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The Shadow of Croton: Epicureanism's Concept of
Religion and the Necessity of Asceticism

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The birth of the religious sect accompanied the emergence of natural philosophy in the period known as archaic Greece. The passage of time has, in some cases, made the two approaches seem almost synonymous and interchangeable. The mystic philosopher, Pythagoras of Samos is the first personage who fits the this religious criteria. He led a group his devoted followers to the Achean colony of Croton in the late 6th century BCE. In Croton, Pythagoras created a community of and for his "believers" who were dedicated to his mystical teachings. These instructions included strict rules of conduct for all members of the community as well as alternative theological ideas that wandered significantly from the accepted public religion of the *polis*. Further, this community engaged actively and persistently in the politics of the colony. The Pythagoreans made themselves well known to their neighbors. This behavior was eventually disastrous for the community as they were killed or driven out by their neighboring Crotonians.

The lesson of Pythagoras serves as a historical warning to those groups that followed in the philosophical tradition that emphasized living among associations of the philosophically initiated. Epicurus almost certainly had knowledge of the failure at Croton, and I suspect that it probably had an effect on the development on the "way of life" that he propagated. It has been largely proven that Epicurean philosophy encouraged communities that bordered on the later concept of monasticism. In this paper I will argue that the innovative Epicurean concept of the divine, and the unkind reception that such ideas were sure to receive, were the driving factors in creating the need for the ascetic flavor the philosophy developed under its founder. This theme will be examined through the relevant writings of Epicurus relating to the ideal lifestyle and the gods, the later public religious recruitment strategy of Lucretius, as well as the esoteric concepts of divinity and the resulting conclusions. Throughout, I will make reference to the Epicurean

concept of “living unseen” and how its meaning is essential to understanding the structure of the gatherings in the Epicurean Gardens.¹

The Hellenistic period saw dramatic changes to the social and religious landscape. The successes of Alexander and the movements of the successive *Diadochoi* made the ancient world a decidedly smaller place. As a result, the spread of ideas from afar became commonplace and the period saw two major themes emerge from that cosmopolitan exchange: the ruler cult and what became known as the "mystery cults." The importance of the ruler cult cannot be overstated while examining the historical context that surrounded the emergence of philosophical schools in the cosmopolitan post-Alexander period. While the traditional pantheon of Zeus and Hera still presided over the public sphere of religion in Greek cities, rulers who sought "international" legitimacy followed in Alexander's footprints and were divinized all across the Hellenistic world.² Divinization brought with it a fair amount of eye rolling from certain corners, yet over large areas that were hard to control it helped to bring centralization. Under this system, the living ruler had effective control over the ritualistic nature of city life as well as what we would dub virtually unlimited secular control over his territory.

Mystery cults tended to be "exotic" imports that attracted followers who sought a more mystical and individualized experience.³ These religions incorporated figures from various mythologies ranging from Zoroastrianism (Mithras) to Egyptian cosmology (Isis and Osiris). In practice, many mystery cults were practiced in semi-secrecy. Sadly, little is known of many of the

¹ Epicurus. "Letter to Pythocles." Also translatable as *living without tumult, living secretly, or living quietly*. Via Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.), 19.

² Peter Green, "Ruler Cults, Traditional Religion, and the Ambivalence of Tyche" in *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 396-413.

³ Due to the length and direction of this particular study, generalizations will be made regarding the mystery cults. Specifics differ greatly across different cults and at different locales. For the definitive look at the religious aspects of the mystery cults see W. Burkert's work noted in bibliography.

dogma and practices of the majority of these followings, yet in general it is thought that they offered alternatives and extensions to the traditional aspects of the Hellenic deities. Further, the fact that worship was partially carried out in secret hints to both the exclusivity inherent in some of these groups as well as the potential reluctance of mainstream society to accept foreign gods and near heretical takes on the Hellenic pantheon within Greek culture.⁴ In Epicurus' adopted home, Athens, "religious traditionalism" maintained a firm grip upon society; so much so, that a contemporary of Epicurus was violently attacked by a mob due to the alternative religious claims that had been made by him.⁵ Structurally, Epicureanism acts as a combination of these two themes within Hellenistic society. Epicurus himself was treated as a distinctly mortal "savior" by his followers, whose teachings could provide relief from distress and fear that surrounded contemporary society.⁶ Additionally, the religious arguments he put forward do not seem out of line with the religion offered by certain mystery cults. The arguments regarding the disposition and composition of the gods that are put forward by Epicurus' surviving letters provide reasoning for the enclosed nature of his philosophical circle.

Regrettably, only a fraction Epicurus' writing survives to the modern day. Fortunately however, several letters covering the broad sketch of the whole mode of thought have passed down in relatively good condition. It would be difficult to assert that what we understand of Epicurus' writings presents a complete version of his thoughts, as a result any attempt to discern his foremost religious beliefs will require a fair amount of conjecture and speculation. Regarding the gods of the traditional Greek pantheon, however, certain firm statements survive in letters to

⁴ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 40.

⁵ Green, *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, 398-399.

⁶ A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2001), 15.

friends and confidants that state a clear belief in gods, "For gods do exist . . . But they are not such as the many believe . . . The man who denies the gods of the many is not impious, but rather he who ascribes the gods the opinions of the many."⁷ To Epicurus, the fear of divine punishment from sophomoric gods was the greatest cause of distress to the well being of humankind, seconded only by the fear of death itself. Like the iconoclast actively targeting the objects of reverence, Epicurus sought to eliminate these traditional conceptions of the gods that were commonly held.⁸ In Epicurus' mind, the gods were first and foremost atomic beings.⁹ As a result they were probably mortal (yet extraordinarily long lived and for most intents and purposes, immortal). They could only interact with humanity only through residual actions (dreams, feelings of guilt, etc) through a complex atomic process.¹⁰ They remain anthropomorphized, yet their personalities vary greatly in actuality than what is presented in Homer and Hesiod. What sets the gods metaphysically apart from mankind is that they are free from the disturbances which cause all of the distress in humanity. As a result, Epicurus' gods are "carefree" and "completely untroubled," the very essence of *ataraxia*.¹¹ They were essentially Epicurean philosophers removed from the world and existing happily apart from chaos.¹² Regarding worship, Epicurus allows for the dedication to these remote and untouchable gods in public but emulation of the gods is seen as the path to *ataraxia*.

⁷ Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 28-29.

⁸ George Depue Hadzits, "The Personality of the Epicurean Gods," in *The American Journal of Philology*, Volume 37, No. 3 (1916), 320.

⁹ David Konstan, "Epicurus on the gods," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, edited by Jeffery Fish and Kirk Sanders, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60. Although there is some debate concerning the mortality of the gods, Konstan recreates a literalist argument that would undoubtedly please the producers of the History Channel's *Ancient Aliens*. That is that the gods of Epicurus, are "a specially privileged extraterrestrial life form."

¹⁰ Ibid, 54, 66-67.

¹¹ Michael Erler, "Autodidact and Student: On the Relationship of Authority and Autonomy in Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, 21. *Ataraxia* is the state that is free from worry, the goal of Epicurean philosophy.

¹² Green, *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, 622.

Epicurus seems to argue that one could achieve a divine level of *ataraxia* if one followed his philosophy attentively. In closing his *Letter to Menoeceus*, which serves as a brief outline of the philosophy as a whole, Epicurus urges his friend to "practice these and the related precepts day and night . . . and you will never be disturbed . . . and you will live as a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal goods (sic) is in no respect like a mere mortal animal."¹³ This revelation could be seen as nothing less than extremely controversial among those contemporaries who concerned themselves with the traditional religion or any of the other mainstream philosophies. If one could *literally* bridge the Epicurean gap between the gods and men by following this way of thinking, then the reality of the pantheon existing as a Epicurean community becomes a very real option. The related conclusion for those outside of the philosophy could only be opposition to this idea, and opposition that could almost certainly be expressed through violence towards the group. During the Roman period, the religious version of the philosophy that was presented to the public initially appeared significantly different from the danger that Epicurus paints it as.

Lucretius is the best example of a "public face" of later Epicureanism, as the expressed purpose of his *On the Nature of Things* was to recruit a prominent Roman to the philosophy. The opening invocation of his work reads like an extended "who's who" of the Roman psyche by calling upon both Venus and Mars to bless his words and to help him fulfill his goals, and even to bring peace to the Roman world in the tempestuous first century BCE.¹⁴ Aside from an overly flattering and superlative description of Venus, the versions of the gods that Lucretius uses are very similar to the gods that dominated the common perceptions of the Roman deities. Yet, in the

¹³ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 31.

¹⁴ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by Martin Ferguson Smith, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 1.1-43.

second book of *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius addresses the gods in a more traditionally Epicurean way. He describes them as being, "far removed and separated from our world; free from all distress, free from peril, fully self sufficient, independent of us, they are not influenced by worthy conduct nor touched by anger."¹⁵ There is an apparent contradiction between this Epicurean description of the gods and the opening dedication.

A few possible explanations exist for this apparent textual discrepancy. It could be the result of the standard opening in the genre of "epic" poetry. Traditionally, the gods or muses were invoked in order to provide for divine approval of a topic. In support of this view, Lucretius wrote in dactylic hexameter, which is the meter of the epic tradition, employed by Homer and Hesiod (among others). This seems unlikely, however, as Lucretius does not include the traditional invocation of the muses until book six, the description of Venus and Mars are not used in that sense, and as a recruiting tool the entire trope does not fit well as the work is dedicated to a single individual. It could also be based upon a yet it seems as though the most likely scenario is that an initial public statement from a sect would be most accepting by a general reader and then progressively become more philosophically specific and potentially controversial. This conclusion seems likely as Epicureanism has been considered the only Greek philosophy that actively sought recruits through missionary work, and the aforementioned tactic is effective towards that goal.¹⁶ The use of this approach points to the lack of acceptance of Epicurean philosophy in aristocratic circles in Republican Rome. Epicurus recognized the potential scandal that his philosophy could cause among the populous and as a result he separated his followers

¹⁵ Lucretius, 2.649-651.

¹⁶ Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 17.

from the majority of his contemporaries and that is why the choice of the secluded garden was made for the meeting place of the "school."

Epicurus famously welcomed all comers to the garden. This approach scandalously accepted women of all social levels and slaves among the male free born pupils of the thinker; all learning and adopting religious ideals that were against the societal norm. Regarding death, instead of employing the traditional ideas of the "afterlife," these being: Hades, the five rivers that had been traditionally associated with the underworld, Tartarus, and the Elysian Fields that are associated with traditional faith, Epicurus argued that death is nothing to be afraid of as the gods do not have any interest in the comings and goings of mortals. His concept of justice did not extend to the gods in any sense, except perhaps that they lived in an enclosed community. The enclosed community, and the anonymity that it provided, was the key for the actual execution of the philosophical system. It is only within a closed association of like minded people that the Epicurean ideas of death, rather the void that death creates, could be carried out without causing deeply felt disturbance across those left behind. The association's conception of *guilt* based justice (particularly guilt based justice without the threat of divine punishment) seems too out of the norm of regular society's shame based justice to have much of an impact outside of a small group of individuals.¹⁷ The need to withdraw into a secluded area with fellow Epicureans is essential for the group to practice their philosophy in a way that is consistent and to protect themselves from the surrounding world. Epicurus' urgings to "live unseen" prove to be good advice for those who would attempt to buck contemporary society through open alternatives to the common religion

¹⁷ John M. Armstrong, "Epicurean Justice" in *Phronesis*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1997), 325.

and the political problems that associate themselves with denying the divinity of a divinized governor.¹⁸

Similar to the views of Pythagoras several centuries before, Epicurus' philosophical considerations of religion and society aroused "violent and passionate opposition" by those who lived around them.¹⁹ In order to avoid the same fate that the Pythagoreans earned in Italy, Epicurus proposed the idea of "living unseen." This approach allowed the philosophy's less acceptable religious concepts to go without punishment from non-followers. The secrecy inherent in separating oneself from the mainstream forced the sect to adopt an egalitarian acceptance policy as well as actively recruiting from conventional contemporaries. Further, the execution of the philosophy itself could only be effectively performed within a group that is closed off from the rest of society and accepting of Epicurus' thoughts on death and what death means for those left behind. It was the secluded garden that enabled the group to act out the philosophy and protected the psuedo-mystery cult that had been led by a messianic figure from the passions of those that were unable or unwilling to adopt alternatives.

¹⁸ Geert Roskam, *Lathe Biosas: On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 64.

¹⁹ Green, *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, 622.

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