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CICERO AND HIS CLAMOROUS SILENCES:
WAS HE FAIR ENOUGH WITH THE EPICUREANS
AND THEIR ETHICAL AND POLITICAL VIEWS?*

The opponents of Epicureanism in antiquity successfully established a cliché that has remained to this day: the theoretical and practical disinterest of Epicurus and the Epicureans in political communities. The best proof of their success is the transformation of the expressions «live unnoticed» (λάθε βιώσας) and «do not participate in politics» (μη πολιτεύσεσθαι) into famous Epicurean slogans. It is worthwhile, however, to note two well-known facts that cast doubt on this cliché. On the one hand, the Epicurean Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things* constitutes, as Strauss has underlined¹, one of the best and most influential documents of the conventionalist theory of justice. On the other hand, Epicureanism underpins one of the foundational works of modern political philosophy, Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Before Hobbes, Pierre Gassendi had also viewed Epicurus' philosophical project with sympathy². In fact, Hobbes and Gassendi had at their disposal the same Epicurean texts as did opponents of Epicureanism such as Cicero, Epictetus, and Plutarch (though the ancients also had access to works that have not been preserved). But while Hobbes and Gassendi found valuable considerations of political philosophy in Epicureanism, neither Cicero, Epictetus nor Plutarch refer to these ideas in their anti-Epicurean writings. The treatment by Cicero, Epictetus, or Plutarch of Epicureanism was not doxographical; it was part of the philosophical diatribes of antiquity (*i.e.*, the usual debates among the schools). These undoubtedly included some relevant testimonies and criticisms, but some of their usual techniques were the

* We are grateful to the reviewers for their remarks and critiques. Special thanks go to Ermanno Malaspina and Dino De Sanctis for sending us some material we needed for our paper.

¹ Strauss 1952, 111-112.

² In the 17th century Epicureanism appears in the background of the personal dialogue between Gassendi and Hobbes and their mutual influence in the years of the making of the *Leviathan* (for discussion, see Ludwig 1998, 401-454; Paganini 2020, 963-979).

omission of the adversary's views, simplification, exaggeration, and even the use of an overly melodramatic tone.

If our knowledge of Epicurean philosophy depended *exclusively* upon the information conveyed by their adversaries, we would be practically unaware of the political component of the Epicurean study of nature (φυσιολογία), and of the political considerations that grounded the Epicurean way of life. This paper aims to show how Cicero omits some elements of Epicureanism that are crucial to understanding how political reflection was integrated into Epicurean philosophy, as well as how it influenced the lifestyle and actions of those who subscribed to it. We argue that Cicero consciously omits these details for the sake of showing the plausibility of his own agenda. In this vein, we stress that Cicero deliberately omits important details of Epicurean arguments regarding ethics and politics and includes some silences that can be described as «clamorous» (one of our reviewers has objected to us our stance that Cicero is not a «meticulous witness» and that a fierce hostility towards Epicureanism always animated him. The reviewer notes that we neglect that Cicero's first teacher of philosophy was Phaedrus and that «il a toujours baigné dans un bain d'amitié épicurienne». We are aware that the Epicurean scholar Phaedrus was Cicero's first philosophy teacher. However, unlike what our reviewer states, that fact reinforces our position: there is no doubt that Cicero knew Epicurean philosophy very well. That is why his silences concerning essential aspects of Epicurean theory turn out to be so «clamorous»). As a matter of fact, Cicero bypasses the entire, crucial interconnection between political theory and the Epicurean study of nature (Epicurus' φυσιολογία).

While Cicero does include passing reference to Epicurean contractualism, he does not set out the Epicurean theoretical framework in which it was originally inscribed. This can at times make his testimony and assessment of Epicurean philosophy appear particularly virulent and negative. To make our point clearer, we think that Cicero and other writers (such as Plutarch) «absolutize», so to speak, the slogans «do not participate in politics» and «live unnoticed» as if they were principles of conduct of the Epicureans. However, they do not dedicate a single line to the specification of which text of Epicurus it comes from and what its *original context* was. Diogenes Laertius (10, 119) states that «do not participate in politics» was contained in the first book of *On Ways of Life* but offers no further information. The case of the slogan «live unnoticed» is

even more significant and, to some extent, more intriguing, since Plutarch devoted to it an entire treatise (*Live Unnoticed*) which does not contain the slightest information about its meaning or the text of Epicurus from which it comes. From this perspective, Plutarch's opusculum is especially disappointing, although very illustrative of how some topics in ancient thought were formed. Plutarch, in fact, not only does not provide any indication about the context of the expression λάθε βιώσας but almost makes it the appropriate motto for a *hidden* way of life by emphasizing its perversity (*Live Unnoticed* 1128d-e). These are undoubtedly characteristic rhetorical procedures in the philosophic diatribes of antiquity that require caution regarding the absolutization of the motto «live unnoticed». In fact, none of the *Key Doctrines* (hereafter *KD*) offers categorical rules of conduct and, not for nothing, Epicurus places prudence at the top of the doctrine (*LM* 132). As we will show in this paper, the testimonies about Epicurus do not paint a picture of a person shut away in the Garden and isolated from the life of Athens, but of someone who, while refusing to participate actively in politics, respected the laws and institutions of the city, participated in its worship and piety, integrated family relationships into the exercise of philosophy and cultivated friendships and philanthropy.

Before outlining the structure of the paper, let us look at the following about Cicero's approach to Epicurean doctrine. Security (ἀσφάλεια) is a key part of the precepts of Epicureanism as condensed in the *KD*. Seven of the forty *KD* refer to security, and one of them (*KD* 14) equates the Epicurean style of life to «the purest security» (εὐλικρινεστάτη ἀσφάλεια). *KD* 40 closes the series of *Key Doctrines* with several superlative expressions focused on the security of Epicurean life. The preserved texts of Epicurus contain few considerations about the notion of preconception. Still, Epicurus' two most extensive *Key Doctrines* (*KD* 37 and 38) deal precisely with the preconception of the just. These two passages discuss the historical dynamics to which the relationship between the just and the legal gives rise in political communities. So, if we add to the *Key Doctrines* concerned with security those that refer to the contractual justice, it can be said that almost a third of the *KD* refer to the topic of Epicurean life and society. Every Epicurean, Cicero writes, has learned the great man's Κύρια Δόξα, these pithy sayings being considered of the utmost importance for a happy life (Cic. *fin.* 2, 20). This statement suggests that Cicero could have taken into account all of the *Key Doctrines* when exposing and criticizing Epicureanism. It is understand-

able that he does not do this in a bitter vindictive speech like *Against Piso*, where he caricatures Epicureanism by means of popular anti-Epicurean arguments in order to denigrate the «Epicurean» Piso³. He does not refer to the whole of the *KD* in either his letters or his treatises. In fact, when Cicero refers to Epicurean apoliticism, or to the supposed performative contradictions of Epicurean belief, he does not consider any of the *KD* related to the topic of the Epicurean life and society. If that is the case, then a third of the Κύρια Δόξα remain silenced in Cicero's testimony.

The paper proceeds thus: In section 1 we show that Cicero bases the Epicurean disinterest in political communities on the egoistic hedonism that he derives from the rules of conduct of the Epicurean wise (such rules stemming from the famous slogans «live unnoticed» and «do not participate in politics»). Interestingly, Cicero omits all reference to Epicurean political philosophy, insofar as neither the sophisticated reflection of Epicureanism on the ontological status of the just nor the preconception of the just find any mention in Cicero's work (Epicureanism's rich reflections on security – ἀσφάλεια – are also omitted by Cicero in his writings). Next, in section 2 we highlight the ways in which Cicero was not a meticulous witness of Epicurus' and Epicureans' social interaction, and we argue that he ascribes to them performative contradictions on the basis of a deficient interpretation of their philosophy. Indeed, Cicero's treatment of Epicureanism was not historiographical (and, in a sense, it was not meant to be), but such an approach certainly evinces a certain historical levity. Finally, in section 3 we highlight the defining aspects of the Epicurean sage that Cicero omits when analyzing the position of the Epicureans vis-à-vis the story of the ring of Gyges. Such aspects are crucial to understand the relationship between the Epicurean sage, the just, and the laws.

1. Cicero, Epictetus, Plutarch, and the assumed apolitical attitude of the Epicureans

Cicero objects to the Epicureans that, in their arguments, history remains mute (*fin.* 2, 67). «I have never heard», he writes, «Lycurgus mentioned in Epicurus' school, or Solon, Miltiades, Themistocles, or Epami-

³ De Lacy 1941.

nondas, all of whom receive due acknowledgement from other philosophers» (trans. R. Woolf)⁴. To this list, he adds a long enumeration of illustrious Romans, which practically covers the whole history of Rome. With clear polemical purpose, Cicero includes among those people the ancestors of Torquatus, the representative of Epicureanism to whom he recites the glorious past of Rome. Either you must denigrate their actions, says Cicero to Torquatus, or you must give up your advocacy of pleasure (Cic. *fin.* 2, 67). As we show in section 3, Torquatus replies that this is a false dilemma since he can perfectly well explain the heroic actions of his ancestors from the grounds of Epicureanism.

Epictetus and Plutarch express themselves in similar terms to Cicero. After referring to the Epicureans' denial of providence and the piety of the polis, Epictetus ironically suggests that, from principles like these, our well-governed states have grown great and have made Sparta what it was. Those who died at Thermopylae, Epictetus sarcastically underlines, surely died because of doctrines like those of Epicureanism (*Discourses* 2, 20, 26). Plutarch is also in the habit of opposing Epicureanism to the great contributions to Greek political life made by non-Epicurean philosophers and, especially, by Plato and his disciples. Plutarch practically presents the Academy as a school for the training of politicians in the political life of the Greek world (*Adversus Colotem* [Col.] 1126b-d). In *Live Unnoticed* he contrasts the figures of Epaminondas, Thrasybulus, Themistocles, Camillus, and Plato to the uselessness of Epicurus and his followers (1128d, 1129bc). Cicero, Epictetus, and Plutarch each present Epicureanism as a philosophy entirely contrary to the motivations and actions based on the natural sociability of human beings who forged the history

⁴ *Numquam audivi in Epicuri schola Lycurgum, Solonem, Miltiadem, Themistoclem, Epaminondam nominari, qui in ore sunt ceterorum omnium philosophorum.* Epicurus certainly criticized Epaminondas (Plut. *Col.* 1127ab), and apparently Miltiades and Themistocles (Cicero, *rep.* 1, 5; Plutarch, *non posse* 1097c). Plutarch notes, unfortunately without giving names, that Metrodorus mocked some wise men who tried to imitate Lycurgus and Solon and pretended to be legislators (*Col.* 1127b). In *On Property Management* col. 22, 10-48 (ed. Tsouna 2012), Philodemus seems to refer to the rise among his Latin contemporaries of the fashionable *Exempla* and *Vitae* of great Greek and Roman militaries, politicians, and men of action. Insofar as their lives reflect «thirst for fame» (δοξοκομία col. 22, 24) they produce, in Philodemus' view, a negative echo in the lives of those who read them. Nevertheless, Philodemus, like Lucretius and in accordance with Epicurus' views, in no way condemns the activity of any politician. Curiously, Epicurus' *VS* 75 indicates that Solon's well-known *dictum* («a man should not be called happy while he lives, but only when he has already reached his end»; cf. Aristotle, *EE* 1219b6-7), is indicative of someone ungrateful for past goods (εις τὰ παρωχηκότα ἀγαθὰ ἀχάριστος).

and greatness of Greece and Rome. In their view, Epicureanism is at odds with the ideals of Greece and Rome as well as with human nature. All of them emphasize that human beings are social by nature, something that the Epicureans deny. To be sure, Cicero, Epictetus, and Plutarch do not mention any statements from Epicurean political philosophy to support the Epicurean challenge to the natural sociability of human beings. They derive this position rather from the egoistic hedonism that they attribute to the rules of conduct for the Epicurean wise (an issue that we know especially from the indirect tradition), such rules being «the Epicurean sage will not marry, will not have children, will not participate in politics, and will live unnoticed».

Cicero, like Plutarch, argues that the natural sociability of human beings makes dedication to politics the most fulfilling way of life. At the beginning of *rep.*, which, as Roskam has indicated, constitutes a kind of *apologia pro vita sua*⁵, Cicero proudly affirms what neither Socrates nor the Academics or the Peripatetics, much less the Sceptics, Epicureans or Stoics, endorsed: the supremacy of the exercise of real politics over theoretical life (Cic. *rep.* 1, 2, 2-3). The revaluation of the exercise of real politics gives rise in Cicero to an eloquent Roman reformulation of the topic of «resembling god» (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ), which differs from the versions found in Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, or the Stoics⁶. For Cicero, people approach the gods in the foundation and preservation of the states. Nobody is more pleasing to the supreme god than those who rule and preserve their homeland (Cic. *rep.* 1, 12). In the famous Dream of Scipio Cicero reiterates that piety towards the homeland is the best path to heavenly bliss, since care for its salvation is the most important concern of the soul and the fastest way to heaven (*rep.* 6, 29). Cicero addresses these remarks against philosophers in general, and even repeats the same expressions (*rep.* 1, 2) with which the character Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* mocked Socrates' dedication to philosophy. Nevertheless, the Epicureans are the main targets of his criticism. As Gilbert indicates, Epicureanism is the «philosophical other» against which Cicero structured his arguments, literary *personae*, and political/cultural self-representations⁷. However, there is a more unsettling dimension of Cicero's position re-

⁵ Roskam 2007a, 52; see also Lévy 2012, 65.

⁶ Cf. Asmis 2001, 128; Erler 2002, 159-167. On the issue of ὁμοίωσις θεῶ see also Annas 1999, chapter 3.

⁷ Gilbert 2015, 4.

garding Epicureanism. As Schofield points out, Cicero assumes that establishing a philosophical foundation for political power – the doctrine of the natural basis of justice – will put commonwealths on a firm footing and bring stability to cities. Such a process requires pragmatism and authority, and has no space for debate⁸. Consequently Cicero considers that in this context the views of the Epicureans must be rejected *even if what they say is true*. However, he also states that the Epicureans do not know and have never wanted to know anything about the republic (Cic. *leg.* 1, 39).

Epicurus (and other philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and even the Stoics) had political interests, though he was not a «professional politician» particularly interested in his political profile, as Cicero was, but a philosopher, one of whose main interests was providing a normative model of what a just society should be. Certainly, Epicurus' discussions of the nature of law or justice were not merely descriptive of an actual situation but also normative (as is the case in any other political and social model). To some extent, this is a truism, but Cicero's *De finibus* is helpful to better explain our point. In *fin.* 4, 4-6 he presents the Stoic division of philosophy into three parts; one of these, he upholds, is focused on shaping our character (it is the section that deals with the highest good or what is really good). Cicero announces that he will shortly be considering this part of philosophy as treated by the Stoics, but that for now he is concerned with discussing the topic that, according to him, is correctly named «related to citizenry» (*civilem recte appellaturi*), what the Greeks call πολιτικόν. As usual, Cicero is translating from Greek into Latin, and he adds that both the Peripatetics and the Academics dealt with this topic carefully and fully (*graviter et copiose*; *fin.* 4, 5). This is important to our purposes because, as is obvious, Cicero straightforwardly links the treatment of the ethical part of philosophy with politics or, more appropriately, with what affects (our fellow) citizens (*civile*). Interestingly, when Cicero refers to the «account of nature» (*de explicatione naturae*; *fin.* 4, 11) in the Peripatetics, the Stoics, and Epicurus, he stresses the fact that the latter recommended undertaking such a study «to drive out fear of the gods and religious superstition» (transl. R. Woolf). It is true that in these pages Cicero concentrates especially on the Stoics, but he also mentions Epicurus and his view that his investiga-

⁸ Schofield 2021, 229-242; see also Görler 1995.

tion of nature (his «physiology»; φυσιολογία) allows people to drive out fear of the gods and any form of superstition. For the sake of our argument the most relevant point is that Cicero is aware of the «interconnection», as it were, between the different parts of philosophy in view of our practical life, which of course encompasses politics⁹.

As just mentioned, Cicero acknowledges that in Epicureanism this interconnection concerns liberation from fear of the gods and from religious superstition. In the case of the Peripatetics and the Stoics¹⁰, Cicero states that from such an «account of nature we gain a sense of justice when we understand the will, the design and the purpose of the supreme guide and lord to whose nature philosophers tell us that true reason and the highest law are perfectly matched» (Cic. *fin.* 4, 11, trans. Woolf). He reiterates in *leg.* that the root of justice and law is nature, and, as Annas emphasizes, he draws primarily on the Stoic view of natural law in order to endorse the doctrine of the natural basis of justice¹¹. Cicero passionately admired Plato (in fact, he believes him to be the «god of philosophers» and the «prince of philosophers»; Cic. *nat. deor.* 2, 32, *fin.* 5, 7)¹². He knew his work very well and writes *De legibus* with Plato's work of the same name in mind. In *Laws* 10 Plato refers to the harmful fusion of physicalist cosmogony and contractual theory (*leg.* 888b8), and he condemns it as impious and subversive, maybe thinking of Archelaus, the disciple of Anaxagoras¹³. Epicurus may have been inspired by Archelaus, whom he valued positively according to Diogenes Laertius (D.L. 10, 12). In any case, Epicureanism's response to the questions «what are political communities, justice and the laws?» concurs with the fusion of physicalist cosmogony and contractualism that Plato emphatically condemned.

Epicurus apparently dealt with the origin of civilization in *On Nature* 12, 2 (fr. 27, 1, ed. Arrighetti)¹⁴; however, the best surviving testimony of

⁹ Certainly, Cicero does not confer much originality to Epicurus, whom he takes to be a «mere pupil of Democritus», at least in physics (*fin.* 4, 13).

¹⁰ And Cicero himself.

¹¹ Annas 2013, 212-213.

¹² Lévy 1992, 489-490.

¹³ Some interpreters, such as Solmsen 1936, 209-210, have held that Plato's elaboration in this passage combined the theories of the Presocratics and the Sophists. More recently, Sedley 2013, 346-347 and Betegh 2016, 25-32 have put forward Archelaus; the few preserved testimonies indicate that Archelaus distanced himself from the function that his master Anaxagoras ascribed to intelligence (νοῦς) and developed a mechanistic physics that was extended in explanations about the origin of living beings, communities, techniques, and laws. Tate 1936, 53-54 had previously also suggested Archelaus.

¹⁴ See Sedley 2004, 119-123.

the Epicurean extension of the physicalist cosmogony in a rationalistic account of the origin of civilized life, justice and the laws is to be found in Lucretius. In *Lucr.* 5, he explains the origin of life and the survival and extinction of the species without resorting to (and by implicitly rejecting) divinity or teleological explanations. The formation of human groupings subject to covenants of justice constitutes the final moment in the sequence of processes that Lucretius posits to explain the survival of the human species and the origin of civilized life. In this way the application of the Epicurean study of nature (φυσιολογία) to the analysis of political communities is translated into a rationalistic genealogical approach to justice and laws. The interconnection between the study of nature and political philosophy is a crucial part of Epicurean philosophy, and it constitutes the framework of the *Key Doctrines* focused on security, justice, and the laws. The same thing applies to the genealogy of Hermarchus' extract, *Lucr.* 5 and Polystratus' considerations that explicitly mention «the noble and shameful things» (*On the Irrational Contempt of Popular Opinions*, col. 22, 23-24; 24, 3-5; 25, 9-10; 26, 22-5; 28, 10, Τὰ καλὰ καὶ τὰ αἰσχρὰ, ed. Indelli 1978), practical or evaluative items usually related to the law and the just, which in turn are linked to usefulness¹⁵. In these Epicurean writers the just is presented as a modality of usefulness, specifically as what is useful for the sake of the pact and the basic rule of human groupings («neither harming one another nor being harmed»; Epicurus, *KD* 33).

Interestingly, in *leg.* Cicero criticizes the link between justice and utility that the Epicureans defend. He implies that the Epicureans equate utility with mere selfish gain. This is undoubtedly a malicious interpretation, for in reality the Epicureans reiterate the traditional link between justice and common utility. The «common advantage» (τὸ κοινῇ συμφέρον) is for Aristotle the proximate end of law and serves as a criterion for assessing the correctness of constitutions and laws. The common advantage is a normative reason, identifiable with political justice¹⁶. Justice and common interest (*utilitas*), as Wood highlights, are also the two crucial characteristics of Cicero's definition of the state¹⁷. In Cicero's view, according to Wood, the reason for the existence of the

¹⁵ Polystratus concludes with the indefinite expression τὰ ὅμοια τούτοις (22, 6), but they must also refer to practical items.

¹⁶ Duke 2020, 17-39; 85-108.

¹⁷ Wood 1991, 128.

state is the common interest of those concerned, interest defined here in terms of security, protection, and well-being¹⁸. In fact, as Cicero states, a republic (*res publica*) is the property of the people (*res populi*), i.e., «not every kind of human gathering but a numerous gathering brought together by legal consent and community of interest» (Cic. *rep.* 1, 39, *Non omnis hominum coetus quoquo modo congregatus, sed coetus multitudinis iuris consensus et utilitatis communione sociatus*; transl. N. Rudd 1998).

Epicurus and the Epicureans do not support, like Cicero and the Stoics, the idea of a natural law. However, in conceiving the just as a modality of the useful, neither do they equate utility with mere selfish gain, as Cicero maliciously suggests. Like Aristotle and Cicero, Epicurus conceptualizes the just by reference to a dimension common to the idea of utility, as is evident in his famous formula «neither harming one another nor being harmed». The Epicurean genealogical approach to justice and laws could lead one to assume that Epicureanism endorses a crude relativism. That being said, Epicurus, Hermarchus, and Polystratus all touch on a topic that is highly illustrative of the status they attribute to justice. They all argue against those who deny that justice exists, claim that it is merely conventional, or defend the cynical way of life. The just is not conventional because it is constrained by conformity to the purpose established by the first pacts of human communities (pacts based on the basic agreement «neither harming one another nor being harmed»). The fact that a community decides that *x* is just does not automatically make *x* useful to fulfilling the purpose of not harming or being harmed that Epicureanism attributes to the pacts of justice (*KD* 31-33). Usefulness is constrained by the facts (τὰ πράγματα, *KD* 37; τῶν περιστώτων πραγμάτων, *KD* 38). For the same reason, what is just, i.e., useful, for one community may not be useful for another (*KD* 36-37). And even what is useful for one community in certain circumstances may not prove useful later or in different circumstances (*KD* 37-38). It is not hard to see that in Epicureanism the just has a compelling normative or regulative character. The normative or regulative function of the Epicurean political model is embodied in the preconception of the just (*KD* 37-38). The preconception of the just operates as an epistemological canon of the usefulness of the laws, that is, of their suitability to the purpose of the pact («nei-

¹⁸ Wood 1991, 129-130.

ther harming one another nor being harmed»). Epicureanism seems to maintain collective ownership for the preconception of the just, and explains the acquisition and continuity of the just through a conceptualization of the world that is based on the model of the transmission and acquisition of language. Surprisingly, neither the sophisticated reflection of Epicureanism on the ontological status of the just, nor the preconception of the just, finds any mention in Cicero's work. Perhaps it could be argued that these are very distant themes from the foundation of the Epicurean way of life and from the imperturbability (*ἀταραξία*) it advocates. In fact, like the genealogical approach in which they are embedded, they represent substantial elements of the Epicurean way of life since they are connected to the category of security (*ἀσφάλεια*) and the genealogy of vain desires. For Epicureanism, security means the satisfaction of natural desires, but also confidence regarding their future satisfaction and the danger of violent death. Security, both physical and psychological, is recognized in ancient literature as a constitutive element of the polis. Epicurus extends this approach and presents security as the good of nature (*τὸ τῆς φύσεως ἀγαθόν*), and therefore as an end in itself according to what is naturally congenial (*κατὰ τὸ τῆς φύσεως οἰκεῖον*; *KD 7*). Such an approach establishes an interesting consistency between our human nature and the purpose of pacts, justice, and laws. The Epicureans consider security from three perspectives: the contractual security provided by the polis, the security achievable by wealth, power, and fame, and the security attributable to Epicurean life («the purest security», *εἰλικρινεστάτη ἀσφάλεια*; *KD 14*). The first is a necessary condition for the other two; the second is not a necessary condition of the third, as greed and ambition are incompatible with Epicurean life, which does not mean that wealth and reputation are. It would certainly be absurd for Epicureans to subtract from the purest security that they postulate positive attributes that recognize contractual security. The Epicureans recognize in this contractual security a reality which is not restricted to what is useful for the present, but which looks at life as a whole and offers human beings a state of confidence (*θαρρεῖν*, *ἀφοβία*, *ἡσυχία*). However, they also attribute to the polis the promotion of vain fears and limitless desires of wealth, power, and fame which Epicureanism seeks to dissipate through «physiology» to attain the purest security. Cicero does not comment, perhaps intentionally, on Epicureanism's rich reflections on

security. But such relevant details, we hold, cannot have escaped Cicero, an attentive and critical reader of his philosophical and cultural past.

2. *History remains mute*

Traditionally, the Epicureans are not only regarded as having a theoretical disinterest in political communities, but above all as having a practical disinterest that translates into a refusal to participate in politics and a minimal interaction with society. But how reliable is this image of the Epicureans forged by their critics? If they omitted, as evidenced by Cicero, essential aspects of the Epicureanism, it is reasonable to think that they were not interested in scrupulously reporting the lifestyle of Epicurus and the Epicureans. Cicero, as we will try to show, is not a meticulous witness, and his writings demonstrate considerable historical levity regarding Epicureanism.

But this is not an exclusive characteristic of Cicero. In a speech in which Epictetus attacks the Academics and the Epicureans (an association that would probably have surprised the Epicureans), after referring to the antisocial opinions (τὰ ἀκοινώνητα) of the latter he writes: «And then people who talk in this way go on to marry, and father children, and fulfil their duties as citizens, and get appointed to be priests and prophets! Priests of whom? Of gods who don't exist! And they themselves consult the Pythian priestess, to know her lies and interpret the oracles to others? Oh what colossal impudence, what imposture!» (*Discourses* 2, 20, 27; transl. R. Hard).

To be sure, the passage furnishes valuable information about the striking public performances of Epicurus and Epicureans which are confirmed by other sources. Two other discourses of Epictetus complement the information in the passage. In *Discourses* 3, 7, 1 a conversation of Epictetus with an Epicurean «inspector» (διορθωτής) is recounted; additionally, *Discourses* 1, 19 contains remarks on the role of the priest of the imperial cult. One of his fellow citizens of Nicopolis, a city of special religious significance due to its imperial foundation, remarks to Epictetus that he wants to become a priest of the cult of Augustus. Epictetus asks him why he wants to incur such great expense, and he replies that he wants to wear a crown of gold, and that when contracts are drawn up they will be inscribed with his name. Epictetus mocks this man and tells him that it would be preferable for him to crown himself with roses (*Dis-*

courses 1, 19, 26-29). Two details are striking: On the one hand, it is evident from the conversation that the office of imperial priest required abundant resources, which presupposes that it was held by members of the upper classes. On the other hand, neither Epicetetus nor his interlocutor appeal to anything resembling religious motivations for aspiring to the office of priest. The prominent motivation is honor, a natural aspiration of those who belonged to the upper classes of the polis. These are, as we shall see, relevant data when examining the testimonies about priests, prophets, ambassadors, advisers, and other offices held in the poleis by Epicureans. The public activity of these Epicureans, rather than being the result of political ambition and the struggle for power, which the Epicureans expressly rejected, seems to stem from their membership of prominent families.

Let us start with Epicurus. In *On Piety* (col. 53, 1512-1532, ed. Obbink), Philodemus notes that while some philosophers were exiled, persecuted, and even condemned to death, Epicurus remained «magnificently» (μεγαλομερῶς) in the city. Philodemus agrees with other authors (D.L. 10, 10) on the fact that Epicurus loyally observed the cults of the city. Philodemus collects fragments of Epicurus' works and letters to show that he participated and recommended his friends to participate in Athenian worship, prayers, feasts, oaths, and mystery cults. Nor did Epicurus' conception of justice and law alienate him from his city. Epicurus shares in the rejection of two figures who represent contempt for the laws of the polis: the tyrant and the Cynics (D.L. 9, 119). Indeed, love of country, concern for reputation («insofar as this ensures that he is not despised»; D.L. 10, 120a), care for patrimony and concern for the future, differentiate Epicurean life from the shamelessness, cosmopolitanism, mendacity, and apathy of the Cynics. Diogenes Laertius (10, 9-10) stresses Epicurus' love for his homeland (which he describes as «indescribable»; ἄλεκτος) and his piety, as well as his good character and philanthropy, which earned him many friends.

Even Cicero and Plutarch, fierce critics of Epicurus, support the latter views of Diogenes Laertius. Epicurus' prolific correspondence evinces the plurality and heterogeneity of his friendships and reflects the interaction between the Epicureans and their cities. Indeed, among Epicurus' friends there were politicians who were influential and close (even *very* close) to Epicureanism, such as Idomeneus, a prominent politician of Lampsacus, and Mithres, Lysimachus' minister of finance, who provided financial aid

to the Garden. Each of the indicated elements entails immersion in legality and in the social relations and institutions that shape the polis. In this regard, there are very significant testimonies. For one, Epicurus deposited a copy of his will in the city archive, the Metroon, which is unusual: it is, in fact, the only private document that we know of deposited in the Metroon. Clay further underlines that Epicurus is the only philosopher we know who deposited his actual texts in the Metroon, and highlights that Epicurus is the only Greek philosopher whose works are dated by the year of the eponymous archon in which they were written. This latter feature can be read as a symptom of Epicurus' concern for his posthumous philosophical legacy (cf. also D.L. 10, 120)¹⁹.

Epicurus' will (D.L. 10, 16-21) is a remarkable document that demonstrates his connection with the polis. Epicurus' desire to make a will in the first place seems to be based on one of the fundamental motivations of Athenian inheritance law: to ensure the continuity of the cult of the family ancestors (D.L. 10, 18). The document also incorporates testamentary provisions to ensure the maintenance of Metrodorus' and Polyneus' children. Furthermore, it establishes provisions to ensure the dowry and the marriage of the latter's daughter as well as the emancipation of three slaves and a female slave (D.L. 10, 19; 21). Additionally, Epicurus includes several provisions aimed at maintaining the continuity and cohesion of the Kepos, so that its members and the school itself are preserved in the most secure manner (*ἀσφαλέστατον*). He even instructs his disciples to preserve his memory and that of Metrodorus after his death (D.L. 10, 18), and places all his books in the hands of Hermarchus (D.L. 10, 17; 21). Affection, friendship, gratitude, philanthropy, piety, and respect for the social relations of the polis are motives acknowledged in the testament. Epicurus' testament reflects the recognition his philosophy gives to the security provided by the polis and friendship and, above all, to the benefits resulting from both that are of enormous importance to Epicureans: a state of confidence (*θαρρεῖν*), of tranquility (*ἡσυχία*), and of absence of fear (*ἀφοβία*) regarding the future satisfaction of needs. Epicurus trusts that his testamentary dispositions will be fulfilled and will have the desired consequences. The basis of his trust is the legal system of the polis since the security of the polis has made possible his way of life and the Garden itself. No doubt Epicurus also relies on it to secure both the Epi-

¹⁹ Clay 2001, x; 43; 47-48.

curean life of his friends and successors and the dissemination of his writings and teachings, a central aspect of Epicurean philanthropy. To sum up, the testimonies about Epicurus' life do not paint a picture of a person shut away in Kepos, isolated from the life of Athens, but of someone who, while refusing to participate actively in politics (i.e., in contingent politics), respected the laws and institutions of the city, participated in its worship and piety, integrated family relationships into the exercise of philosophy, and cultivated philanthropy and numerous, heterogeneous friendships, including with influential politicians.

A fundamental doctrinal resource of Epicureanism is the biographical tradition of the *imitatio Epicuri*. This is a model of biography that uses epistolary sources extensively in order to highlight the exemplary behavior of the master and his main successors, thus preserving their memory, and safeguarding their doctrine. It also acts as proof of the validity of Epicurean philosophy, i.e., that Epicurus, as Philodemus observes, «obviously succeeded in imitating the blessedness of the gods in so far as mortals can» (*On Piety* 2043 ff., ed. Obbink).

Among the papyri recovered from Herculaneum there is a *Vita Philonidis* (*PHerc.* 1044), perhaps by Philodemus. The *Vita Philonidis* follows the biographical model of the *imitatio Epicuri* and focuses on the same features that are observed in Diogenes Laertius' biography of Epicurus, already mentioned above. Philonides' efforts for his hometown and for the Seleucid court appear in his biography as an unexceptional strand of Epicurean philosophy and philanthropy²⁰. Philonides was ambassador and royal advisor to Demetrius I Soter, whom he won as a disciple and turned into a king renewed by Epicurean philosophy (apparently, Demetrius I generously supported the Epicurean community; *PHerc.* 1044, col. 12, 1-9, col. 27, 1-7, ed. Gallo 2002)²¹. Several inscriptions at Eleusis show that Philonides belonged to an aristocratic family of Laodicea, whose piety and diplomatic activities he shared²². The love and services to the fatherland and the care (θεραπεία) of King Demetrius are organically framed in the

²⁰ On this complex issue, see the thoughtful study by De Sanctis 2009.

²¹ Assante (2011-2012, 47; see also 50) interestingly notes that from the inscriptions and the papyrus, we learn that Philonides «belonged to a prestigious family, that must have had some political clout due to his diplomatic activity». She also underlines that Philonides came into contact with the king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his grandson Demetrius I Soter (king from 162 to 150) during his maturity. Assante's edition of the *Vita Philonidis* complements and, to some extent, improves Gallo's edition of *PHerc.* 1044.

²² Koch 2005, 262-266; Haake 2007, 148-159.

Vita Philonidis in Epicurean philanthropy. Philonides' biographer stresses, probably aware of his public career, that he lived philosophically, nobly, and honorably, and received gratefulness and recognition from his fellow citizens, and even from philosophers of rival schools (col. 53, 1-8). Philonides is not an exceptional case; there are a significant number of Epicureans belonging to the upper classes, coming from different poleis and centuries, who held public offices: diplomats (Apollophanes of Pergamum, Aristion, Gaius Julius Alynas of Samos, Heraclitus, son of Heraclitus), priests (Gaius Julius Alynas himself, Plous, Lysias of Tarsus, Theocritus, son of Aresteias, Tiberius Claudius Lepidus), and even prophets (Philidas, son of Heracleon, Aurelius Belius Philippus)²³. The principal source for this information is Greek epigraphy. Epigraphic testimonies, whether they originate from public decrees or private initiatives, reflect, as emphasized by Haake, common convictions of the polis²⁴. They therefore provide precious data on the prevailing convictions about what it meant to be an Epicurean philosopher and about actions and positions that were not considered irreconcilable with that status. They also allow us to reach an important conclusion: contrary to what might be expected based on the traditional interpretation of Epicureanism, the mentions of «Epicurean philosopher» in the epigraphic corpus of philosophers in the Hellenistic period and later centuries are by no means fewer in number than those of «Stoic or Peripatetic philosopher».

As can be seen, there are remarkable testimonies of the social interaction of Epicurus and the Epicureans. They substantially confirm and amplify the succinct information in the passage from Epictetus quoted above. Indeed, Epictetus refers to public performances of Epicureans to highlight (with indignation) their performative contradictions, since, in his view, the Epicureans declare themselves to be apolitical. This is the same argumentative strategy found in Cicero, which shows that in Epictetus' time this kind of procedure was already commonplace. As we have already indicated, Cicero does not derive his idea of Epicurean apoliticism from the political philosophy of the Epicureans, but from the egoistic hedonism that he attributes to rules of conduct of the Epicurean wise, especially, the famous slogans «live unnoticed» and «do not participate in politics». As is clear,

²³ For a full discussion of this issue see Aoiz-Boeri 2022a. To these testimonies, the wall of more than 250 square meters in the agora of Oenoanda – on which the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda had engraved Epicurean doctrine – must be added.

²⁴ Haake 2007, 6-7.

Cicero absolutizes these slogans as principles of conduct for the Epicureans, but he does not devote a single line to specifying from which text of Epicurus they come and what their original context was. But to do justice to Cicero it must also be emphasized that he points out, obviously with polemical purposes, that the Epicureans acknowledge circumstances that imply reservations to the application of the slogan «do not participate in politics» (Cic. *rep.* 1, 10). Unfortunately, these exceptions are devoid of the context in which they were to be found in Epicurus' writings. Again, therefore, their documentary contribution, like that of Cicero's considerations of the formula «do not participate in politics», is disappointing, for they do not really provide substantial information about the actions of Epicurus and the Epicureans in political communities.

Cicero occasionally refers to the performative contradictions of Epicurus and uses the strategy Lévy has called *l'éloge paradoxal*²⁵. But for our purposes Cicero's most interesting considerations on the supposed performative contradictions of Epicurean refer to two Roman politicians, Testa and Cassius. These references are found in Cicero's correspondence and turn out to be especially significant; in our opinion, they perfectly exemplify how Cicero deliberately omits elements belonging to Epicureanism that are crucial to understanding how political reflection was integrated into Epicurean philosophy and how it influenced the lifestyle and the actions of those who subscribed to it. For the same purpose we will refer briefly to the work *On the Good King According to Homer* by Cicero's contemporary Philodemus. However, it is worthwhile dedicating a few lines to the problem of the prosopography of Epicurean politicians in Rome.

Momigliano began this prosopography in a review of Farrington's *Science and Politics in the Ancient World*. In Farrington's view, Cic. *Tusc.* 4, 6-7 as well as *fin.* 2, 44 provide evidence that Epicureanism constituted in Italy a «mass movement of lower-class people discussing among themselves the undistinguished writings of their plebeian school of thought»²⁶. Momigliano objected to Farrington that Epicureanism spread among the upper classes of Rome, a thesis shared by most later inter-

²⁵ To recognize the Epicureans as «good people» does not correspond to moral praise, but rather bolsters the strategy of presenting them in contradiction with the theses they defend, and as proof that in human beings there is disinterested probity which is innate (such probity being neither provoked by pleasures nor attracted by rewards; cf. Cic. *fin.* 2, 99). To sum up, the life of the Epicureans, Cicero thinks, denies their philosophy, and confirms the innate recognition of the intrinsic value of virtues (see Lévy 2001).

²⁶ Farrington 1939, 192.

preters²⁷. Castner, Benferhat, Gilbert and Valachova have continued the prosopography begun by Momigliano without reaching a unanimous list of Epicurean politicians²⁸. The reasons are understandable. Firstly, we are not dealing with the cultural and social sphere of the polis, nor with philosophers or professors, but with members of Roman society immersed in specific social and political practices, in which it is difficult to determine precisely the ascription to Epicureanism and its scope. In fact, the traditional absolutization of the slogans ascribed to the Epicureans has led some interpreters to see the adherence of the Roman politicians to Epicureanism as mere frivolity or as representing a complete dichotomy between life and doctrine. Secondly, it is hard to prove the dependence of Roman politicians' affiliations, decisions, and justifications on their presumed Epicureanism. Even if we have sufficient evidence, there is always room for speculation. Epicureanism places precisely prudence (*φρόνησις*) at the top of the doctrine (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [LM] 132), and it is too general in its approach to offer unambiguous guidelines for behavior in particular situations. This implies a flexibility that does not exclude encouraging its followers to live in accordance with the *mos maiorum*²⁹. The difficulties indicated above show that the ascription of Roman politicians to Epicureanism must be decided carefully and on a case-by-case basis, as Gilbert has highlighted³⁰. Fortunately, there is considerably more information about their political actions than there is about the Epicureans of the Greek cities. These illustrious Epicureans were involved in the most important political events in Rome in the 1st century BC, and were mostly related to Cicero in one way or another. Therefore, they have been the subject of numerous studies. The elements gathered make plausible both their Epicureanism and the Epicurean imprint of various orientations and decisions in their lives.

In his correspondence Cicero familiarly treats as Epicureans the two characters we are interested in, Testa and Cassius. Trebatius Testa was one of the most renowned jurists of his time. He began his career under

²⁷ Momigliano 1941, 149-151.

²⁸ Castner 1988; Benferhat 2005; Gilbert 2015; Valachova 2018.

²⁹ Griffin 1989, 32-34; Volk 2021, 92-109.

³⁰ The list, even in the most conservative versions, is not small. See the version in Gilbert 2015: Titus Albucius, Lucius Calpurnius Piso, Gaius Cassius Longinus, Marcus Fadius Gallus, Lucius Manlius Torquatus, Gaius Memmius Caesoninus, Gaius Velleius, Gaius Vibius Pansa, Caetronianus Lucius Papius, Paetus Titus Pomponius Atticus, Lucius Saufeius Gaius, Trebatius Testa.

the protection of Cicero, who then recommended him to Caesar. Trebatius joined Caesar in Gaul in 54 B.C. In a letter of February 53 Cicero tells Trebatius that he knows he has become an Epicurean and reproaches him that being an Epicurean contradicts his status as a politician and jurist (Cic. *fam.* 2, 12 1). We do not know Trebatius' reply, but several facts in his biography point towards the arguments by which an Epicurean could have replied to Cicero. Trebatius did not want to pursue a political career (in fact he refused the office of military tribune offered to him by Caesar in 54, a move which annoyed Cicero). Nevertheless, he was able to make the most of his talent as a jurist and became Caesar's adviser and *familiaris*. Trebatius, as Benferhat points out, got through the civil war without compromising himself or becoming a victim³¹. He was also appreciated as a jurisconsult by Augustus. It could perhaps be said that Trebatius, without aspiring to power or office, enjoyed fame and prestige, which provided him with security until his death in his eighties. In the aforementioned letter of February 53, Cicero is particularly emphatic in questioning how an Epicurean could devote himself to law. It is one of Cicero's anti-Epicurean arguments that most clearly reveals his omission of the central tenets of Epicureanism, for the Epicureans developed a sophisticated defense of justice and law³². One of the testimonies of Trebatius' activity as a jurisconsult reflects just the kind of argument one would expect from an Epicurean jurist: the insistence on the utility of law. Augustus consulted jurists on whether the use of codicils was in accordance with the *ratio iuris*. Trebatius convinced the emperor by claiming that, in effect, the codicil was most useful and necessary for the citizens (*utilissimum et necessarium hoc civibus esse*)³³.

If another one of Cicero's Epicurean friends, Atticus, represented what Benferhat calls «neutralité vigilante», the Epicurean Cassius Longinus, on the contrary, played a leading role in one of the major political events of the 1st century: the assassination of Caesar in March 44³⁴. Be-

³¹ Benferhat 2005, 277.

³² Gilbert 2015, 134-145 has carefully examined the anti-Epicurean arguments of this letter to show their continuation in Cicero's philosophical works. But certainly, such continuation also reflects the continuity of the omission of central Epicurean approaches that Cicero's anti-Epicurean arguments entail (as Erler 1992 has rightly emphasized). On the letter to Trebatius of April 53, see Erler 1992, 310-322; Griffin 1995, 332-334; Benferhat 2005, 274-281 and 2010. For Vesperini 2011, 166, Trebatius' adherence to Epicureanism lacks seriousness and is merely frivolous.

³³ Bremer 1896, 398.

³⁴ Benferhat 2005, 98.

tween December 46 and January 45 Cicero and Cassius exchanged a series of letters in which they discussed political events and their respective philosophical convictions³⁵. Cassius identifies himself as an Epicurean and is treated as such: Cicero does not miss the opportunity to address several anti-Epicurean arguments to him. There is one which is of particular interest because of the reply from Cassius to which it gives rise. Cicero refers to their common Epicurean friend Pansa, declaring that both the latter's noble deeds and those of Cassius himself prove that both are better than their egoistic hedonistic philosophy. Cassius' response is remarkable for the knowledge of Epicurean doctrine he displays. He complains about the deficient interpretations of Epicurus by Amafinius and Cadius, quotes Epicurus' *KD* 5 in Greek, and makes Cicero see that his attempt to undermine the compatibility of pleasure, virtue and justice is based on a deficient and biased understanding of Epicureanism. Cassius stresses that living pleasurably and attaining tranquility is not in contradiction with living justly and nobly but *implies* living justly and nobly (Cic. *fam.* 15, 19). As in the case of Testa, Cicero attributes performative contradictions to Cassius and Pansa based on a deficient presentation of Epicureanism. Cassius rightly reproaches him. According to Seneca (*ep.* 83, 12), Cassius was a sober person throughout his life. He was a great military man and that is probably why, after supporting Pompeius, he obtained Caesar's pardon and seconded him, perhaps convinced that he represented a hope for peace and tranquility, values dear to an Epicurean³⁶.

As stated above, it is hard to prove the dependence of Roman politicians' decisions on their presumed Epicureanism. We find ourselves in the same situation, despite some famous interpretative attempts³⁷, with Cassius' decision to kill Caesar, especially given the link between Caesarism and Epicureanism that some interpreters maintain. This link, as already noted in Momigliano's review of Farrington³⁸, has played an important

³⁵ See Griffin 1995, 342-346; Benferhat 2005, 261-265; Armstrong 2011, 111-114; Gilbert 2015, 221-243; Valachova 2018, 112-131.

³⁶ Sedley 1997, 41.

³⁷ Sedley 1997, 46-47.

³⁸ According to Momigliano (1941, 151-154), Farrington wrongly argued that the Roman Epicureans were inclined towards the Republic, since there were also Epicureans who opted for the monarchy. Anglade 2015, 766-768; 2021, 423-427 proposes to distinguish between a Latin and a Greek Epicureanism. The former, represented by authors such as Amafinius, his Epicurean *aemuli* and Lucretius, would be linked to the *Populares*. The lat-

role in the prosopography of Roman politicians linked to Epicureanism. It has also influenced the interpretation of Philodemus' *On the Good King according to Homer*, which some scholars, such as Grimal³⁹, have argued to be a defense of Caesarism. This work is dedicated to Piso, just as Philodemus' *Rhetoric* is dedicated to another Epicurean-Cesarist, Pansa. However, *On the Good King According to Homer* seems properly to constitute an Epicurean contribution to a traditional literary genre to which Epicurus' *On Kingship* (D.L. 10, 28) probably also belonged. According to Philodemus, πολιτεύεσθαι includes several activities, such as leading and administering the state, giving advice, serving as envoy, being experienced in such things as laws and decrees (*rhet.* 3, col. 10a, 1-6, and 11a, 17-24 ed. Hammerstaedt). It is easy to see that the activities of the Epicureans mentioned in the present section are included in Philodemus' enumeration. However, in this same work Philodemus insists that politics constitutes a specific domain with its own characteristic activities. Politics and philosophy move in different terrains. Politics, in his view, is based on experience and talent. Philodemus polemicizes with the Stoic Diogenes of Babylon who, according to Philodemus, does not grasp the autonomy of politics. The Stoics maintain that politics and philosophy are connected and consequently claim that only the Stoic sage can be a good statesman⁴⁰. The position of Philodemus and Epicureanism in general does not imply the absolute disqualification of politicians that this Stoic thesis entails⁴¹. The recognition of the autonomy of politics allows Philodemus to defend politicians from the attacks of Diogenes of Babylon⁴². The question then arises as to how the Epicurean philosopher can be useful and advise the ruler. Philodemus' *On the Good King According to Homer*, perhaps in the same manner as Epicurus' *On Kingship*, appears to provide an answer to this question. Although philosophy and politics are two different fields with their own features and operating modes, philosophy can improve the moral character of the ruler and thus notably contribute to better government (see Philodemus, *rhet.* 3, col 15a, 16-31, ed. Hammerstaedt), something which is in the

ter, represented by figures such as Albucius, Atticus, L. Saufeius, Cassius and the circle of Philodemus, to the *Optimates*.

³⁹ Grimal 1966. See also Anglade 2015, 741-745.

⁴⁰ Roskam 2007a, 23-27; 2007b, 105-107.

⁴¹ As Fish 2011, 76-81 has shown, Lucretius' comparison of politicians with Sisyphus (Lucr. 3, 995-1002) does not correspond to a widespread «existentialist» interpretation. Lucretius is not interested in showing the vanity and futility of all politics; he rather refers specifically to politicians who fail in the quest for power.

⁴² Roskam 2007b, 106.

interest of the ruler, the ruled and, ultimately, the Epicurean sage and the Epicurean community⁴³. In fact, as we have shown, the *Vita Philonidis* (PHerc. 1044) highlights Philonides' contribution to the good government of king Demetrius and the latter's consequent support for the Epicurean community. As observed by Fish, it could even be argued that the Epicureans saw in the figure of a monarch enlightened by Epicureanism an exceptional example of security (ἀσφάλεια), provided by the exercise of power⁴⁴. The virtues advised to the monarch in *On the Good King According to Homer* are practically those of the Epicurean sage. Their result is also similar: on the one hand, the stability (εὐστάθεια) of the sage's life; on the other, a stable monarchy that Philodemus contrasts with a despotic regime based on terror (col. 24, 17-18). Philodemus stresses the following virtues of the ruler: mildness (πραότης), equity (ἐπιείκεια), gentleness (ἡμερότης), forgiveness (συγγώμη), benevolence (εὐνοια) (col. 24, 6-18, col 25, 11-19). The inclusion of ἐπιείκεια is particularly significant as it is consistent with the Epicurean conception of laws. For Epicurus, as we have already mentioned, laws are just insofar as they are useful, and equity certainly complements the law in order to achieve justice⁴⁵. Philodemus' *On the Good King According to Homer* thus complements the defense of positive law, pragmatism, and moderation, derived from the Epicurean study of nature (φυσιολογία), and contributes to a picture of the social interaction of Epicurus and the Epicureans that is far more complex and interesting than the evidence of Cicero would suggest. To Cicero one could apply the reproach that he addresses to the Epicureans (*fin.* 2, 67): history remains mute when he denigrates the attitude of the Epicureans towards the political communities.

3. Cicero on Epicureanism and the ring of Gyges

The assessment of actions performed by a person without witnesses was a topic that Greek philosophers addressed repeatedly when dealing

⁴³ Philodemus argues that philosophers can also be of great help to their homelands by teaching the young to obey the laws. According to Philodemus, it is also necessary to teach children never to touch injustice, just as they are taught never to touch fire, since both injustice and fire are destructive by nature (ὀλέθριοι φύσει) (*rhet.*, PHerc. 1078-1080, fr. 13, 9 – 22; 2, 155 Sudhaus).

⁴⁴ Fish 2011, 103-104; 2018, 154-155.

⁴⁵ Neither equity nor forgiveness had a positive valuation in Stoic ethics (see Erskine 2000, 73-74). On the «legalism» of Diogenes of Babylon see Erskine 2000, 154-156.

with justice and laws. Suffice it to recall the fragments of Democritus (DK 244, DK B 264, DK 68 B 264), the preserved passages of Antiphon's *On the Truth*⁴⁶, or the well-known story of the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* (359c6-360c5; 612b). Epicurean philosophy and Cicero's interpretation provide approaches that yield an interesting debate on the old topic of actions performed without witnesses. The Epicurean conception of the gods rules out the idea of providence while also denying that the gods are capable of or interested in punishing us. An Epicurean god is a blessed and indestructible entity having no troubles itself, nor troubling anyone else (Epicurus, *KD* 1). The gods are a model for the Epicureans whose piety aspires to an assimilation to god (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν), which is reflected in living pleasantly, prudently, nobly, and justly. Epicureanism upholds a contractualist genealogy of justice and laws that stresses, as one of the main factors of the effectiveness of laws, the role of internalized punishment⁴⁷. Suspicion, uncertainty, and the fear of being discovered and condemned represent, in Epicurus' view, a punishment triggered by the perpetration of an unwitnessed crime. The Epicurean sage is free from the vain desires responsible for most crimes. Thus, he is free from the disturbance represented by uncertainty and fear of discovery, just as he is free from the fear of death and the gods. Now, according to Cicero, an Epicurean does nothing for someone else's sake and measures everything by his own interest (Cic. *leg.* 1, 40). Cicero states that Epicurus' hedonism conveys the impression that there is no action so base but that he would be ready to commit it for the sake of pleasure, provided he were guaranteed against detection (*fin.* 2, 28). So, if the Epicurean wise person knows that he will not be discovered, will he carry out actions contrary to the laws? It is a question that Epicurus asked himself in a passage from the *Puzzles* (Διαπορίαι) transmitted by Plutarch (*Col.* 1127d).

Cicero also refers (in *off.* 3, 38-39; *fin.* 2, 28) to the Epicurean position vis-à-vis the story of the Ring of Gyges, which undoubtedly has similarities with the passage from the Διαπορίαι just mentioned. Naturally, Cicero and Plutarch do not miss the opportunity to discredit Epicureanism. In what follows we shall analyze the elements of Epicurean philosophy that Cicero deliberately omits, in our opinion, in his interpretation of the Epicurean position regarding the story of Gyges.

⁴⁶ Cf. Pendrick 2002, 160-163, 323-324.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of the issue of the genealogy of justice and laws in Epicurus and Epicureanism, allow us to refer to Aoiz-Boeri 2022.

The passage from the *Puzzles* has received more attention than the Ciceronian text of *off.* 3, 38. Although Gyges' case is not identical to the one posited in the *Puzzles*, the interpretative guidelines followed by scholars when analyzing it provides, as we will see, relevant contributions to consider in reflections on *off.* 3, 38.

In the *Puzzles* Epicurus asks himself whether the wise man will do things which the laws forbid if he knows that he will escape detection. And he answers: «the plain statement [of the answer] (τὸ ἀπλοῦν ἐπικατηγόρημα)⁴⁸ is not easy» (εὐδοον) (*Col.* 1127d; transl. Inwood-Gerson). After this declaration, Plutarch, perhaps somewhat maliciously, comments (putting words into Epicurus' mouth): «that is, I will do it, but I do not wish to admit it» (οὐ βούλομαι δ' ὁμολογεῖν; *Col.* 1127 d; transl. Inwood-Gerson). Plutarch wants us to see that Epicurus' refusal to respond in fact reflects hypocrisy and shame in recognizing that he would commit an unwitnessed crime, shame that implies accepting that he performs actions that he knows are bad; that is to say, they are bad regardless of whether they remain hidden or not⁴⁹. In dealing with this passage, interpreters have focused on the following three aspects. First, they have put forward the distinction between just and unjust laws present in Epicurus *KD* 37 and 38: in the face of unjust laws, the aporia seems to be solved, though this solution is too easy, since the transgression of unjust laws might also trigger the fear and anguish of being discovered and punished⁵⁰. Second, they have probed the exceptional status of a situation concerning the satisfaction of necessary natural desires or the preservation of the life of an Epicurean sage or of a friend, since even though the Epicurean sage does not fear death, it is also true, as Polystratus stresses, that humans, unlike irrational animals, can take precautions in anticipation of suffering and provide beneficial or useful things (*On*

⁴⁸ The editors debate between the reading of the *hara*x ἐπικατηγόρημα of the MSS. and Estienne's conjecture ἐστὶ κατηγόρημα. Westman-Pohlenz's Teubner edition of Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* (1959) and Einarson-De Lacy's Loeb edition (1967, 312-313) favor the former, as do Goldschmidt (1977, 119-121), Besnier (2001, 136 n.17) and Seel (1996, 343). Usener followed Estienne's proposal; it was also accepted by Arrighetti (1973, 166 and 573). ἐπικατηγόρημα is usually taken to mean «predicate», although it can also mean «accusation» (see Vander Waerdt 1987, 407 n. 18).

⁴⁹ Plutarch, like Polus in Plato's *Gorgias* (474c), seems to appeal to shame as proof of the effective acceptance of argumentatively rejected assessments

⁵⁰ Philippon 1910, 302-303; Einarson-De Lacy 1967, 312-313; Goldschmidt 1977, 119; Konstan 2008, 124; Cosenza 1996, 368 n. 17. Neither Cicero nor Plutarch consider this interpretation.

the Irrational Contempt of Popular Opinions III 5-11)⁵¹. Finally, they have explored the counterfactual character of the conditional clause «if he knows that he will not be discovered». As Epicurus emphasizes in *KD* 34-35, there is no possibility of certainty regarding the future.

In *off.* 3, 38-39; 77-78 Cicero summarizes the story of Gyges' ring, noting that certain philosophers, not bad people nor particularly subtle (surely referring to the Epicureans: see *Cic. fin.* 2, 80, and *Tusc.* 3, 46)⁵², underestimate its value in that they consider the assumption illustrated by Gyges' story to be impossible in the world of human actions. The Epicureans, who apparently criticized Plato for his mythologizing like a poet⁵³, stubbornly resist considering the hypothesis and go no further because, according to Cicero, they do not truly understand the question⁵⁴. In their opinion, nonetheless, answering such a question would put them in a real predicament: if they answer that they would act against others *knowing* that they would not be discovered they would reveal themselves as villainous, while if they answered to the contrary they would admit that they must avoid bad actions. This is precisely the thesis of the preceding section of *off.*, where Cicero introduces the story of Gyges and its Epicurean interpretation. Goldschmidt insists on Cicero's blindness to Epicurus' position concerning what is impossible, although it seems that his peculiar dissolution of the puzzle sets aside – as do Cicero's rebukes – fundamental theses that the Epicureans could offer as an answer to the question contained in Epicurus' *Puzzles*. By concentrating on the coun-

⁵¹ Seel 1996, 367; Besnier 2001, 136 n.17; Vander Waerdt, 1987, 416-418.

⁵² It would seem to be another example of «l'éloge paradoxal» (see Lévy 2001), which Cicero frequently addresses to the Epicureans. Even though one reviewer «strongly believes that Cicero is referring to Epicurus and the Epicureans» in *off.* 3, 38-39, s/he has objected to our use of the adverb «obviously» (in the sentence «obviously referring to the Epicureans»). Cicero is positing what the *wise person* would do if he had the ring, which clearly evokes, in our opinion, the old topic of actions performed without witnesses discussed by Epicurus in his *Puzzles* (cited by Plut. *Col.* 1127d) and in *KD* 35. Even if the reference to *Cic. off.* were questionable, it is relatively common for Cicero to assert that he is not questioning Epicurus' goodness as a person, but the lack of subtlety of his argument (as indicated in *Cic. fin.* 2, 80 and *Tusc.* 3, 46), which coincides with *off.* 3, 39, where Cicero states that those philosophers «are not at all bad men, but not clear-thinking enough» (transl. M. Atkins 2004).

⁵³ According to Macrobius' and Proclus' testimonies, Colotes criticized the use of the myth of Er in the final section of *resp.* 10 (cf. Kechagia 2011, 53-71 and Corti 2014, 90-93).

⁵⁴ In Roskam's opinion (2012, 26-27), Cicero is referring to the epigones of Epicurus. Roskam attributes to them an «ossified» and intransigent position, far from the living thought of Epicurus, which prevents them from recognizing that it is Epicurus himself who in the *Διαπορίαι* raises the puzzle and underlines the difficulty of offering a categorical response.

terfactual conditional, as ostensibly do some late Epicureans, Goldschmidt implicitly seems to leave intact the thesis shared by Cicero and Plutarch that the only reason why Epicureans abstain from certain actions is the fear of punishment, from whose escape one can never be certain, indeed an uncertainty that already constitutes castigation (*KD* 34). To be sure, the Epicureans could begin by objecting to and declaring fallacious the expressions «intrinsically good or bad actions» and «actions performed by themselves or avoided by themselves», whose acceptance both Cicero and Plutarch intend to force. In fact, Torquatus does a similar thing in *fin.* 1: Cicero, a skillful rhetorician, endeavors to embarrass him by opposing his hedonistic and utilitarian explanations of actions, the noble and heroic patriotic deeds carried out by Torquatus' own ancestors (Cic. *fin.* 1, 23-25). Torquatus, unintimidated, wonders whether they were thrown into these great feats, which were incidentally always performed like animals before the viewing public, without awareness of their effects and consequences. The obvious negative answer calls into doubt that the *exclusive* motivation of these patriotic heroes was the performance of intrinsically good actions (*fin.* 1, 34-36)⁵⁵. Cicero attributes irrationality and animality to Epicurean hedonism. Torquatus counters with the exact same disqualification: if the patriotic feats were carried out *exclusively* for the sake of duty, they constitute irrational, animal behaviors, unsuitable for rational beings⁵⁶.

Perhaps the best Epicurean argument would be to focus the issue on the Epicurean sage, as Plutarch (*Col.* 1127d) and Cicero (*off.* 3, 9) do, probably with the purpose of highlighting the ignominy of Epicureanism through the behavior of its most qualified representatives. The question, therefore, concerns the emblematic representative of the possession of φυσιολογία and φρόνησις that Epicureanism advocates. This distinction is decisive, since it forces us to consider if the figure of the

⁵⁵ By removing the necklace of an enormous enemy Gaul, his homonymous ancestor, observes Torquatus, achieved glory and esteem, which are the firmest safeguards for life without fear. By punishing his son with death, he managed to contain the army in the midst of a very serious war and through fear of punishment he was providing for the security of his fellow citizens, and of course, for his own (*fin.* 1, 35).

⁵⁶ That the objection affects Cicero is proven by the fact that he accepts (*fin.* 2, 61) that perhaps Torquatus performed the mentioned feat in *fin.* 1 for his own utility, although Cicero also stresses that this account turns out to be unacceptable in the case of his colleague Publius Decius, who threw himself against enemy troops knowing that this would mean his death. Curiously, one of the arguments that Plutarch addresses against the Epicureans in *Non posse* is that the pleasures experienced by the great men of action when performing their feats surpass the pleasures exalted by them (1098a-1100d).

Epicurean sage is recognizable amongst the motivations alleged by Cicero that might lead to carrying out bad actions knowing that they will not be discovered. Cicero reviews the first in these terms: *divitiarum, potentiae, dominationis, libidinis causa* (*off.* 3, 39). Regarding the second point, Cicero tries to show, as we have indicated, that either the Epicureans are villainous (because they act badly when they know they will remain unnoticed) or they act well (because they abstain from performing bad actions even knowing their bad actions will remain unnoticed) and, consequently, they accept that bad actions should be avoided. The second point would mean that Cicero accuses the Epicureans of being inconsistent, the first point of being perverse. Right at the beginning of the paragraph he insinuates the former, qualifying them «as not bad people but not very subtle».

The considerations of Cicero and Plutarch strip the Epicurean sage of his defining characteristics: φυσιολογία and φρόνησις. One of the purposes of the former is to achieve what Epicurus calls, with an expression of his own convincingly interpreted by Erler⁵⁷, «firm contemplation» (ἀπλανής θεωρία; *LM* 128), which discriminates and hierarchizes desires while explaining and dispelling those that have their origin in fears and vain opinions. The latter refers to all forms of choice and avoidance based on what Epicurus calls, with an expression also coined by him, «sober reasoning» (νήφων λογισμός; *LM* 132)⁵⁸. Cicero does not even mention the role of φυσιολογία and φρόνησις in the motivations and decisions of the Epicurean sage when analyzing the Gyges passage. As a matter of fact, he does not capture the interesting conflation of theory and praxis that reflect the expressions ἀπλανής θεωρία and νήφων λογισμός, as coined by Epicurus. He is obliged to do so, of course, because of his biased identification of the Epicurean way of life with what tradition called «life of enjoyment» (βίος ἀπολαυστικός).

⁵⁷ Erler, 2012, 45-55 sees in the expression a reformulation (of Epicurean imprint) of the Platonic approach to the ὁμοίωσις θεῶν (cf. *Timaeus* 90c ff., where the adjective ἀπλανής is used, too). θεωρία is an expression that in Plato is especially related to the intelligible domain. Epicurus takes up the connotation of empirical knowledge that the term θεωρία possessed and adds to it the adjective ἀπλανής that, for Plato at least, is anchored in the intelligible world. The anti-platonic result of the reformulation is clear: the Epicurean ἀπλανής θεωρία is aimed at the happiness of man as a mortal being on earth, to live as a god on earth.

⁵⁸ Perhaps in this case too, Epicurus is inspired by Plato, who argues that φρόνησις is like a sober (νηφαντική) source of pleasure (*Phl.* 61c6; on this point see Boeri 2010).

None of the motivations that Cicero alleges as the basis for carrying out bad actions knowing that they will not be discovered (see again *off.* 3, 39) is taken to be valid in the hierarchy of desires that the Epicurean ἀπλανῆς θεωρία discriminates as fostering serenity, peace of mind, and absence of pain. In other words, not only do they not constitute motivations of an Epicurean sage, but they are also (especially the first three listed) analyzed by the Epicureans as vain desires aroused by fear, from which the Epicurean wise person has freed himself⁵⁹. Epicurus knows that the polis establishes legal channels for satisfying such vain desires. However, in his opinion, this in no way accredits them as constituents of *living prudently, honorably, and justly* (φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως) on which he focuses pleasant living; that is, tranquility (*LM* 132; *KD* 5). Hence, the actions derived from the motivations listed by Cicero, whether just or unjust, legal, or not, regardless of remaining hidden or not, do not correspond to an Epicurean sage. The honorable and just living of the Epicurean sage does not respond to the fear of the punishment of laws, as happens to many of his fellow citizens, but to his abiding by the necessary natural desires that not only do not promote unjust actions, but which might even disregard actions authorized by the law. The pleasurable life of the Epicurean sage is not a life of pure personal sensual pleasure, but a life in which living wisely and prudently is tantamount to living honorably, justly, and pleasantly. In fact, the adverb «honorably» (καλῶς), so profusely used by Epicurus, along with the adverb «justly» (δικαίως), qualifies the life of the Epicurean sage in different terms from the simple attachment to the laws. Indeed, there are behaviors authorized by the law that do not correspond to the sage, such as «being sordidly stingy» (*Vatican Saying* [VS] 43) and in general the love of money (φιλοχρηματία; see Philodemus *On Property Management* 17, 2-14; 25, 23-24)⁶⁰. Likewise, the expression living honorably (καλῶς ζῆν) encompasses behaviors of the Epicurean sage that go beyond what is required by law in social relations, such as, giving and donating, friendship or philanthropy.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, Konstan (2008, 53-55) suggests that the Epicurean doctrine that fear or, more properly, anxiety is the cause of unlimited desires makes a notable difference from Plato's and Aristotle's approaches to immoderate passions such as greed or ambition.

⁶⁰ See both *VS* 43 and the use of γενναῖος («noble man») regarding the Epicurean sage in *VS* 78. On the use of καλῶς in Epicurus, see Robitzsch 2019, 6-7, who does not consider the illuminating remarks by Long 2006, 190-192; 378.

This characterization of the life of the Epicurean sage does not, in our view, imply a tension between the relational imprint of the «contractual» justice, circumscribed by the structure of mutual obligations, and the apparently intrinsic and personal scope of the expression «living honorably and justly» in *LM* 132 and *PD* 5. We hold this is so because both cases fit, in an Epicurean view, into the purpose of human being's happiness.

Additionally, such “fitness” has an interesting causal structure: on the one hand, the wise person living with justice requires the security (ἀσφάλεια) provided by contractual justice. It is precisely in this sense that a passage of Stobaeus (Us. 530) may be interpreted; there it is pointed out that the laws are established for the sake of the wise (χάριν τῶν σοφῶν), not so that they will not commit injustice but so that they will not suffer it. On the other hand, by living honorably and justly the Epicurean sage at once strengthens his security and promotes the reduction of the causes of harm and being harmed, to the avoidance of which, as is well-known, the arrival of the pact and justice is orientated (*PD* 33). In fact, some Epicureans seem to have considered that a consequence of the universalization of Epicureanism would be the elimination of laws and penalties as unnecessary.

Cicero's interpretation of Epicureans' answer to story of Gyges' ring assumes that the reason why the wise Epicurean does not commit crimes is the fear of being discovered and punished. So, in Cicero's view, as long as he is certain that he will not be discovered, he will act illegally. As we have shown, a fundamental aspect of the malicious character of Cicero's interpretation is the omission of the link that Epicureanism establishes between φυσιολογία and the actions of the sage. There is, though, another aspect that evinces his deficient interpretation of Epicurus' answer. Cicero understands Epicureans implicit reply in the passage of *Puzzles* to be a rule of conduct («whenever the Epicurean sage is certain not to be discovered, he will act unlawfully»). However, Epicurus' answer points precisely to the impossibility of giving a categorical answer such as «yes, always» or «no, never». Perhaps the reason for this is that the question, despite its appearance, is too general, i.e., it does not determine the singular circumstances in which the sage must decide. We do not know the context of the passage from *Puzzles*, and we do not know whether Epicurus provided any examples. Attempts by interpreters to supply them

have certainly proved controversial⁶¹. Epicurus stresses that the circumstances constitute a fundamental ingredient of the Epicurean sage's decisions. In fact, none of the *Key Doctrines* offers categorical rules of conduct and, not for nothing, Epicurus places prudence at the top of the doctrine (*LM* 132). On the other hand, as Strauss has stressed, it is a commonplace since Aristotle's meagre and marginal considerations on the topic that even natural law is subject to exception in extreme cases (*EN* 1134b18-1135a5).

The background of Gyges' ring story is Glaucon's specific contractual model, in which *πλεονεξία* is the essential motivation of human nature (Plato, *resp.* 359c3-5). Cicero underlines this link between *πλεονεξία* and contractualism in *leg* 3, 23 (in fact, as observed by Woolf 2013, 802, Cicero's Gyges is presented more overtly than Plato's as a ruthless evildoer whom we should not want to be like). Now, in Epicureanism *πλεονεξία* is framed by the emergence of vain desires and fears posterior to the establishment of the first covenants of justice. In Glaucon's model Gyges represents, as it were, the figure of a human being *ante pactum* living in the midst of human beings subject to a pact. Hence perhaps the fascination which Plato attributes to the common mind (*resp.* 360b6) with the figure of one who, like Gyges, could do everything as if he were equal to a god among men (*ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἰσόθεον ὄντα; resp.* 360c3). Certainly, as is well known, Plato's theology and agenda is quite different: the human being, he argues, should as far as possible assimilate himself to god or rather become like god (*i.e.*, cultivate his immortal soul)⁶². At the end of *LM* Epicurus seems once again to use Plato's expressions to encapsulate his own philosophy as well as his view of the gods. Epicurus states that whoever practices his philosophy – not Gyges or the Platonic philosopher, one might add – will live as a god among men (*LM* 135, Ζήση δὲ ὡς θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις). The figure of Gyges represents neither a challenge nor fascination for the Epicureans.

⁶¹ Most interpreters refer to exceptional circumstances in which the satisfaction of the natural desires of the sage or of a friend (which would seem to constitute performing «honorably», *καλῶς*) would involve breaking the law. There are, however, also very different hypotheses, such as the one put forward by Roskam, who argues that it cannot be ruled out that if Epicurus were sure of not being discovered, he would put the harmful apostate Timocrates to death (Roskam 2012, 37-39).

⁶² According to Plato himself, this means “becoming just and pious with wisdom” (*φρόνησις*; Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b); the question of becoming godlike is a recurrent theme in Plato (see, for example, *Phaedr.* 253a-b; *resp.* 383c; 500c-d; 613a-b; *Tim.* 90a; *leg.* 716c-d). For discussion see Sedley 1997 and Erler 2002, 163-167.

As in the case of friendship, *KD* 1 does not seem to leave room for justice in the Epicurean becoming like god, since «[w]hat is blessed and indestructible has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone». Again, Philodemus clarifies the linkage insofar as in *On Piety* he points out that the happiness of the gods stems from their harmlessness (ἀβλαβία) towards everyone (*On Piety* 2051-2, ed. Obbink). In this respect, too, the gods are to be emulated. As Obbink comments⁶³, Philodemus suggests human beings should endeavor as far as possible to make themselves harmless to everyone. Such harmlessness is attained by piety; the pious and wise person is just and thus enjoys the greatest benefit from the gods.

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⁶³ Obbink, 1996, 566.

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