THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL

Volume 42 Number 4
JANUARY 1947

The Unknown Philosopher

Epicurus: Philosophy for the Millions

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THE FASCINATION of ancient Greek civilization is increased when we recognize it as presenting the spectacle of an intelligent race in the process of emerging from the Stone Age. The Stone Age man was no less intelligent than his posterity and whether by the spoken word or the dexterous hand he was capable of producing art, but the logic of his thought was confined within the limits marked by myth and magic, oracle and miracle. To open a breach in this mesh of habits and to assert for the first time the birthright of man as a rational being is what is here meant by emerging from the Stone Age. On the material level the change is inaugurated by the metallurgist; on the intellectual level it is begun by the man who for the first time launches an hypothesis to explain the physical world and its workings. Science marches on from hypothesis to hypothesis.

THE FIRST FUMBLING attempts to reason from manifest effects to hidden causes and to present a picture of the inner nature of things were made on the margin of the Greek world; it is around the rim of a vessel that the blinking beads of ferment are first seen to rise. On that restless Greek frontier was born a succession of pioneers of thought. Of their reasoned guesses the majority now seem absurd, but within two centuries their tentative efforts had arrived at an atomic theory of the constitution of matter. This was far from being absurd; it was the borderland of chemistry.

The greatest name in this succession of first researchers was that of Democritus, who became known as the laughing philosopher. In his ethical teaching great store was set by cheerfulness.

Democritus was still living when the new scientific movement suffered a violent reverse. It was in Athens, a center of conservatism, that the opposition arose and it was brilliantly headed. The leader was no other than Socrates, who despaired of the possibility of scientific knowledge. Even Aristotle, who pioneered in some branches of science, rejected the atomic theory. Between

¶This article outlines a new interpretation of Epicureanism. Documentation will be offered elsewhere. In the meantime the author will gladly furnish references if requested: 108 Bernard Avenue, Toronto 5, Ontario, Canada.

Norman W. DeWitt is Professor Emeritus of Latin in Victoria College, University of Toronto. For a number of years his researches have been devoted to Epicurus. The need for a re-interpretation of the work and influence of this truly unknown philosopher can hardly be over-estimated, for he belongs to that other classical tradition which was overshadowed by Platonism and Stoicism. Unobserved by humanists, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a renaissance of science which took men back to Hippocrates and Democritus—and upon this renaissance the modern world was built.

these two great names came that of Plato, who believed the ultimate realities to be not atoms but triangles, cubes, spheres and the like. By a kind of analogy he extended this doctrine to the realm of abstract thought. If, for example, perfect spheres exist, why should not perfect justice exist also? Convinced that such perfect justice did exist, he sought in his own way to find it. The ten books of his *Republic* record only part of his searchings of the mind. At the core of all this thinking lies the doctrine that the eternal, unchangeable things are forms, shapes, models, patterns, or, what means the same thing in Greek, "ideas." All visible things are but changing copies of unchanging forms.

The Epicurean Revival

AFTER the great triumvirate of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had passed away the scientific tradition was revived with timely amendments by Epicurus. In his time it was the prevalent teaching that the qualities of compound bodies must be explained by the qualities of the ingredients. If the compound body was cold, then it must contain the cold element air, if moist, water, if dry, earth, and if hot, fire. Even Aristotle sanctioned this belief in the four elements. Epicurus, on the contrary, maintained that colorless atoms could produce a compound of any color according to the circumstances of their combination. This was the first definite recognition of what we now know as chemical change.

The Stoic Reaction

EPICURUS was still a young man when Athenian conservatism bred a second reaction to the new science. This was headed by Zeno, the founder of Stoicism. His followers welcomed a regression more extreme than that of Aristotle in respect to the prime elements. For the source of their physical theories they went back to Heracleitus, who believed that the sole element was fire. This was not a return to the Stone Age but it was a longish way in that direction.

This Heracleitus had been a doleful and eccentric individual and became known, in contrast to the cheerful Democritus, as the weeping philosopher. His gloom was perpetuated in Stoicism, a cheerless creed, of which the founder is described as "the sour and scowling Zeno." Epicurus, on the contrary, urged his disciples "to wear a smile while they practised their philosophy."

Running parallel to these contrasting attitudes toward life and physical theories was an equally unbroken social divergence. Platonism as a creed was always aristocratic and in favor in royal courts. "I prefer to

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OUR FRONTISPIECE

At the beginning of the Appian Way, close to the Forum and the Colosseum—in the heart of Rome—the Triumphal Arch of Constantine stands as a reminder that the Emperor Constantine, who made the Roman Empire Christian and thus paved the way for the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages, was also deeply rooted in the age-old Roman past. Studying the Arch, archaeologists have discovered that most of its sculptural ornament is borrowed from older monuments, so that the Arch itself is a true symbol of Constantine.

Constantine went on to found a new capital in the East, where he made over the thousand-year-old Greek city of Byzantium into a new Roman capital, renaming it "Constantinople" (or, in modern Turkish, Istanbul). Constantinople flourished through the Middle Ages and was the center of the brilliant Christian art called Byzantine. Dumbarton Oaks, the great estate, collection, and library in Washington recently presented to Harvard, is devoted to the study of this classical-rooted art. (From the Radcliffe College pamphlet "The Classics in College," beginning on Page 223 of this issue.)

Courtesy of the Fogg Museum of Art
Harvard University

agree with Plato and be wrong than to agree with those Epicureans and be right," wrote Cicero, and this snobbish attitude was not peculiar to him. Close to Platonism in point of social ranking stood Stoicism, which steadily extolled virtue, logic and divine providence. This specious front was no less acceptable to hypocrites than to saints. Aptly the poet Horace, describing a pair of high-born hypocrites, mentions "Stoic tracts strewn among the silken cushions." Epicureanism, on the contrary, offered no bait to the silk-cushion trade. It eschewed all social distinction. The advice of the founder was to have only so much regard for public opinion as to avoid unfriendly criticism for either sordidness or luxury. This was no fit creed for the socially or politically ambitious.

The Schoolteacher's Son

WHO, THEN, was this cheerful and friendly Epicurus, this apostle of the unambitious life? He was the son of an Athenian schoolteacher resident on the island of Samos. These items carry no sting today but in Athens it was different. That cradle of democracy was democratic only within limits. Its citizens looked down upon both islanders and schoolteachers: upon islanders as small fry, who needed protection from the stronger; upon schoolteachers because, like their own secluded women, they spent their time with children. A satirist not only twitted Epicurus with being an islander but also coined a comic name for him, *Grammadidaskalides*, as if we should have a name "Schoolteacherson." Of a certain rival Epicurus himself had the following to record: "This upset him so completely that he fell to abusing me and called me a schoolteacher."

Evidence of the little tempest that swirled for a time about this word is furnished by the fact that from the school of Epicurus it was banned. Not only the head himself but all his assistants were styled "guides" or "leaders."

It is hardly to be expected that a man so discounted by the upper classes in antiquity, to whom ancient writers for the greater part addressed themselves, should enjoy an unspotted record with posterity, and to so express it is a euphemism. Much of what may be read concerning Epicurus even in the most recent handbooks consists of traditional misrepresentation, disparagement or plain falsehood. His life, for example, has been called uneventful. This is certainly untrue of his youth. His boyhood fell in the years when every Greek hamlet must have been ringing with the startling reports of Alexander's victories. The time for performing his required military service coincided with the news of Alexander's tragic end. As a cadet or ephebe he must have witnessed, as it were, the last futile war against Macedon, the reception in Athens of a Macedonian garrison and the suicide of Demosthenes. Even the forced retirement of Aristotle during the same crisis and his death at Chalcis must have been meaningful enough to one already interested in philosophy.

During this same two-year interval the paternal home in Samos had been broken up and the family expelled from the island. All the Athenian settlers were evicted by the Macedonian general Perdiccas. Some twelve years later Epicurus himself was destined to be forcibly driven from Mytilene. Even after his final settlement in Athens the city endured a painful siege and the beans doled out to the members of the school had to be counted. Such are a few highlights of a life that biographers call "uneventful."

The Pragmatic Urgency

HIS STORMY cadetship terminated, Epicurus rejoined his father and family in Asia, where a safe refuge had been found in the ancient city of Colophon. There in the course of the ensuing decade a great illumination came to him and the result was a new philosophy inevitably conditioned by the external events and the intellectual currents of the time. In so far as this new philosophy revived the scientific tradition it was Ionian; in so far as it exalted ethics above physics it was virtually Socratic. Yet this similarity is apt to be obscured by more conspicuous differences. The new doctrine divorced ethics from politics, which was heterodoxy in Athens. It

allied itself instead with the Ionian tradition of medicine, which was philanthropic and independent of political preferences. Just as all human beings, men, women and children, slave and free, stand in need of health, so all mankind, according to Epicurus, stands in need of guidance toward the happy life. This view of things tinged his philosophy with the color of a gospel and bestowed upon it a pragmatic urgency, which is lacking in Socratic thought. With the leisurely meanderings of dialectic he had no patience. Truth, he believed, must possess immediate relevance to living.

The New Ecumenical Outlook

THE NATURE of the new outlook was placed in a bright light by a comparison that suggested itself to Epicurus. In Athens men practised a weird Corybantic rite of mental healing in which the patient sat solitary upon a throne while the ministrants went dancing around him in riotous music and song. The first reaction to this treatment, should the cure succeed, was bewilderment, the second drowsiness, and the third an ecstatic awakening to joy and health. In this rite Epicurus saw a reversed image of his own program of healing. Instead of a single favored individual surrounded by a ministering multitude he envisaged the vast multitude of humanity in need of healing while a lone personified Philanthropia offered her ministrations: "Love goes dancing round and round the inhabited earth, crying to all men to awake to the blessedness of the happy life." About the identity of this Love there can be no doubt; it is the Hippocratic love of mankind, which to true members of that craft was inseparable from the love of healing.

In this teaching Epicurus displayed his originality. His new design for living was applicable everywhere, irrespective of country or government. He had emancipated himself from the obsessions of his race, political separatism and the exclusive faith in political action. The whole world was a single parish.

It is mere justice that other original features of the new philosophy should receive recognition. Cicero, a crafty trial lawyer, in his last years employed the tricks of the courts to discredit Epicureanism with his contemporaries and with posterity. Among other false charges he upbraided Epicurus for neglecting methodical partitions of subject matter, classifications and definitions. Yet the pragmatic partition of knowledge that was standard in Cicero's own day and throughout the greater part of ancient time was the invention of the despised Epicurus. His division was three-headed: The Canon, Physics and Ethics. The Stoics, always great borrowers, changed this partition into Physics, Ethics and Logic. Their Logic was taken from Aristotle, nor did it matter that this was substituted for the Canon. Both the Canon and Logic had for their function the test of truth.

The Canon

THE ORDERLINESS of Epicurean thought, which Cicero denied, is also exemplified by the Canon. According to this we possess three contacts with the external world: Sensations, Feelings and Anticipations. In our handbooks two of these three are completely misrepresented. It is usual to declare that Epicurus believed "in the infallibility of sensation." Not even the ancients ventured to go so far as this in misrepresentation. What Epicurus really did believe was that only immediate sensations are true. For example, if the observer sees an ox at a distance of ten feet, he can be sure it is an ox, but if he sees an animal at the distance of a mile, he may be uncertain whether it is an ox or a horse. Moreover, it does not follow that because a sensation is true it is also trustworthy. An oar in the water appears to be bent; the sensation is true but it is false to the facts. Naturally all sensations must be checked by one another and by those of other observers.

The Feelings alone have been rightly reported. By these were meant pleasure and pain. These are instruments of Nature in teaching both brute beasts and human beings the facts of life: honey is sweet, fire hurts.

The third term, Anticipation (Prolepsis), has suffered worst from misinterpretation.

Unlike the Sensations and Feelings, the reference of which is chiefly to physical contacts, the Anticipations have to do with social relations and with abstract ideas, such as that of justice. Epicurus rightly observed that both animals and human beings from the moment of birth not only reach out for food and avoid pain but also exhibit soon a predisposition to fall into patterns of behavior agreeable to their respective kinds. In the case of human beings he speaks of this predisposition as an idea faintly sketched on the mind at birth. Since it there exists in advance of experience of life and of conscious reflection it is styled by him an Anticipation or Prolepsis.

Moreover, since a certain pattern of behavior is proper to each race of living things, it follows that in the case of the human race, for example, a definition of justice, to be true, must square itself with the innate idea of justice. It is in this sense that the Anticipations serve as tests of truth and find a place in the Canon. Truth must square with Nature.

The error of the handbooks on this point is fundamental. They have confused general concepts, such as that of a horse, with abstract ideas, such as those of justice, piety or friendship.

These three, then, Sensations, Feelings and Anticipations, constituted the Epicurean tripod of truth. Through the first we come to know the physical world; through the second we learn the pleasures and pains of living; by the third we are guided aright to the recognition of abstract truth.

The New Physics

THE ORDERLINESS of Epicurean thought is admirably exemplified also in the Physics. In a textbook entitled the *Twelve Abridgements* Epicurus furnished his disciples with the only coherent and complete summary of the general principles of physics ever promulgated in the ancient world. A few specimens will suffice for illustration: 1. Matter is indestructible. 2. Matter is uncreatable. 3. The universe consists of atoms and space. 4. The universe is infinite. 5. Bodies are either simple or compound.

The rest of the principles deal with the qualities of atoms, their hardly imaginable speed in space, their vibrations in compounds, their capacity to form compounds possessing qualities not possessed by themselves, such as color or plasticity, and their proneness to form filmy images of things, called idols, which explain the sensation of vision.

Especially important was the doctrine that in the motions of the atoms there existed a sufficient degree of free play to permit the exercise of free will in animals and man. This is known as "the doctrine of the swerve."

The New Freedom

EPICURUS was the first Greek philosopher to expressly sponsor a doctrine of free will. His predecessors had recognized three forces as incompatible with the freedom of the individual. First, certain physicists, Democritus among them, had posited the supremacy of the inviolable laws of Nature. This was known as Necessity. Second, the Greeks in general had thought of man as helpless before the will of the gods. This was called either Fate or Necessity. Third, the Greeks generally conceded to Fortune the ability to make or mar the happiness of men.

Like the modern pragmatist, Epicurus stressed the power of man to control his experience. The Necessity of the physicists he eliminated by his doctrine of a certain freedom of play in the atoms. The Necessity of Fate he expunged by denying any form of divine interference in the affairs of men. Fortune he taught his disciples to defy on the ground that the caprices of chance could be all but completely forestalled by rational planning. These teachings nullified the importance of Greek poets as moral teachers. Homer and the tragic drama went overboard. Epicurus styled their moral teachings a hodge-podge.

This new freedom signified the privilege of being continuously happy. This too was new, because Plato and most other teachers had assumed the existence of peaks of pleasure alternating with intervals void of pleasure. Continuous pleasure Epicurus made conceivable and feasible by defining pleasure as

a healthy mind in a healthy body, mens sana in corpore sano. The limit of it was freedom from pain of body and distress of mind. Pleasure, he said, was normal, just as health is normal; pain was abnormal, just as sickness is abnormal. By living the right kind of life and by limiting the desires he declared that continuity of happiness could be achieved. The control of experience was to him a categorical imperative.

Pleasure Not the Greatest Good

IN SPITE of this teaching it was not the doctrine of Epicurus that pleasure was the greatest good. To his thinking the greatest good was life itself. This was a logical deduction from the denial of immortality. Without the afterlife this present life becomes the concentration of all values. Pleasure, or happiness, has its place as the end, goal or fulfilment of living.

It was the Stoics and Cicero who concocted and publicized the false report that Epicurus counted pleasure as the greatest good. This is mistakenly asserted in all our handbooks.

The New Psychology

JUST AS THE BELIEF in immortality leads to the exaltation of the soul and the depreciation of the body, so the belief in mortality presumes a certain parity of importance between soul and body. To Epicurus the soul is of similar structure to the body, differing only in the fineness and mobility of the component atoms. Body and soul work as a team. The soul bestows sensitivity upon the body and the body in turn bestows it upon the soul. This results in "co-sensitivity," as Epicurus calls it. Sensation itself, he claimed, is irrational. Thus the tongue by physical contact receives the stimulus of sweetness, but it is the intelligence, part of the soul, that recognizes this stimulus and issues the pronouncement, "This is honey." This interdependence of soul and body extends to all activities. Responses to stimuli are total, not separate; they are "psychosomatic," to use a term of modern psychiatry. Epicurus scorned all philosophy that failed to regard psychiatry as its function.

Persecution by the Platonists

AT THE AGE of thirty Epicurus migrated from Colophon to Mytilene and began to promulgate these heterodoxies as a public teacher. In that city the Platonists were dominant. Within the space of a few months he seems to have had them about his ears. Within a year their enmity had aroused the authorities and so incited the populace that he was forced to take ship in the winter season and in danger of shipwreck or capture by pirates. Never afterward did he venture like other philosophers to teach in public places.

In Lampsacus on the Hellespont he found a refuge, gained the favor of the authorities, assembled a strong school and obtained financial support. After four years he felt strong enough to carry the war into Africa, as is said in Roman history, and removed to Athens, locating himself on the same street as Plato's Academy and not far from it.

The New Procedures

PERSECUTION had not changed his doctrines but it did revolutionize his procedures. Public appearances were avoided; instruction was confined to his own house and the garden he had purchased. Outside of the school he instituted a method of disseminating his new doctrine by personal contacts. Each convert was urged to win over the members of his own household, his friends and neighbors, "never slackening in spreading by every means the doctrines of the true philosophy." Prospective converts were plied with books and tracts. Epicurus himself, like John Wesley, became a busy compiler of textbooks, and specific instructions were written for the proper use of them. He made outlines of doctrine for those who were unable to live in residence. The allegiance of disciples living in other cities was retained by epistles painstakingly composed. Thus the new school was transformed into a self-propagating sect.

Within two centuries this self-extending gospel of the tranquil life had spread to most parts of the Graeco-Roman world. "It took Italy by storm," as Cicero reluctantly records. At the same time the forces of opposi-

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GREEK TRAGEDY IN FRANCE AND AMERICA

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IN HIS NOTE "Antigone and French Resistance,"[1] Professor Berry calls attention to the role that Anouilh's *Antigone* played in the French underground resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. In this connection, it is interesting to note that another adaptation of a well-known Greek tragic theme has also served a similar purpose. *Les Mouches* by Jean-Paul Sartre is a reinterpretation of the Atreus story. In this recent version, Orestes resolves to carry out the murder "not because of any doom on the house of Atreus, not because he must bring about what is already fated, but for the opposite reason, because he must free the house of Atreus and the people of Argos, because the act will be for him as well as others an emancipation, a justification by works."[2]

The significance of this recent play in the resistance movement is effectively stated by Mr. Bentley as follows: "*The Flies*, like Goethe's *Egmont* and Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, is a political drama of resistance to tyranny, of belief in freedom. One can imagine what force some of the lines must have had in occupied France: the arguments for action, for tyrannicide, the recurrence of the word 'liberté,' the fascistic ugliness of all the symbols of authority, the libertarian audacity of Orestes."[3]

Classicists should not overlook the fact that both in France and America thinkers are turning to the ancient Greeks for guidance in understanding today's problems. In a recent editorial "Untragic America" the editors of LIFE outline what, in their judgment, America and American drama have to learn from Greek Tragedy.[4] This current interest in the Greeks is another challenge to classicists to introduce and to develop courses particularly in translation for the many Americans who may have the desire but not the linguistic ability to understand the Greeks.

NOTES

[1] Edmund G. Berry, "Antigone and French Resistance," THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL, 42 (1946), 17–18.

[2] Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock (1946), 242.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] LIFE, 21 (1946), no. 23, p. 32. The editorial, however, falls into the common error of considering the idea of progress as something foreign to antiquity: "This habit is an optimistic faith in progress. Professor J. B. Bury, who wrote a history of *The Idea of Progress*, defines it to mean 'that civilization has moved, is moving and will move in a desirable direction.' This idea is only about as old as modern science, stemming from Bacon and Descartes." This statement, of course, overlooks the fact that the very tragedians mentioned in the editorial were all concerned with the idea of progress—Aeschylus in the *Prometheus Bound* (436–506); Sophocles in the *Antigone* (332–364); Euripides in the *Supphants* (195–218).

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tion were growing in like proportion. The campaigns of the Stoics became so notorious that modern scholars have all but overlooked the original battle with the Platonists, whose acrid criticisms were refurbished by Plutarch under the early Empire. By that time the Christian writers had joined the chorus of the opposition and at last, in the stormy fourth century, the friendly sect seems to have been finally silenced. For some centuries afterward all that survived was a trickle of untruth. Men still knew something of epicurism but nothing of Epicureanism.

Yet when the study of natural science was at last reborn, it was the once rejected atomic theory that furnished a starting point for modern chemistry, and when modern thinkers began to see evolutionary processes in human institutions, it was observed that long ago Epicurus that blazed that path of enquiry. Erring with Plato had its pleasure and its profit but also its price, the postponement of scientific progress. Platonic thought had some close affinities with the Stone Age.