

Eternal Epicurus

by Pierre-Marie Morel

Contrary to popular belief, the Middle Ages did not discard Epicurus. Several thinkers were in constant dialogue with Epicureanism, even as they condemned it. And many quietly rehabilitated it.

A review of: Aurélien Robert, [Épicure aux Enfers. Hérésie, athéisme et hédonisme au Moyen Âge](#), Fayard, 2021, 367 p., 24 €.

Some books suddenly lift the veil that previously concealed an episode or an aspect of the history of thought, thus opening broad perspectives. Such is the case with Aurélien Robert's work on the presence of Epicurus in the Middle Ages. Until Robert, we had been aware of Epicurus's presence in the Renaissance—thanks to authors such as Lorenzo Valla and Cosimo Raimondi (mentioned by Robert, pp. 290-309)—and we had known about the presence of Epicureanism in the 17th and 18th centuries—through the work of Olivier Bloch on Gassendi or, more recently, that of Catherine Wilson¹—and more generally about the transition from ancient to modern atomism. But we had not at all grasped the importance of Epicurus for the Middle Ages.

¹ See their respective overviews: O. Bloch, "L'héritage moderne de l'épicurisme antique", in A. Gigandet and P.-M. Morel (eds), *Lire Épicure et les épicuriens*, Paris, Puf, 2007, pp. 187-207; C. Wilson, "Epicureanism in Early Modern Philosophy", in J. Warren (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 266-286. See also: N. Leddy and A.S. Lifschitz (eds), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2009.

Epicureanism: From Dismissal to Revival

Is there any philosophical current more constantly vilified than Epicureanism? Already during Epicurus' lifetime, people were outraged by his praise of pleasure. In his short Letter to Menecaeus (§131), the founder of the Garden defended himself at length against those who took his words to mean something that they did not and who claimed that his philosophy justified debauchery through identifying pleasure with the end, the *telos*. Despite this, Cicero denounced Epicureanism in the harshest of terms; he knew the doctrine very well and likely found it fascinating, but he argued that it was made for the people, like a sort of vulgar, ready-made philosophy designed to flatter the senses at little cost. In so doing, he foreshadowed Plutarch, the Stoics of the imperial era, and the Christian witnesses of the first centuries of our era. The Middle Ages inherited all this and no doubt amplified the diatribe, to the point where it was long thought—and is still often thought—that when it came to Epicureanism, medieval thinkers had no other intention than to discard the doctrine, to remove it from the philosophical scene, whether through dogma or through sheer ignorance.

It is indeed commonly accepted that Epicurus was forgotten at the end of Antiquity and eclipsed throughout the Middle Ages, only to be reintroduced on the intellectual scene at the beginning of the 15th century, with the translations of Lucretius and Diogenes Laerce. This view was reinforced by Stephen Greenblatt's best-selling book (*The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, 2011), which treats Poggio Bracciolini's discovery of a manuscript of Lucretius in 1417 as one of the founding events of Modernity.

In Search of a Medieval Epicurus

The book offers a very different perspective on the presence of Epicurus in the Middle Ages and, consequently, on the transmission of his thought to Modernity. Robert is not so much arguing that things are complicated—they always are when one looks closely at the texts and at their historical conditions of emergence—as he is trying to reveal fault lines that previously went unnoticed. In this sense, he aims to chart a “new intellectual landscape” (p. 14). This formula is not an attempt at self-promotion on his part, but a genuine result, guaranteed by the rigor of his method. Robert convincingly shows that the Middle Ages were, in fact, in constant dialogue with Epicureanism, even though this dialogue was most often polemical and negative. To

this end, he clarifies at every step the pragmatic issues at stake in the relationship to Epicurus, linking the successive images of this relationship to their “contextual function” (p. 17). At the same time, he highlights the historical, cultural, and social conditions of the use of Epicureanism in the Middle Ages, thus enriching our perception of the philosophical problem with considerations relating to the history of institutions and discourses (on heresy, see pp. 62-70). By proceeding in this manner, Robert reveals in turn features of medieval culture and thought that had been largely neglected, and this beyond the Latin Middle Ages—see Part II, Chapters 5 and 6, which are devoted respectively to the rabbinic tradition and to “the Epicurean in the godless cosmologies of Islam”.

Epicurus in the Middle Ages: Between Condemnation and Rehabilitation

In order to be convincing, the argumentation had to be built on a sound knowledge of the original Epicurean *corpus* and the specialized scientific literature. This was indeed the case. Robert’s aim was not to produce purely philological analyses of Greek and Latin Epicurean texts, though he did offer every guarantee in this respect by using specialized translations and commentaries and by taking great care in reconstructing the doctrine, including by citing texts that medievalists could not have known about, such as the Epicurean inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda, discovered at the end of the 19th century. Robert’s nuanced discussion of Epicurus’ “religion” (pp. 25-34), which contrasts with accounts of his impiety, demonstrates the strength of his references. As he notes with some mischief, “the Garden was a school, a circle of friends, but it certainly was not a secular club” (p. 26). Indeed, Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods; they even said that these were incorruptible and perfectly happy. As for Epicurus himself, he was renowned for his piety. Yet, these gods were indifferent to human affairs; they exercised no providence. Lucretius, for his part, equated piety with tranquility, that is, with psychic serenity. Robert is therefore justified in pointing out that Epicurean confidence in the divine was “directed towards objects other than the faith of the Christians”, and in assuming that the Christians feared that it was a substitute for true faith (p. 29).

From a historiographical point of view, one could perhaps argue that Robert does not always sufficiently distinguish between the legacy of the simple “figure” of

Epicurus, on the one hand, and the transmission of the texts themselves, on the other. Yet, apart from the fact that he discusses the latter point at length, notably with regard to Lucretius, it is undoubtedly the “figure”, and the fact that it can be invoked for this or that purpose, that is at the heart of the problem.

Robert in no way denies the very negative image of Epicurus and Epicureanism that was inherited from the ancient critics, but he shows how this image was renewed and fueled by new questions (notably theological and ethical questions) and new forms of writing. This was the case with Augustine, whose *Sermon in Carthage* (Sermon 150), which was widely read in the Middle Ages, paved the way for anti-Epicurean preaching by emphasizing the original character, as it were, of the heresy embraced by Epicurus. According to Robert’s reading, “Epicureans had already existed, in a way, before the founding of the Garden, in other forms, with other names. It was therefore the Christian Epicurean who now had to be fought and convinced” (p. 140). We also see this in Dante. Robert notes at the outset that Epicurus is not even among the philosophers whom the poet encounters in Limbo, the First Circle of Hell. It is in the Sixth Circle, the circle of the heretics, damned for eternity, that we finally see Epicurus and his disciples, “those who say the soul dies with the body” (quoted on p. 11).

However, Robert also describes the emergence, in the 12th century, of a more favorable perception of ancient Epicureanism, or at least of the personal figure of Epicurus. This can be seen in Abelard’s writings (see pp. 187-194). On the one hand, Abelard took up the anti-Epicurean themes found in the “pastoral strategy of the theologians of his time”—with some monks reminding him of “the swine of Epicurus.” On the other hand, in his *Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian*, he acknowledged, following Seneca, the sincerity of Epicurus’ morality and its conformity to “natural law”. John of Salisbury, who studied under Abelard, rejected the aspects of Epicurean doctrine that were least acceptable to him, while also retaining from it the possibility of pure voluptuousness in joy and peace of mind. He thus showed how one could produce, in Robert’s terms, a “Christian rereading of Epicurus’ philosophy” (p. 204). Also worthy of note are Robert’s convergent observations on Jean Gerson, in the early 15th century, and Boccaccio, in the 1370s. In some cases, we even see an unexpected form of “rehabilitation.” Gerson is one of those who identified “two Epicuruses”, one vulgar and the other historical. While the former was reprehensible, condemning himself to hell with his scandalous apology for bodily pleasures, the latter made a legitimate contribution to the philosophical representation of the sovereign good and his doctrine could be linked to Aristotle’s teachings in the

Nicomachean Ethics. Thus, in a sermon delivered in 1401, Gerson likened Epicurus to Seneca, when he referred to those who “affirmed that man’s happiness is undisturbed pleasure or peace of the soul” (quoted on p. 183). For the most part, Robert rightly emphasizes the influence of Seneca, whose sympathy for Epicureanism was indeed explicit. Yet, he also shows that the origins of what appears in Gerson’s work can in fact be traced back to the 12th century, which he claims is when the real “revival” of Epicurus occurred (see Chapter 10: “La renaissance d’Épicure au XII^e siècle,” (The Revival of Epicurus in the 12th Century)).

According to Robert, this revival paved the way for a veritable “return of pleasure” (as per the title of the fifth and final part of the book) at the end of the 13th century. Certain authors then substantially altered the givens of the problem and the perception of the figure of Epicurus by legitimizing intellectual pleasure and distinguishing it from bodily pleasure. Yet, it was not just a matter of recognizing the virtues of an ascetic Epicureanism: the body and sexuality also found a legitimate place in the preoccupations of the time. Let us recall, as Robert does (pp. 265-267), that Epicureans held a rather nuanced, sometimes even embarrassed position on sexuality: while the pleasures of sex were natural, they were not necessary, and they did pose a risk to the tranquility of the soul. Be that as it may, the pages on the presence of Epicureanism in the discourse of Italian physicians regarding the physiological benefits of sexuality (pp. 263-289) clearly show that, despite moral and religious prohibitions, Epicurus was reread in a learned and “disinhibited” manner as early as the 13th and 14th centuries.

Robert’s book dispels the idea that the Middle Ages unanimously condemned Epicureanism to the point where it was left in the shadows or plunged into oblivion. On the one hand, where Epicurus was condemned, he was ubiquitous; on the other hand, he was also rehabilitated, sometimes discreetly, but always in a way that did justice to the subtlety of his thought. In short, and to echo the final lines of this unique, scholarly and clearly written book, the Middle Ages may have consigned Epicurus to hell, but it was also the Middle Ages that brought him out of it.

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