Platonic gods the [Epicurean gods](#) radiated influence through the cosmos that reached earth. I don't think it would be a radical leap to further interpret the *eidola* radiating from the gods' bodies as inhering not only in human minds but in particular materials which were therefore especially helpful in attuning a ritual to a particular gods' influence. What might such an Epicurean theurgy look like? I imagine something comparable to Tantric Buddhist deity yoga where meditators chant, employ ritual implements, sing hymns, and either visualize a deity sitting before them, contemplating their various attributes, or even visualize themselves as the deity

situated in that deity's Pure Land. (To be clear I am not trying to suggest that Epicureanism and Buddhism are very similar).

This leads to one clear advantage I think the Epicureans could have had over the neoplatonists in the religious marketplace- while the Platonists were trying to present their philosophy as the inner truth of traditional religion, their conception of deity would have been quite foreign to the average polytheist of the Greco-Roman world. The Epicureans' gods, in their distance and non-interference, were also quite different but, crucially, they were anthropomorphic. You could actually picture them and this picture was held to have a reasonable semblance to the original. Confronted with a statue, say, of Venus, an Epicurean would say to a worshipper, "Yes, that's pretty much what she looks like," while a Platonist would have to say, "Well, it represents her attributes in terms communicable in this gross material plane, but really she's a sphere." *Huh?*

Epicureans, with their thorough materialist account of the universe, could remove the terror of the gods without elevating them into inhuman abstractions, and without positing a complicated hierarchy of gods and intermediate beings, with matter at the bottom. They did not have to engage in agonized theorizing about how matter is actually good since the idea of matter as some kind of prison or obscuration didn't arise for them to begin with.

Perennial Tradition

The Platonists liked to position themselves not just as followers of Plato but the exponents of a universal wisdom tradition, found not only in the Greeks but traceable to various wise "barbarian" peoples (Egypt, Babylon, India, sometimes the Jews were included here). As far as I can tell, Epicureans never claimed that Epicurus was following any tradition. Insofar as he had influences/ teachers he improved on them and his philosophical system was altogether new. However "tradition" was very much in vogue- to the point that simply saying, "it's new" was enough to discount any system for some people (one of the sharpest points made by anti-Christian polemicists like Porphyry was that Christianity was innovation). In this context I wonder if some Epicureans would have been tempted to position their school as also embodying a primordial tradition. Saying Epicurus had a teacher from Egypt or India would probably be too implausible but the Epicurean doctrine of the gods as models for Epicurean living could position the teaching as a divine revelation. Moreover the conception of an infinite, eternal universe with infinite worlds could be made to support a doctrine of Epicurus-like sages appearing periodically throughout the universe and inspiring successors in other worlds by means of their god-like simulacra flying through space. Pretty far out but not any crazier than the doctrines Buddhism developed about infinite Buddhas pervading the universe.

Esoteric Hermeneutics and Poetics

Something the middle and late Platonists took up from the Stoics was the interpretation of traditional myths as veiled allegories of natural processes or higher philosophical truths. Plato himself made selective use of myths as teaching tools, but rejects many others and was suspicious of poets and rhetoricians for teaching untruths in sweet language. Reading myths as veiled philosophy allowed later Platonists to take a different approach which allowed them to

read some high philosophical meaning in even some of the most unpromising material. Eventually you get Proclus make a full-on defense of Homer, reading Homer as a Neoplatonist in disguise. Proclus gives a remarkable theory of symbols- because everything in the universe has a single source, everything is somehow deeply connected, so that not only can things be represented by like symbols, but the more unlike its referent a given symbol is, the more powerful is their connection, so that good poets will draw correspondences between apparently very disparate things (such as, say, depicting the gods as vengeful adulterers, murderers, drunks, etc.)

Epicurus rejected Hesiod and Homer and was reportedly suspicious of figurative language in general. There's the bit in Diogenes Laertius about Epicurus saying that sages are best able to discuss poetry but don't write it themselves (or don't write it very actively, depending on how it's translated). I think it's safe to say that Epicurus would have thought Proclus' approach to be ridiculous or insane- in fact I'm not sure if Plato would have been keen on it.

But as every school of thought develops nuances or even contradictions as its adherents apply its principles in varying times and places, I think the Epicureans might have also developed some novel ways of using myth and poetry. When Lucretius used an epic poem to expound Epicureanism he was already overturning the understanding that poetry was unsuitable for imparting philosophy. The opening invocation of Venus as a supreme goddess, and the petition that she lull her lover Mars, are not of course in accordance with Epicurean theology and demand to be read allegorically. I think for one thing, at this stage, the myths had been discussed and interpreted by philosophers enough that the danger of an educated person credulously deriving dogmas from them was significantly lessened than maybe in Epicurus' day.

Could the Epicureans have found their own use of the highly creative hermeneutics like the Neoplatonists employed? The Stoics and Platonists for one thing are heavily invested in an analogical reading of the cosmos and the foundational principle for this is some sense of the unity of all things. As far as I know Epicureanism rejected any unifying principle like Logos or the One, so on what foundation could an Epicurean poetics emerge that sees the interpenetration of all phenomena? Some possible candidates...

Matter. Epicurus rejects the possibility that all things could be made by combinations of a single type of atom, so there must be an incalculably large variety of atoms. Nonetheless everything shares in this material character and in an infinite eternal universe it's possible that every atom has existed in combination with every other one.

The void. The atoms are infinitely many but the void is fundamentally one. The void which allows for the differentiation of bodies also unites them. However different or far apart the bodies are, they move in the same void, which could be conceived as a single principle on which all existence rests.

Pleasure. Pleasures vary but are one in their foundation. Or, since the chief pleasure of the mind is the contemplation of nature all phenomena are joined in this pleasure.

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Whew, I wrote a lot. That's a long post. If I bored anyone, I'm sorry.