EPICURUS

AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS PRACTICAL ETHICS AND POLITICS

MICHAEL ERLER

SCHWABE VERLAG

Michael Erler

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Preface

This small book contains six lectures that I delivered at Renmin University, Beijing, in June 2017. I had the pleasure and honour to be invited to deliver this set of lectures as part of a programme of master lectures on ancient philosophy, which had been established as a biannual series in 2010. This was my first visit to the People's Republic of China. I am most grateful for having had the honour and opportunity of sharing my thought on Epicureanism, and also on Plato and Platonism, with scholars and students of Renmin University, as well as with other audiences at other Chinese universities, including Beijing University and Sichuan University, Chengdou. I am most grateful for the inspiring discussions and for the generous hospitality of the university and my colleagues there.

Certain aspects of Epicurean practical philosophy were chosen as the topic of my talks; I drafted the lectures for that occasion, but I have been working on the topic of Epicurean practical ethics, its political aspects and influence on other schools and traditions such as the Platonist tradition in imperial times, already for a long time. So I was delighted to have the chance to address in this 'introduction' problems and questions which seem to be of interest to me as a philologist as well as a reader who is interested in literary and philosophical aspects of Epicurean texts.

The lively discussions that followed the lectures in Beijing proved an immense interest in questions of Epicurean practical ethics and the 'art of living' proposed by the Epicureans in general. The answers and pieces of advice offered by the Epicureans proved to be not only of historical interest but were regarded as inspiring and sometimes even helpful for today's problems.

In fact, in Epicurus' times (the 3rd and 2nd century BC) the focus of philosophical interest had indeed shifted away from metaphysical speculation towards considerations concerning the individual and the happiness (*eudai-*

monia) of the individual, a development which was caused not least by the challenges of that time. Among these were the geographical opening to the East and colonisation in the form of city foundations, culturally close contacts of the Greeks with the New World and its traditions, social and economic changes in the living world, and, politically, new forms of government. All this diminished the significance of the old institution of the polis, led to a new kind of individualism, to concern for one's own self and reticence concerning political commitment. Thus the tendency towards a world culture at that time was accompanied by a predilection for small literary forms, the progressing globalisation was answered with individualism and an increased search for orientation.

Some of these aspects, like the problems created by 'globalisation', might seem familiar to modern readers, who today may well perceive the world as difficult to manage and frightening due to political and social changes; modern readers too may try to design their own lives and may therefore be looking for standards and ways to overcome irritations in order to live a balanced life and gain happiness. Whoever promises happiness must offer means to defeat these phenomena. The sales success of popular treatises on life assistance and the art of living signal a certain need for orientation. In this context, modern philosophers increasingly remember antiquity and those concepts of "self-care" (Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault), which emerged above all in the period described. Epicurus in particular, who founded his school in a garden (*kepos*) in Athens towards the end of the 3rd century BC, is profiting from this renaissance as well. As a representative of a special way of life and a teacher of an 'art of living' he won many followers already in antiquity – especially in times of crisis – and some think that his teachings can be helpful again even today.

Epicurus and the Epicureans indeed promised to help to lead a happy life (*ars vitae*) and to form a special attitude inspired by their teachings, which seems to be necessary if one wishes to lead a good life without inner disturbances. They proposed to offer help in order to increase the capacity to help oneself, and methods and material for the acquisition of a disposition that allows to correct wrong attitudes and to cultivate basic correct ones. The Epicurean philosopher is characterised not only by his knowledge of philosophical doctrine and philosophical discourse but also by his ability to make the learned teachings the maxim of practical action in every possible sit-

uation. In order to achieve security and happiness one should try to overcome fear and anxiety. Epicurus therefore offers means to achieve the ability to heal oneself from disturbing fear in an irritating situation. The remedy consists in the Epicurean doctrine and its basic convictions: "One need not fear God, one should not face death with suspicious fear, the good is easy to obtain, but the bad is easy to bear". Epicurus not only offers recipes for the liberation from fear, but also welcomes everyone as a patient. Young and old alike are invited to be instructed by the master. This, too, distinguishes Epicurus from many ancient colleagues and has made an impression even on those who strongly reject basic tenets of his teachings like the denial of the immortality of the soul, of the providence of the gods, or his thesis that all men are striving for pleasure. Yet despite all polemics, even Epicurus' enemies often accepted that his life in some respects was paradigmatic.

Exercise, application, consultation or habituation of knowledge therefore play an important role for the Epicureans. Breviaries, collections of sentences, catechisms or handbooks offer Epicurean teaching in an easily comprehensible and memorable form, combined with methodical instructions for its application in daily life.

Epicurus' practical philosophy as an offer of an 'art of living' is propagated, explained, and illustrated by a variety of writings, including scientific treatises such as Epicurus' main work *De natura*, but also the use of other types of texts such as the diatribe, memorial treatises on the life and death of school members, letters to friends and communities around the world, compendia or *epitomai* (short summaries), or collections of sentences with simple and plausible guidelines on how to shape a happy life and how to attain it.

These latter kinds of text recommend the memorising of easily comprehensible basic sentences rather than confront the reader with complex philosophical theories and controversies. This can be explained with Epicurus' view on knowledge transfer. Like Plato, Epicurus repeatedly demands a rethinking of philosophical foundations which forms a component of his art of living. Unlike Plato, however, he is not concerned with an independent search for truth, but with memorising doctrines. The texts are thus a means and an essential element of the practical philosophy propagated by Epicurus, and his offer of techniques for the application of this teaching to the adver-

sities of daily life made his philosophy attractive for many in antiquity and for some even today.

Unlike the modern hedonist Dorian Gray, who poisons himself by reading a book, the Epicureans experienced edification as liberation from the "plague of ignorance" (Diogenes). Reading became part of the techniques of "self-care" (Michel Foucault) that Epicureans offered to support the search for pleasure and happiness. *Philosophia medicans* became *philologia medicans*.

Of course, it does not follow from this that Epicurus and the Epicureans did not strive to establish a theoretical basis for this offer. They rather developed an epistemological, ontological, and ethical framework for their practical advice as shown, for instance, by Epicurus' main treatise *De natura*. It should, however, be noted that this basis, e. g. atomism or empiricism, always includes ethical intentions, for example, the intention to explain why irritating phenomena are not irritating at all, as the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius demonstrates. Epicurus' world view thus does not remain purely theoretical, but leads to the formation of a special way of life and thus becomes practical. Theoretical and practical philosophy are closely connected after all.

In a way, Epicurus regarded the world as a textbook for the cultivation of the self. Theoretical contemplation became part of the therapeutic programme that Epicurus offered as an aid to orientation. Only those who know how to deal with accidental inconveniences or natural violence will overcome the "fear of the child in us" (Lucretius). Then one gains that distanced attitude that makes the viewer stand above things and feel pleasure.

Still, people who direct all their activity towards themselves and transform everything into self-care expose themselves to the suspicion that they are practising a pure cult of the ego, propagating modern dandyism. But that is not exactly what Epicurus is about, as the lectures collected in this volume try to show. By no means is an Epicurean alone enough to gain pleasure and happiness for himself. He needs food and connection to the world of his fellow men, he needs friendship. Self-confidence and security require an environment that is conducive to one's own happiness. This may initially consist of a small circle of garden comrades. But the Epicureans see the world as a common home. With his inscription at the town hall, Diogenes of Oenoanda wanted to reach as many people as possible in order to heal them from ignorance. The goal for the Epicureans, as later for John Stewart Mill, was the

greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number. Then, so they hoped, one would be on the way to an ideal society: social life without laws, nay, without state, on the basis of well-understood self-interest will not only enable Epicureans, but all people to live a life like a God on earth. Epicurus' much quoted call to political abstinence – 'live in secret' – the cultivation of the self he propagated, the utilitarian basis of his philosophy – all this should not obscure the philanthropic character of his teaching. It seems paradoxical: Epicurus' utilitarian doctrine demands orientation towards fellow human beings and promotes social development. This view fits well with more recent theories from behavioural research that put genetically-determined egoism into context with social developments. A free expression of one's problems, the examination of one's conscience, the confession of guilt towards friends are recommended. Many things seem modern, make one think of confession and therapeutic counselling. It is not, however, about the forgiveness of sins, but about the ability to analyse oneself, which is at the beginning of every improvement and every healing process.

Because of this far-reaching influence of Epicurean practical ethics, I further develop some aspects of Epicurean practical ethics in this book, which might be called *philosophia medicans* because it offers a kind of medicine to free people from fear and anguish.

To do so, I will focus first (ch. 1) on the Epicurean ideal of the wise man, then (ch. 2) on Epicurus' school, the Garden or *kepos*, and on how the ideal of the self-perfection of one's mortal self and caring for others go together. I then also ask (ch. 3) what it means that the Epicurean wise man should shun politics and argue that a newly-found fragment of an Epicurean inscription will help to better understand that Epicurus' advice to avoid politics concerns traditional politics only and recommends a new understanding of what politics really should mean. I wish to argue that this new kind of 'philosophical' politics, which the Epicureans favour to be applied in any community, should be seen in the Platonic-Socratic tradition and reflects what Plato's Socrates had to say in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*. I further discuss (ch. 4) the fact that Epicurus, although he has been accused of atheism, accepted the existence of gods and traditional religious features, while transforming them into what could be called *theologia medicans* and integrating them into his practical ethics or *philosophia medicans*. Next (ch. 5), I try to defend the Epicureans against the accusation of *apaideusia*, i.e. a neglect of

traditional education, and discuss the relation of so-called Epicurean orthodoxy and innovation in this matter. Finally (ch. 6), I track down elements of Epicurean practical ethics in the Roman context and late antiquity, and discuss how Epicurean teachings were adapted to new Roman and even Christian contexts down to late antiquity and the Renaissance. The *main thesis* is that Epicurean practical ethics are indeed relevant for good living in community, that they were of great importance in antiquity, and might be of interest even today. They can be interpreted and perhaps better understood as a kind of response to philosophical predecessors – especially to Plato.

I would like to thank Marion Schneider, who helped me with the composition of the English version of the lectures; Francois Renaud who spent some time in Würzburg on a Humboldt grant working with me on Plato, discussed with me many topics that I treated in the lectures and gave good advice for improving the English version; Vincenzo Damiani, who helped with formatting the manuscript, and Konstantin Heil, who kindly checked the notes for me. All of them were of great help to me, for which I am grateful.

Chapter 1: Epicurus' Wise Man: Practical Ethics as *philosophia medicans*

1. Epicurus in the Vatican

The famous *School of Athens* painted by Raphael on a wall of one of the Catholic Pope's private rooms in the Vatican has become an icon of western European culture.[1] In this painting, Raphael assembles famous ancient philosophers; among these 58 philosophers one recognises Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus, Diogenes and many others. Raphael presents them as doing what philosophers like to do best: discussing, teaching, reading, writing, and – sometimes – listening to each other. That is to say, Raphael, as the great Renaissance writer Vasari recognised,[2] characterises the philosophers by illustrating their different ways of philosophical communication. In doing so, Raphael seems to follow a rule formulated by Lorenzo Valla in his treatise *De voluptate*, according to which the communication of a philosopher should match the character of the person and of the teachings he stands for.[3] From this it follows that focusing on the different ways of communication each person employs tells the viewer something about the philosopher, who he is, how he practises philosophy and what his philosophical message is. This makes it easier to identify the philosophers depicted by Raphael. In most cases, this identification is quite easy.[4] But if you look for the philosopher our

1 Cf. Erler 2000: 273–294; Most 1996.

2 Cf. Kranz 1996: 51. The importance of the way of communication was stressed by Burckhardt 1959: 273 f.; for the rule of Decorum of Audience see Hankins 1991: 330 f.; Erler 2000: 276; Most 1999.

3 Cf. De Panizza Lorch 1970; Erler 2004a: 7–19.

4 Cf. Erler 2000: 280.

lectures are interested in – Epicurus – things are different: Epicurus, the Athenian philosopher who lived in the late 4th and 3rd centuries at the beginning of the so-called Hellenistic age (341–270 BC), who founded a school in Athens[5] and marked the beginning of a very important and interesting, though highly controversial philosophical movement which lasted for over 500 years up until imperial times.[6] Although many attempts have been made to discover him in the painting, Epicurus seems hard to identify. To the best of my knowledge, no suggestion has been accepted as being fully persuasive so far. I suggest taking the cue from what Epicurus himself tells us about philosophy and philosophical communication in one of his letters to Menoeceus. What Epicurus has to say at the beginning of this letter[7] explains exactly the peculiarity of the composition of the small group to our left, standing around a column. There are good reasons to argue that the members of this group must be Epicureans and that one of them, who is wearing a wreath of ivy and pointing to a page of a book in front of him, might be Epicurus.[8] The other persons who pay attention to him – I think – are his followers. Now, the composition of this group strikes me as intriguing, because each of the four individuals is of a different age and obviously represents a different phase in man's life – a baby, a very young man, a man in his best years, and an old man. A composition such as this cannot be observed in any other of the groups painted by Raphael. As far as I can see, this peculiarity has not yet been utilised in the discussion about the identity of the group, but – as I shall argue – it is the cue for identifying it as a group of Epicureans and the man wearing the wreath of ivy as Epicurus, because the composition of the group consisting of four people with each of them representing a phase of human life, recalls, and obviously is meant to recall, the beginning of a most popular writing of Epicurus, the letter to his friend Menoeceus, which is preserved by Diogenes Laertius and had been translated into Latin in Raphael's times. This letter begins as follows:

5 Cf. Clay 2009.

6 Cf. Sedley 2009; Erler 2009a.

7 Cf. Epicur. Ep. Men. 122.

8 Cf. Erler 2000: 286–289.