



**The Rejection of the Epicurean Ideal of Pleasure in Late Antique  
Sources: Not Only Misunderstandings**  
**El rechazo del ideal epicúreo del placer en las fuentes tardoantiguas: no  
sólo equivocaciones**  
**A rejeição do ideal epicurista do prazer e seus inúmeros mal-entendidos  
nas fontes da Antiguidade Tardia**

Ilaria L. E. RAMELLI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Epicureanism was seen by its opponents, both ‘pagan’ and Christian, as the philosophy of pleasure and atheism. From the theological point of view, the accusation of atheism was incorrect, since Epicurus and the Epicureans admitted of the existence of deities, and posited them as models of moral perfection, while denying their interest in human affairs, i.e. providence. This denial aimed at guaranteeing their imperturbability (*ataraxia*). From the ethical point of view, the ideal of pleasure (*hēdonē*), on which I shall concentrate here, was grossly misunderstood or distorted by the opponents of Epicureanism, who generally did not take into consideration the moderation, equilibrium, and serenity that the superior ‘catastematic pleasure’ (Epicurus’s real ideal of pleasure) involved. I shall analyse the attitude of late-antique sources, especially Christian, toward Epicureanism and its ethics. A great many of Usener’s and Arrighetti’s fragments of Epicurus indeed come from Christian late-antique authors, such as Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Lactantius, and Augustine, but other patristic authors should be added, such as Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. Even if patristic interest in Epicureanism is often critical, and sometimes imprecise or distorted, nevertheless it is tangible. I shall focus on the authors who make the most interesting use of Epicurean sources, particularly with respect to the ethical doctrine: Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, Lactantius, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, Gregory Nyssen, and Nazianzen, the only

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Fellow, Durham University, United Kingdom, & Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy; Full Professor & K. Britt Endowed Chair, Graduate School of Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Thomas Aquinas University (Angelicum), Italy-USA. E-mail: [ilaria.ramelli@unicatt.it](mailto:ilaria.ramelli@unicatt.it) and [i.l.e.ramelli@durham.ac.uk](mailto:i.l.e.ramelli@durham.ac.uk)



one who really understood and praised Epicurus's notion of *hēdonē*. I shall also argue that the fading away of the availability and use of good sources on Epicureanism, along with the disappearance of the Epicurean school itself, brought about an impoverishment in the understanding of, and hostility to, Epicurus and Epicureanism.

**Resumo:** O Epicurismo foi visto pelos seus oponentes, tanto pagãos quanto cristãos, como a filosofia do prazer e do ateísmo. Do ponto de vista teológico, a acusação de ateísmo era incorreta, desde que o Epicuro e os epicuristas admitiram a existência de divindades e depositaram neles os ideais de perfeição, enquanto negavam seu interesse nos negócios humanos, isto é, a providência. Esta negação visa garantir sua imperturbabilidade (*ataraxia*). Do ponto de vista ético, o ideal de prazer (*hēdonē*), no qual eu irei me concentrar, foi grosseiramente mal-entendido ou distorcido pelos oponentes do Epicurismo, que geralmente não consideravam a moderação, equilíbrio, e serenidade que o “Prazer Catastematizado” superior (verdadeiro ideal de prazer do Epicuro) envolvia. Analisarei a atitude em fontes tardo-antigas, especialmente cristãs, a cerca do Epicuro e sua ética. Grande parte de fragmentos do Epicuro de Usener e Arrighetti na verdade são de autores cristãos tardo-antigos, como Clemente, Orígenes, Eusébio, Lactêncio, e Agostinho, mas outros autores patrísticos deveriam ser adicionados, como Basílio e Gregório de Nyssa. Mesmo se o interesse patrístico no Epicurismo fosse frequentemente de crítica, e às vezes imprecisa ou distorcida, no entanto, é tangível. Focarei nos autores que mais se interessaram no uso de documentos do Epicuro, particularmente a despeito da doutrina ética: Orígenes, Dionísio de Alexandria, Lactêncio, Ambrósio, Jerônimo e Agostinho, Gregório Nyssen, e Nazianzeno, o único que realmente entendeu e elogiou noção de *hēdonē* do Epicuro. Também argumentarei acerca do desaparecimento da disponibilidade de uso de boas fontes sobre o Epicuro, juntamente com o desaparecimento da própria escola epicurista, que provocou um empobrecimento na compreensão e na hostilidade do Epicuro e epicurismo.

**Keywords:** Epicureanism – Pleasure (ἡδονή) – Christian reception – Origen – Gregory Nazianzen.

**Palavras-chave:** Epicurismo, Prazer (ἡδονή), Recepção Cristã, Orígenes, Gregório Nazianzeno.

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## I. The Importance of Christian Sources for the Epicurean Fragments

Patristic interest in Epicureanism is often critical, and even imprecise or distorted, but it has proved invaluable. Indeed, many fragments and testimonies in Usener's and Arrighetti's collections<sup>2</sup> come from ancient Christian sources, from Clement of Alexandria and Lactantius to Jerome and Theodoret, from Tertullian to Origen, from Hippolytus to Augustine, from Theophilus to Nemesius, from Eusebius to John Chrysostom and Ps. Chrysostom, from Ambrose to Salvianus of Marseilles and Boethius, from Justin Martyr to Dionysius of Alexandria, to some Byzantine gnomologia and the *Suda*. Most of these quotations or testimonies come from Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Lactantius, and Augustine, but other patristic authors should be added, such as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, whose attitude toward, and knowledge of, Epicurean ideas I set out to analyse here.

## II. Early Reception: Acts, Justin, and Irenaeus. Interest and Misunderstandings

The author of the Acts of the Apostles, in the late first century—or, as some critics hypothesise, at the beginning of the second—depicted the Epicureans as highly interested hearers of the earliest Christian message, around 50 CE, in Paul's speech at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17. 18-34). This proved a highly inspiring text for patristic philosophy: Paul expounds there the Christian doctrine before philosophers and in philosophical terms, in the city that was the heart and symbol of the Greek philosophical tradition: the city not only of the Academy, the Lyceum, and the Stoa, but of Epicurus' Garden as well.

Most of patristic philosophy would be Platonic; however, the author of Acts here does not speak of Platonists among Paul's hearers in Athens—indeed the revival of Middle Platonism had not yet touched Athens around mid first

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<sup>2</sup> USENER, Hermann. *Epicurea*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1887; translation and updating in RAMELLI, Ilaria. *Epicurea*. Milan: Bompiani – Catholic University, 2002; RAMELLI, Ilaria. *Stoici romani minori*. Milan: Bompiani – Catholic University, 2008, chapter on Manilius, and review by REYDAMS-SCHILS, Gretchen. In: *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2009; ARRIGHETTI, Graziano. *Epicuro. Opere*. Turin: Einaudi, 1973.



century<sup>3</sup>— but only of Epicureans and Stoics. These are represented as the Athenian philosophers interested in what Paul had to say about theology.

The Epicureans are even mentioned first, and indeed, they were interested in theology. For they admitted of the existence of deities, and posited them as models of moral perfection, while denying their interest in human affairs, i.e. providence. This denial aimed at guaranteeing their imperturbability. Since, however, the ideal of pleasure, with its possible misunderstandings, is not central to Paul's speech, I shall not linger on this remarkable piece of philosophical and theological literature now.

Justin Martyr, who taught Christian philosophy in Rome at mid second century, offers a nice exemplification of how the term 'Epicurean', far from referring to specific philosophical doctrines taught by Epicurus or his followers, could bare a vague, pejorative meaning, which denoted a blend of hedonism, materialism, agnosticism, or atheism. Justin associates Epicurus with hedonism generally in his *First Apology* (7. 3, 12. 5, and 15. 3), stressing the importance of pleasure for Epicurus, but without taking into consideration his doctrine of catastematic pleasure. In fact, Justin, a Christian Middle Platonist, has been demonstrated to be using Platonising stereotypes, such as those attested in Plutarch and elsewhere, against Epicureanism. Patristic authors frequently did so, but, as I shall point out, there were also some felicitous exceptions.

More often than not, however, Epicurean doctrines, such as that of pleasure, were the object of gross misunderstandings. From the second century onward, Epicureanism became even associated with Christian 'heresies' as an object of blame. Thus, the heresiologist Irenaeus describes the 'Gnostics' as 'Epicureans' for their denial of divine providence (*AH* 3. 24. 2), even though from the historical point of view there were scarcely connections between Epicureanism and Gnosticism. Epicureanism was construed as an enemy of Christianity, and was stereotyped as the doctrine of pleasure and the refusal of divine revelation—though the Epicureans were not atheists proper and, according to the author of Acts, Epicureans and Stoics, and not Platonists,

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<sup>3</sup> See RAMELLI, Ilaria. 'Philosophen und Prediger: Dion und Paulus - pagane und christliche weise Männer'. In: NESSELRATH, Heinz-Günther (ed.), *Dion von Prusa. Der Philosoph und sein Bild*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, pp. 183-210; RAMELLI, Ilaria. 'Dieu et la philosophie: le discours de Paul à Athènes dans trois 'actes apocryphes' et dans la philosophie patristique'. In: *Gregorianum*, 93, 2012, pp. 75-91.



were interested in Paul's teaching in Athens. Paul, besides quoting a Stoic or Stoicising verse, clearly alluded, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> to an Epicurean theological doctrine.

### III. Clement's Good Knowledge of Sources. Origen and Celsus 'the Epicurean'

The Hellenistic Jewish exegete, philosopher, and theologian Philo of Alexandria in the first half of the first century CE had criticised Epicureanism to depth, including its ideal of pleasure. Philo indeed constructed his own ethics as a profound devaluation of pleasure (ἡδονή). Clement of Alexandria was very well acquainted with Philo's writings, but also shows a relatively profound and direct, personal knowledge of Epicurean doctrines. Indeed, he seems to have read Epicurus himself.

Thus, he did not simply depend on Philo and his (quite biased) 'filter' for his own knowledge of Epicureanism. For instance, in *Strom.* 4. 8. 69. 2 he quotes a long passage from Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus*, and he appears quite appreciative in his comments, since he remarks that this passage was 'well written' or 'nobly written' (καλῶς). The whole text of this letter was available to, and cited by, Diogenes Laertius, roughly a contemporary of Clement, who devoted a whole book, the last of his masterpiece, to Epicureanism, and entered a lively debate that involved his contemporary Christians as well, concerning the origin of philosophy and the value of barbarian 'philosophy'.<sup>5</sup>

Also elsewhere, such as in *Strom.* 6. 2, Clement reports Epicurus' ethical ideas; this is why this passage was included in Usener's *Epicurea* as frs. 519 and 476: 'Imperturbability [ἀταραξία] is the most important fruit of justice' and 'self-sufficiency [αὐτάρκεια] is the greatest richness of all'. Clement also quotes *Principal Belief* or *Key Doctrine* [Κυρία δόξα] 1 (*Strom.* 6. 104. 3), which sets the bar high for the representation of divinities and their imperturbability as ethical paradigms: what is supremely happy and incorruptible neither has troubles itself nor causes troubles to anyone else; thus, it is not prey to either anger or favour. For everything of this kind is found in a weak subject.

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<sup>4</sup> In FISH, Jeffrey and SANDERS, Kirk (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Epicureanism*, Oxford, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> See RAMELLI, Ilaria. 'Diogene Laerzio storico del pensiero antico tra biografia e dossografia, 'successioni di filosofi' e scuole filosofiche'. In: *Diogene Laerzio, Vite e dottrine dei più celebri filosofi*. Milan: Bompiani, 2005, pp. xxxiii-xxxviii.



Moreover, Clement ascribes to Epicurus the definition of faith as a pre-notion (πρόληψις τῆς διανοίας) in *Strom.* 2. 4. This passage was also included by Usener in his collection as Epicurus' fragment 255.

Clement explicitly includes Epicureanism too, along with Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism, among the Greek philosophical movements that were inspired by the Logos (who is identifiable with Christ in his view). Insofar as Greek philosophy was inspired by the Logos, he maintains, it spoke 'well and nobly' (καλῶς), 'teaching justice with pious science' (*Strom.* 1. 7. 37. 6). One instance of such good teaching is found by Clement in Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus* for its initial exhortation to philosophy which addresses everybody, independently of one's age, status, gender, and the like (*Strom.* 4. 8. 69. 2). In the same spirit Clement quotes and commends Metrodorus' fragment 37 Koerte; he goes so far as to claim that it was divinely inspired (ἐνθέως, *Strom.* 5. 138. 2).

Of course, Clement means that it comes from Christ-Logos. Along the same lines, Clement suggests that Epicurus derived his doctrine of chance (τοῦ αὐτομάτου, *Strom.* 5. 14) from the sentence of Ecclesiastes, 'vanity of vanities, all things are vanity' (1. 2). Once again, the apologetic motif that underlies this statement is that Christ-Logos inspired the biblical authors, and these in turn inspired Greek philosophers.

What is more, Clement appropriated a great deal of Epicurean polemic against traditional 'pagan' religion. In particular, Clement's own refutation of paganism in *Protr.* 2. 30-32, is largely dependent, directly or indirectly, on Philodemus' treatise *On Piety* (Περὶ εὐσεβείας). Even the quotation from Euripides *Alc.* 3 is the same in both Clement and Philodemus. Clement in the passage at stake avails himself of the double argument that Philodemus had used against the gods of the poets: these deities are temporal and pass away, have unworthy passions, and commit unworthy deeds. The list of such misdeeds is, again, the same as Philodemus': woundings, bindings, enslavement, and fights for power, besides unlawful intercourses. The dependence on Philodemus, possibly through an intermediate source, is evident.

Notwithstanding his fairly good knowledge of Epicurean ideas, and his appreciation and appropriation of some of them, Clement at times does repeat the cliché of Epicurus 'the atheist' and even the initiator of atheism



(*Strom.* 1. 1. 2). In *Strom.* 1. 11. 50. 6 Clement explains that Col 2. 8 does not criticise every kind of philosophy, but only Epicureanism, insofar as it denies divine providence and ‘deifies’ pleasure. Clement’s criticism especially targets Epicurean hedonism; this is why this is described hyperbolically as the ‘deification of pleasure’. Clement attacks the Epicurean denial of divine providence also in *Protr.* 66. 5. These two elements, together with the denial of the immortality of the soul, will become the most common Christian accusations against Epicureanism.

Origen mentions the name of Epicurus in his extant works more than sixty times. For a comparison, one can note that in the extant works he mentions Plato over one hundred and sixty times. The distribution of the occurrences of Epicurus’ name, however, is extremely uneven: almost all of them come from Origen’s treatise *Against Celsus*, in which he argues against a ‘pagan’ Middle Platonist and his criticism of the Bible. A few other occurrences stem from the *Philocalia*, i.e. the anthology of excerpts from Origen’s writings compiled, according to tradition, by the Cappadocians Basil and Gregory Nazianzen. Finally, only one occurrence is found in Origen’s homilies.

Here, Origen was not debating with philosophers, but was preaching at church, before a mixed audience; usually in his homilies Origen did not mention ‘pagan’ authors, but rather Scripture. Thus, it comes as no surprise that in this context, the only mention of Epicurus, in Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus* 8. 9, comes with a negative characterisation of Epicurus,<sup>6</sup> as a hedonist who identified pleasure with the highest good and was therefore an impure person. Origen felt that his ethical ideal of virtue as *apatheia* or eradication of passions could not square with the ideal of pleasure, even catastematic pleasure.

Origen excluded atheistic philosophers from his teaching in Caesarea, as is attested by his disciple Gregory Thaumaturgus. Origen included among the ‘atheists’ those who denied divine providence (Greg. Thaum. *Or. paneg.* 13; cf. *Orig. De or.* 5. 1; *CC* 8. 38), such as Epicurus. Moreover, Epicurus deemed the encyclopaedic disciplines useless for philosophy, while Origen integrated them in his teaching program as propaedeutic to philosophy and theology. According to Marksches, Origen’s knowledge of Epicurean doctrines, unlike

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<sup>6</sup> On this critique see KÖCKERT, Charlotte. ‘The Use of Anti-Epicurean Polemics in Origen’. In: *Studia Patristica* 41. Leuven: Peeters, 2006, pp. 181-85.



Philo's and Clement's, came, not from extensive and (relatively) direct reading of Epicurean texts, but from Stoic and Platonic lexica and handbooks that contained doxographical material.<sup>7</sup> I think this was due, not to a want of sources, which were available to Clement in Alexandria, but to Origen's scarce interest in, and criticism of, 'atheistic' philosophies.

In *Against Celsus*, Origen's criticism of Epicureanism is a bit less stereotyped and schematic than in the homiletic passage analysed above. He attacks Epicurean theology because of its atomistic structure, which entails materialism and immanentism (4. 14). More specifically, Origen argues that divinities made of atoms cannot be eternal—a prerogative of the divinity alone according to Origen—in that they are compounds, while only what is simple can be eternal. Compounds, resulting from aggregation, are necessarily liable to disaggregation. In this perspective, Origen attacks Epicurus' claim that the gods must constantly defend themselves from all destructive factors. But why this refutation of Epicurean materialism in a treatise against a Middle Platonist? In fact Origen presents Celsus as an 'Epicurean' (*CC* 1. 2 and *passim*).

It is not impossible that Origen confused Celsus, the philosopher who wrote the *True Discourse*, with an Epicurean namesake who lived under Hadrian: Galen wrote letters to 'Celsus the Epicurean' (Galen, *De libris suis* 16). Eusebius, who ascribes the *True Discourse* to 'Celsus the Epicurean' in *HE* 6. 36. 2, simply followed Origen. However, Origen is aware, and plainly states (*CC* 1. 8; 5. 3), that Celsus never professes himself an Epicurean in his *True Discourse*; but he says he read other writings of Celsus, from which his Epicurean belief transpired in a clearer manner (*CC* 1. 8). Now, those 'other writings' may have been by the other Celsus, the Epicurean. Some ideas that are close to Epicureanism can in fact be detected in the *True Discourse*, especially a reference to the *κεναὶ ἐλπίδες*, 'empty hopes' for immortality and life in the beyond (*CC* 3. 80), which sounds indeed closer to Epicurean than to Middle-Platonic ideas – even though Celsus was referring to the Christian hope in the resurrection and not to the Platonic tenet of the immortality of the soul; this denial of the resurrection of the body certainly also fits a 'pagan' Platonist, unlike the denial of life after death.

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<sup>7</sup> MARKSCHIES, Christoph. *Origenes und sein Erbe*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007, pp. 139-41, and my review in *Adamantius*, 15, 2009, pp. 548-50.



Origen pushes certainly far by taking this as a reason to deem Celsus an Epicurean, also conflating this assertion of his with his criticism of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus (this indeed confirms that what Celsus refuted was the resurrection and not the life of the soul after death). Moreover, according to Origen, Celsus is an Epicurean because of his denial of divine providence (cf. *CC* 1. 21; 2. 13). Celsus, though, like all Middle Platonists, did not deny providence; yet, Origen, to construe him as an Epicurean, claims that he pretended to admit providence, but actually did not (*CC* 4. 4). Origen surely realises that Celsus is a Platonist, but he does not want to concede this, and rather maintains that in many respects he pretends to be a Platonist (*CC* 4. 83).

I offer that Origen, a Platonist and the founder of Christian Platonism, perhaps identifiable with the homonymous Neoplatonist mentioned by Porphyry in *Vita Plotini* and later Neoplatonic sources,<sup>8</sup> portrayed Celsus as an ‘Epicurean’ because he was more at ease in censuring an ‘Epicurean’ than in denigrating a Platonist. There is some evidence to support this hypothesis. For instance, when Origen finds fault with Greek philosophical ideas in his Commentary on Romans, 3.1.197-215, he singles out several doctrines that he declares to be deceptive and contrary to the truth. Now, *none* of these is Platonic, but all are Peripatetic and Stoic. Origen did reject in fact the Platonic theory of metempsychosis, but this was expounded by Plato only in a mythical, and not in a theoretical, form. Thus Origen could maintain that true Platonism, that is, Christian Platonism, had to avoid the doctrine of metempsychosis, without betraying Plato’s teaching.

#### **IV. Dionysius of Alexandria, Eusebius, Ambrose, and their Sources**

In the third century, the learned theologian and bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, a personal disciple<sup>9</sup> and faithful follower of Origen, composed a work *On Nature* (Περὶ φύσεως). This is the same title as that of Epicurus’ masterpiece—now extant only fragmentarily—and not by chance, given that Dionysius’ treatise focused on the refutation of Epicurean atomism and denial of providence. Dionysius availed himself of Stoic arguments against

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<sup>8</sup> See RAMELLI, Ilaria. ‘Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism’. In: *Vigiliae Christianae*, 63, 2009, pp. 217-63; RAMELLI, Ilaria. ‘Origen the Christian Middle/Neoplatonist’. In: *Journal of Early Christian History*, 1, 2011, pp. 98-130.

<sup>9</sup> So Eusebius *HE* 6.24.9 and Jerome *Vir. Ill.* 69.1.



Epicureanism. In his treatise, there are no direct quotations from Epicurus, and, according to Marksches, he too, like Origen, did not read entire works of Epicurus and the Epicureans, but more probably used handbooks.<sup>10</sup> Eusebius has transmitted some fragments from Dionysius' work (*PE* 14. 26-27).

Some decades later, the Cappadocians, too, seem to have used Dionysius' treatise. Eusebius, in the early fourth century, provided plenty of information on Epicureanism, especially in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, drawn from a variety of sources: Christian authors such as Dionysius himself and Clement, but also treatises, such as that of Atticus, and doxographies.

In the late fourth century, Ambrose is the only Latin patristic author in his time who shows a knowledge of Epicurus that is based not only on the usual Latin sources, such as Lucretius, Cicero, and Seneca. In Letter 63 (from 396 CE), he mentions 'epitomes' of Philodemus: *sicut Philodemus eius sectator in epitomis suis disputat*, 'As Philodemus, a follower of his [*sc.* Epicurus], argues in his epitomes'. Soon after, Ambrose in the same letter quotes twice from Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus*, 132 and 130, but indicating Hermarchus as his source:

Clamat ergo ille, ut Hermarchus<sup>11</sup> adserit, quia non potationes nec comissiones nec filiorum soboles nec feminarum copulae nec piscium copia aliorumque huiusmodi quae splendido usui parantur convivii suavem vitam faciant, sed sobria disputatio.

Epicurus, as Hermarchus says, claims that what makes life pleasant is not drinking, eating, producing children, having intercourse with women, or having a great deal of fishes or other things of this kind that are prepared for the enjoyment of luxurious convivial occasions, but it is sober reasoning.<sup>12</sup>

Ambrose was likely translating from Greek, a language with which—unlike Augustine—he was well acquainted. Hermarchus, in turn, probably quoted passages from Epicurus' letters. Ambrose might depend on Origen, as in so much else; though, in Origen's extant Greek works there is no mention of either Hermarchus or Philodemus, and I have already noted that Origen was

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<sup>10</sup> MARKSCHIES, *Origenes und sein Erbe*, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Codd. *Demarchus*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Ep. Men.* 132: it is not drinking and eating abundantly without interruption, not enjoying boys and women, nor tasting fish and all other kinds of food which a rich table bears, that make a pleasant life, but sober reasoning.



not very interested in doing a systematic work of research into the Epicurean sources, given that he deemed 'atheistic' philosophies unworthy even of attention and teaching. Clement of Alexandria might have been the source of Ambrose, since he quotes Philodemus.

Ambrose, who is likely to have been familiar with a Middle and Neoplatonic reception of Epicurus, stresses that this philosopher was already heavily criticised by other Greek philosophers for his hedonistic ethics (*Ep.* 63-19; *Off.* 1. 13). More recently, Plotinus, whom Ambrose knew well, even accused Epicureanism and Gnosticism of the same basic theoretical faults, essentially a ridiculing of both providence and virtue (*Enn.* 2. 9. 15).

Finally, Ambrose, like many other Fathers, uses the term 'Epicurean' as a synonym of 'hedonist' and even a term of abuse, in reference to opponents who countered asceticism, in Letter 63. 8. The mainly rhetorical nature of such remarks of his, however, is clear if one considers his above quotation from Epicurus-Hermarchus on the true nature of Epicurean pleasure as 'sober reasoning'.

## V. The Cappadocians and the Exception of Gregory Nazianzen

Like Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa was profoundly inspired by Origen and refuted Epicurean ideas. In his dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 20-25,<sup>13</sup> his venerated elder sister, whom he calls "mother" and "professor", Macrina demonstrates the soul's spiritual nature and eternity and refutes Stoic and especially Epicurean materialistic objections to the thesis of the immortality of the soul. These philosophers claimed that the body, being a compound, is completely dissolved into its constitutive elements, since all that is composite is necessarily subject to dissolution, and dissolution is the destruction of the compound. Now, what is destroyed is not immortal. Macrina remarks that such considerations were probably opposed to Paul by the Stoics and the Epicureans in Athens.

Above all Epicurus maintained that nature is casual and operates by itself, as though no providence existed. For, according to this philosopher, the

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<sup>13</sup> Edition, translation, and commentary in RAMELLI, Ilaria. *Gregorio di Nissa Sull'anima e la resurrezione* [Critical Essays, New Edition, Translation and Commentary of *De anima et resurrectione* and *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*, Appendixes, Bibliographies]. Milan: Bompiani – Catholic University, 2007.



boundary of nature was what appears, the phenomenon. He made sense-perception the measure of the apprehension of all—Macrina objects—and limited himself to seeing earth, water, air, and fire, but was unable to discern the provenance of each of these elements.

Epicureans, looking at the world, could not see God, who is made manifest through it, and maintained that the body is composed of elements; that the elements are corporeal, and that the soul cannot subsist by itself unless it either is one of these elements or dwells in them. At this point Macrina argues that, if the Epicureans maintain that the soul is found in no place simply because it does not have the same nature as the elements, they should teach that life in the flesh is inanimate as well. For the body is nothing but a concourse of elements. Therefore, they should not say, either, that the soul is found in these elements in order to vivify the compound thanks to itself, if it is the case that, after this, it is not possible that the soul can subsist, too, in that the elements continue to subsist. In this way, they end up with demonstrating nothing else than that human life is dead.

Now, Macrina asks, if they do not doubt that the soul dwells in the body, how can they teach the doctrine of its dissolution into the elements? In this case, she argues, they should maintain similar theses even regarding the divine nature. For how could they ever claim—she asks—that this nature, intelligible, immaterial, and invisible, which penetrates both humid and soft substances and hot and hard ones, keeps the existing realities in cohesion in being, without having the same nature as the things in which it dwells, and without being able to consist in them because of the difference of nature?

Therefore, she concludes, they should eliminate from their doctrines the divinity itself, which causes all beings to subsist. In sum, for Macrina, and Gregory Nyssen, Epicurus is the prototype of the ‘materialist’ and crypto-atheist. Indeed, what Gregory singles out is his denial of divine providence, his casualism, and the concept of the divine as corporeal, which is declared to be tantamount to atheism. He also criticises the positing of pleasure as the highest moral criterion, although he does not explicitly mention Epicurus in this connection, but only, more vaguely, ‘non-Christian theories’. However, Macrina’s declaration that the principle of pleasure depends on the negation of the immortality of the soul makes the connection with Epicureanism virtually certain. For she argues that to maintain that the soul is not immortal



means to be enemies of virtue and to take into consideration only the pleasure of one moment (*De an.* 17DE).

Basil, Gregory Nyssen's brother, never names Epicurus, but knew his theories from handbooks, from Dionysius of Alexandria's refutation, and perhaps from more direct readings. Sometimes he quotes or echoes passages by Epicurus. One instance is found in Letter 9.4, where Basil echoes Epicurus' exhortation, *λάθε βιώσας*, 'live hidden'. Another example is at the beginning of Basil's Letter 11, where he quotes from a letter that Epicurus, on the point of death, wrote to Idomeneus (*ap.* Diogenes Laertius 10.22). A very probable reminiscence of Epicurus is also found in Basil's *On Envy* 5. Basil remarks here that virtuous people do not deserve to be envied and vicious people would rather deserve to be pitied, and thereby seems to echo Epicurus' *Vatican Sentence* 53, which analogously remarks that the virtuous do not deserve to be envied, and adds that the vicious, the luckier and more prosperous they are, the more ruin themselves.

Epicurean sentences were received in Christian florilegia—from which Basil may easily have drawn his quotations—such as that of Nilus in PG 79. Nilus is even likely to have handed down in the original Greek a sentence of Epicurus (*ἀρχὴ σωτηρίας ἢ ἑαυτοῦ κατάγνωσις*, 'the beginning of salvation is self-accusation') that was known to Usener only through Seneca's Latin translation in Letter 28. 9: 'initium est salutis notitia peccati': 'the beginning of salvation is to be aware of one's sin'. Usener included it in his collection as fr. 522 of Epicurus.

Gregory Nazianzen, the third Cappadocian and a close friend of Basil, represents a remarkable exception in the patristic reception of Epicurus and Epicureanism, in that he shows appreciation of both Epicurus' life and his theory of catastematic pleasure. As for Epicurus' life, Gregory, far from depicting it as inspired by self-indulgence, as a widespread cliché had it, describes it as characterised by self-restraint: *κοσμίως καὶ σωφρόνως ἔζην*, 'he lived in a decent and moderate way'. Consistently with this, Gregory also presents Epicurus' notion of pleasure as sober and as a prize for one's labours: *ἄθλον τῶν ἐμοὶ πονουμένων*, 'the reward for my moral efforts' (*Carm.* 1. 2. 10). Likewise, Gregory emphasises the coherence between Epicurus' life and his philosophy: *βοηθῶν ἐκ τρόπου τῷ δόγματι*, 'confirming his doctrine by means of his own way of life'.



At other times, however, Gregory too yields to more stereotypical criticism of Epicurus' hedonism, atomism, and supposed atheism (*Or.* 27. 10; 4. 72). This clearly does not mean that Gregory, when writing these more trite anti-Epicurean passages, was unaware of the import of Epicurus' doctrine of catastematic pleasure, but he was simply serving his rhetorical necessities.

## VI. Jerome and Augustine. First-Hand Knowledge of Epicureanism Fades Away

While Gregory Nazianzen reveals a profound knowledge of the Epicurean ideal of catastematic pleasure, at least when his polemical agenda and rhetorical strategies do not prevail, for his (roughly) contemporary Jerome Epicurus is simply the stereotype of hedonism and his follower is a man who is immersed in sins and denies the immortality of the soul, thereby adding blasphemy to sins (*In Is.* 7. 22. 12). This is why Jerome calls Jovinian, an opponent of asceticism, 'Epicurean' (*C. Iov.* 1. 1). Of course the content of this label is no more precise than that of Origen's label 'Epicurean' attached to Celsus.

In the charge that Jerome levels against Jovinian, 'Epicurean' is merely a synonym for 'hedonist'. Likewise, whereas Gregory Nazianzen acknowledges the decency and self-mastery of Epicurus' own life, Jerome casts Pythagoras' continence against Epicurus' purported self-indulgence (*C. Iov.* 2. 38). He repeats two of the classic anti-Epicurean charges: abolition of divine providence and hedonistic ethics: *Dicit Epicurus non esse providentiam, et voluptatem maximum bonum*, 'Epicurus claims that providence does not exist and that pleasure is the supreme good' (*In Is.* 7. 9 on Isa 18. 1).

Jerome too, however, like Gregory Nazianzen, was aware that Epicurus in fact preached frugality rather than unbridled pleasure, so that he filled all of his books with vegetables and fruit, and maintains that one must live on simple foods (*C. Iovin.* 2. 11). Like Tertullian before him, Jerome too associates Marcionism and Epicureanism in the same passage in *In Is.* 7. 9, saying that Marcionites and Gnostics, who disparage the Old Testament, are much worse than Epicurus is, because, even if they accept divine providence, they blame the Creator.

Jerome, and Augustine with him, gave voice to the old stereotype—already widespread in 'pagan' authors because of Epicurus' denial of the importance



of the encyclopaedic disciplines—of Epicurus as ignorant and Epicureanism as a philosophy for the ignorant: ‘qui cum Epicuro litteras non didicerunt’: ‘those who, with Epicurus, did not even learn literature’ or ‘the alphabet’ (Jerome, Letter 70. 6); ‘Epicurei apud indoctam multitudinem [...] vigerunt’: ‘Epicureans prospered among ignorant, common people’ (Augustine, Letter 118. 14). Augustine’s knowledge of Epicurean doctrines was, however, very limited and indirect. Even in Letter 118 to Dioscorus, in which he ventures into an in-depth discussion of Epicureanism, it seems impossible to demonstrate that Augustine went beyond Cicero as a source. In *Conf.* 6.16, Augustine evokes Epicurus only as a hedonist, as Jerome in his invectives. No direct reading of Epicurean sources whatsoever can be detected in Augustine.

Indeed, Augustine himself, in the above-mentioned letter to Dioscorus, testifies to the disappearance of many primary sources for Epicureanism at the time of the composition of the letter, in 410 CE: *Quos iam certe nostra aetate sic obmutuisse conspicimus, ut vix iam in scholis rhetorum commemoretur tantum quae fuerint illorum sententiae*, ‘We clearly see that by our day the Epicureans have definitely ceased to speak, to the point that by now their doctrines are mentioned practically only in the schools of rhetoric, and even there rarely’ (Letter 118. 21). Augustine of course rejoiced in this disappearance, which meant less objections against Christianity on the part of the Epicureans (*ibid.*, 12). It is meaningful that Augustine interpreted Paul’s discourse at the Areopagus in Athens at the beginning of his own *Sermo* 150 as a milestone in the opposition, rather than conciliation, between the Christian message and Greek philosophy.

Augustine opposes Paul on the one side and Epicureans and Stoics on the other, and comments that this passage of Acts should teach Christians which side to choose and which to reject, while some Christians—Augustine complains—are in fact ‘Epicureans’. In this connection, it is remarkable that in the passage I have quoted from Letter 118 on the disappearance of Epicurean primary sources Augustine does not say that Epicurean doctrines are remembered only in schools of *philosophy*, but he affirms that they are mentioned only in schools of *rhetoric*—where he himself had studied and then taught for long years, before his baptism and conversion to monastic life. This clearly points to a non-philosophical, popular transmission of a few tenets of Epicureanism, clearly liable to misinterpretation and distortion.



## VII. Conclusion: The Role of Sources

The fading away of the availability and use of good and direct sources on Epicureanism, together with the disappearance of the Epicurean school, obviously caused an impoverished knowledge of, and hostility toward, Epicurus and Epicureanism in patristic thinkers. A comparison between the representation of Epicureanism in the Acts of Apostles or Clement, Gregory Nazianzen or Ambrose, on the one side, and, on the other, authors such as Jerome and Augustine reveals profound dissimilarities in approach, but also in the availability of sources and the willingness of these authors to study them.

I have been able to highlight some appreciation for at least a few aspects of Epicureanism in the author of Acts, in Clement, in Ambrose, and especially in Nazianzen with regard to the correct interpretation of Epicurus' doctrine of catastematic pleasure. Now such partial appreciation, based on a certain knowledge of sources and on a serious investigative attitude, vanished with the fading away of the sources themselves and some critical interest in them.

Thus, anti-Epicurean polemic became more and more stereotyped and focussed on crass hedonism and atheism. In this paper, I have taken into consideration especially the former charge. The heavy distortions entailed by this charge of hedonism were still clear to Nazianzen, but even he, as I have pointed out, did not refrain from falling into the stereotype of 'Epicureanism as hedonism' when the thrust of rhetorical invective required this.