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Solace for the Frustrations of Silent Citizenship: the Case of Epicureanism

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Insofar as no democratic society can fully realize norms of free and equal citizenship, citizens in such regimes are likely to experience some degree of discontent with their political lives. This raises a second purpose for democratic theory beyond the usual focus on improving democratic institutions: the psychological issue of how ordinary citizens might find solace in the face of disappointment. Democratic theory is capable of providing solace because egalitarian commitments – equality, free speech, solidarity, and self-sufficiency – have a double potential: they not only ground efforts to democratize institutions, but when sublimated in apolitical form also have the capacity to generate a transcendence of the political form itself. In this essay, I pursue both ideas – the need for solace and egalitarianism's ability to provide it – through analysis of the way Epicureanism may have functioned for the ordinary, plebeian citizens in late Republican Rome.

Keywords: Epicureanism; democracy; solace; egalitarianism; plebeian; Rome; extrapoliticism; silent citizenship

> Teach us to care and not to care
> Teach us to sit still. – T.S. Eliot
> "Ash Wednesday"

Silent citizenship is for many a problematic condition in contemporary liberal democracies. It refers to the fact that most citizens usually have only a spectatorial engagement with politics and that, even when ordinary citizens do participate more actively (in elections, protest movements, and public opinion polls), they do so in a communicatively constrained manner (i.e. in a manner that falls short of the articulate speaking and giving of judgments associated with political action in its fullest, most authentic form). Democratic thinkers and activists have addressed the problem of silent citizenship in two main ways. On the one hand, the usual response has been to emphasize how the gap between spectator and actor might be closed, whether by having the spectators control the decisions of leaders (through the function of elections and public opinion) or making it easier for spectators to take up the position of actors. On the other hand, recent work in political thought has emphasized how there might be ways to empower ordinary citizens in their very status as nonacting spectators: that leaders, for example, be made to undergo special burdens as they appear on the public stage so as to recompense the public for their never-fully-legitimate authority (Green 2010).

But beyond these two responses both centered on *empowering* ordinary citizens – either by making them less silent or by having the few with disproportionately influential public

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voices specially regulated – it strikes me that democratic theory today must confront the problem of silent citizenship also in a third way: in the manner of providing *solace*. Insofar as silent citizenship is inescapable to some degree and, insofar as the strategies for empowerment of the ordinary citizen will always remain incomplete, political life, for some silent citizens at least, will be a source of discontent. How to manage the strains of this discontent ought, then, be an element of any full account of democracy.

The idea I pursue in this essay – through analysis of how Epicureanism functioned for the ordinary, mostly silent, plebeian citizens in late Republican Rome – is that democracy should be understood not only in its familiar, *political or governmental* sense (i.e. citizens enjoy some kind of equality of access and influence regarding statecraft and lawmaking) but also in a less familiar, although still vital and historically accurate, *extrapolitical* sense as the *critical indifference* toward active and engaged political lives. That is to say, I mean to recover an ancient, although largely forgotten, democratic tradition that associates the egalitarian mindset with the tendency periodically *not to care* about politics – both in the form of occasionally withdrawing from active political life and in the form of criticizing political life as disrespectful of the fact of human equality and as something likely to be a source of unhappiness rather than contentment. For ordinary citizens – whether the plebeians of late Republican Rome or their counterparts in contemporary liberal-democratic regimes – such critical indifference has the potential to provide some solace from the stresses and strains of a relatively passive and silent ordinary kind of political life.

In referring to this ancient, too-often-neglected conceptualization of egalitarianism in terms of a critical indifference toward politics as *extrapolitical*, I differentiate it from both *antipoliticism* and *mere apoliticism*. The critical indifference I mean to uncover is not antipolitical, because it does not in fact represent a total, unconditional critique of active political life. That is to say, an extrapolitical perspective does not necessarily reject politics once and for all but continually looks to achieve a temporary or episodic transcendence of political commitments and concerns, often with the expectation of a future reentry into political life. With regard to the second differentiation, the idea of extrapoliticism is meant to emphasize that what is at stake in the critical indifference toward politics is not any kind of apoliticism, but a specific form of political indifference that redeploys and sublimates the commitment to basic political values – for example, equality, solidarity, free speech, and self-sufficiency – in an apolitical direction. Indeed, what I mean to recover is the suggestion that certain seemingly political longings are in fact capable of being realized away from politics in the inspired relations of private life, such as friendship. One undergoes the extrapolitical meaning of democracy, then, not by losing all interest in political notions but in pursuing them outside the conventional political spaces of public advocacy, leadership, governance, administration, and legislation.

In pursuing this idea of extrapoliticism, I attend, in particular, to the historical case of the plebeians of late Republic Rome – a group whose members experienced a relatively silent form of citizenship. Unlike aristocratic civic classes (the Senatorial Elite and the Equestrian Order), plebeians were not permitted to run for office, although they could vote (albeit in diluted fashion) and they were afforded the same civil liberties as the aristocrats (excepting their diminished opportunities for political voice). At the same time, plebeian politics in late Republic Rome also model the *two strategies of empowerment* that I have mentioned. On one hand, plebeians tried to control the decision-making of the elite office-holders through their formal voting in legislative assemblies (above all, the *comitia centuriata* and the *comitia tributa*) (Millar 2002, 208). On the other hand, plebeian politics – in distinction from mere oligarchy – differentiated the few from the many not simply to distinguish and elevate the few but also to regulate and burden them. Elite Roman citizens with ambitions for public

leadership were subjected to various kinds of burdens, including their presence in the *contio* (where they might be publically contested by rivals and onlookers) and numerous economic obligations (e.g. that they fund from their own pockets not just banquets, funerals, and games but very often the costs of the magistracies they led) (Veyne 1992, 201–345; Lintott 1999, 94–121; Millar 2002, 73– 94). But most importantly for my purposes here, the plebeians are significant insofar as they appear to have found solace for their political ills in extrapolitical fashion.[1] That is to say, the connection between the Roman plebeians and the extrapolitical meaning of democracy is not just that the latter suggests practices and modes of thinking useful to assuaging the stresses and strains of plebeian (i.e. relatively silent) political life but also that, as a historical matter, one of the best examples of extrapoliticism from the ancient world – *Epicureanism* – is a philosophy that appears to have been especially popular among the plebeians of ancient Rome (Nicgorski 2002, 7–8; Cicero 1918, 4.6–7). Accordingly, I will examine Epicureanism, paying special attention to the extrapolitical significance of Epicurean dicta that one should 'avoid politics' and 'live unnoticed' (Epicurus 2010, Fragments 8, 551). On the basis of some of the central exponents of Epicurean philosophy, I explore the meaning Epicurean doctrines likely had, and might continue to have, for inescapably political but still politically ordinary, *mostly silent* beings. That is to say, there is value in understanding the Epicurean tradition not only as a *call* to live unnoticed but also as a *set of egalitarianly inflected strategies for enduring it*. Thus, rather than treat Epicureanism as utterly without implication for politics, or as merely apolitical or antipolitical, I recognize the tradition's substantive, positive political–philosophical dimension.[2]

When Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher, writing in the last years of the Roman Republic, denigrated Epicureanism as a 'plebeian philosophy,' he intended to indicate two things: its popularity especially among lower orders and, in his view, its erroneousness (Cicero 1918, 1.55). Specifically, Cicero found central Epicurean doctrines – the insistence on human finitude and so the rejection of the immortality of the soul, the upholding of painless tranquility as the highest good for individuals, the effectively a-theological worldview, and with these the general rejection of active political life – as metaphysically false and civically irresponsible (Cicero 1918, 3.46, 5.26–31; Cicero 1923, 85; Cicero 1999b, 1.32–39).

What Cicero does not pursue, but what his discussion of Epicureanism as a plebeian philosophy nonetheless ought to alert one to, is how the Epicurean tradition might have singularly assisted its adherents in enduring the *strains* of a second-class, mostly silent form of citizenship. In other words, Cicero does not really ask the question of *why* plebeians may have been drawn to Epicureanism or *how* that philosophy may have served the psychopolitical needs of citizens who, by virtue of their inferior civic status, were most likely to experience and recognize the difficult plebeian realities discussed in this article.

Against Cicero's diminution of Epicureanism and the plebeians who embraced it, I aim to recover the Epicurean tradition by recognizing its therapeutic significance for citizens disturbed by the frustrations of political life, especially those stemming from the plebeian conditions of ordinary political life. As a first step in this rehabilitation, it is useful to begin by emphasizing a point that Cicero's critique of Epicureanism as a plebeian philosophy implicitly observes: this is the coincidence within Epicureanism of a kind of egalitarianism, on the one hand, and a critique of politics in the name of a life lived outside of political and economic ambition, on the other.

In its substance, Epicureanism had certain egalitarian features. For one thing, Epicureans were among the most inclusive philosophical schools in the ancient world, as not just lower-class citizens but women and slaves were admitted as full members in their societies (Hutchinson 1994, xi; Boyancé 1963, 58). This inclusion followed naturally

from that the fact that Epicurus' primary ethical teaching—that a good life consists in freedom from anxiety (*ataraxia*), the maximum overall increase of pleasure and reduction of pain (*aponia*), and bliss (*makaria*), all of which are usually best secured in friendship and philosophical discussion far from the activities, concerns, and ambitions of engaged political and economic life—was explicitly formulated as a theory of happiness available to all regardless of their socioeconomic position. These considerations, along with certain proto-democratic aspects of Epicurus' thought (especially his implicit belief in human equality and his explicit contractarian notion of political justice as a mutual agreement among citizens not to harm each other),[3] make it credible to treat Epicureanism as an egalitarian philosophy, albeit one that continually challenges the integrity of political spaces rather than seeks to make them equally accessible to all. This mixture of egalitarianism and apoliticism deserves attention because, most foundationally, it suggests a kind of extrapolitical democratic philosophy whose ethical–political function is not the familiar effort to provide citizens with equal access to politics but, as I shall explain, the treatment of stresses and anxieties arising from a political life that always will have fallen short of a full egalitarianism on the institutional level.

But even if it is true that Epicureanism combines egalitarianism and extrapoliticism, why should this strange mixture matter today? Why should we not dismiss Epicureanism as flawed, politically irrelevant, or irresponsible as Cicero so strongly urges? In order to appreciate the specifics of what might be called Epicurean political theory – and to appreciate its plebeian aspect in a more legitimate, politically responsible, and therapeutic manner than Cicero allows – at least three levels of analysis are useful: first, an understanding of the Epicurean call to 'live unnoticed' and 'avoid politics' in its *critical aspect* (i.e. its critique of active political life) rather than only in terms of its apparent celebration of a private, relatively carefree existence; second, a recognition that the specific teachings of Epicureanism (its call for equanimity, the acceptance of finitude, frank discussion, friendship, and self-sufficiency) are best understood as the reconfiguring and indeed intensification of political values (such as equality, solidarity, free speech, and self-rule) rather than mere replacement of political objectives with apolitical ones; and, finally, an acknowledgment that Epicureanism, despite its call for withdrawing from political life, was practiced by citizens who never fully divorced themselves from politics and, therefore, should be seen as having, at least potentially, a *politically contextualized therapeutic function* (rather than being merely a philosophy irrelevant or corrosive to politics). I take up each of these three analyses in turn, all with the goal of presenting Epicureanism as a paradigmatic instance of the ancient linkage of egalitarianism and extrapoliticism and, in so doing, providing an example of the kind of solace contemporary plebeians might find useful in maintaining their cheer and integrity over and against the predominant—and arguably heteronomous—silence of ordinary of political life.

The Epicurean critique of politics

That Epicurus advised against active political life is clear (1994, 33, 39 [PD, 14; VS, 58]). But the reasons behind this perspective are sometimes not pursued owing to the mistaken idea that Epicureans, because they counseled against political activity, had no theory of politics.[4] But Epicureans did not simply aim to live beyond politics. They also actively criticized political life. The Epicurean dicta to 'live unnoticed' and 'avoid politics' were joined by the polemical and provocative idea that politics, usually at least, is a kind of *prison* [*desmoterion*] (Epicurus 1994, 39 [VS, 58]; also see Lucretius 1977, V.1127–1128). However, Cicero and other republican critics are too quick when they

dismiss Epicureanism as a selfish doctrine that privileges individual comfort and contentment over the sacrifices required for dedicated public service. Even if this critique is not untrue, it is still incomplete, because it neglects the fact that Epicureans were interested in politics if only as a singular object of disapproval. This critique of the political is one important way in which Epicureanism likely provided solace to ordinary, plebeian citizens who could expect no more than a highly marginal role with the state.

In elucidating the basis for the Epicurean critique of politics, it is helpful to keep in mind the central elements of the Epicurean ethical theory. Continually the Epicurean tradition returns to the idea that a happy life—characterized by equanimity (ataraxia), a minimal amount of pain (aponia), and bliss (makaria), spent in the company of friends—is best achieved through respecting the *limits* (*perata*) of life, a notion that is best understood in three different, closely related senses.[5]

One of these limits concerns the idea that "the limit of good things is easy to achieve" (Epicurus 1994, 31 [M, 133]), which means both that the good things in life are easily secured and that overindulgence in goods can render them sources of pain, sickness, and frustration. In general, Epicureans taught that limiting one's desires to what is natural and necessary and subjecting desires beyond these limits to careful scrutiny would insure that their fulfillment would indeed lead to tranquility and lack of anguish (Epicurus 1994, 30 [M, 128]). What the Epicureans found especially objectionable were those unnecessary desires that required much effort to realize and whose value depended merely on the "empty belief [κενοδοξ?αν] of mankind" (Epicurus 1994, 35 [PD, 30]; also see 34 [PD, 26]). Against the proliferation of such unnecessary and unnatural desires, Epicureans insisted on the idea of "enough"—i.e., a limit to how much one needed to be satisfied—and they took aim at the unwisdom of those who could not respect this limit: "nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little" (Epicurus 1994, 39 [VS, 68]).

The Epicureans also put forward a closely related *second* idea: that ataraxia and freedom from anguish could only be achieved if one's desires were limited, that is kept in check against the tendency to continually manufacture unnatural and unnecessary wants. Thus, it was a core Epicurean principle to teach "the limit of the desires" [πέρας τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν]   (Epicurus 1994, 33 [PD, 10] and to assert that "even the greatest wealth is poverty when it comes to the unlimited desires" (Epicurus 1994, 99]).[6]

But what propelled human beings to disrespect the limited nature of good things and to seek unlimited desires? Underlying these two pathologies, Epicureans thought, was the fear of death, which drives people to deny their mortality through ambitions for prestige, status, and excessive wealth.

Against this tendency, Epicureans asserted the need for a third kind of limit: an acceptance of the limited human lifespan—that is, of death:

> "He who is assured of the limits [*perata*] of the lifespan knows how easy it is to take away the pain of need and to render the whole of life all-complete, so that there is no longer a need of things obtained in the manner of struggle [*agonas*: also "battle" or "assembly"]" (Epicurus 1994, 34 [PD, 21]).

Overcoming the fear of death does not mean trying to move the thought of death from one's mind. Rather, the irrational fear of death which generates endless unnecessary desires is best counteracted by confronting, rather than turning away from, the limit of finitude. Indeed, something like the repression of the fact of finitude seems to be the primary mechanism whereby the fear of death generates the production of limitless unhealthy needs and wants.

With these three limits in mind—the limited nature of the good, the consequent need to limit one's own desires, and the fundamental limit of death—it is possible to better understand what the Epicureans found objectionable about most forms of political life and how their critique of politics may have brought some solace and relief to ordinary, plebeian citizens with little power, wealth, or fame. To be sure, the Epicurean opposition to politics was never total. Epicureans supported a notion of political justice grounded on the idea of a mutual contract among citizens not to harm each other, they held out the possibility that certain rare individuals might actually find ataraxia in politics, and their very existence as a community of property holders on the outskirts of a society still required for its functioning some kind of minimally robust state to provide security and other basic goods (Epicurus 1994, 33 [PD, 14]). Still, Epicureanism centrally involved a critique of politics. And what I mean to suggest here is that what made politics most suspect and worthy of critique is that it tended to violate each of these three limits.

First of all, against the Aristotelian teaching that active political life is the realization of a fully developed and happy human existence, Epicureans found that politics tended to disrespect the limits of the good by motivating practitioners to pursue numerous unnecessary and unnatural desires for glory, status, and power (Epicurus 1994, 32 [PD, 7]). Of course, one can imagine political actors motivated by different factors—for example a genuine interest in improving the public realm—but even here Epicureans would reply that the *struggle* that would seem to always characterize political action indicates that political action is not conducive to a life of equanimity and painlessness (Epicurus 1994, 33 [PD, 14]). Such reasoning may be hard to accept for public-spirited progressives committed to achieving meaningful reform, but even if such critics remain unpersuaded by the Epicurean injunction to withdraw from politics and socioeconomic competition, they can at least recognize some truth in the Epicurean idea that such pursuits are unlikely to be characterized by the tranquility and bliss the Epicureans prized.[7]

Second, it was not just that political life violated the limited nature of the good, but in doing so it unleashed other desires that were themselves unlimited and, thus, almost certain to generate anxiety and even misery. As the Latin Epicurean poet Lucretius (1977, V.1124–1127) described it, part of what makes the life of politics, especially one bent on achieving great power and mastery, objectionable, is not just its inability to live in accordance to a limited conception of the good, but its generation of a way of life that is terrible [*infestum*] because of its quest for goals that are endless, unreachable, and personally damaging. Political power is something one seeks unceasingly, because there is usually more of it to be had, and there are always "envy's thunderbolts" from below ready to do damage to one's position and, perhaps, one's life.[8] On the basis of such reasoning, the plebeian, and some-time Epicurean, Horace (1929b, 86–87 [I.6.128–131]) could claim with some seriousness that "free from the burden of unhappy ambition … I comfort myself with the thought I live more happily than if my grandfather had been a quaestor, and my father and uncle likewise."

But, third, the most fundamental, if least elaborated, element of the Epicurean critique is that a political mindset tends to cover over the basic fact of human mortality. It prevents the kind of attunement to finitude the Epicureans believed to be essential to achieving a happy, tranquil, and relatively pain-free life. It is not just that the lust for political power most often stemmed, in Epicureans' minds, from the fear of death. More fundamentally, the Epicureans suggested, however implicitly, that politics promotes a *temporal perspective* that prevents one from developing a healthy fixation on one's finitude. Indeed, in at least two respects, political life represents an attempted escape from the fact of human finitude. On one hand, politics offers human beings the opportunity to achieve a partial

kind of immortality through the memorialization of their persons or, in the form of legislation, their causes and conceptions of the public good. On the other hand, the state itself is immortal insofar as, unlike the human being, it is not obviously fated to die.

Epicureans do not deny the difference between states and individuals regarding their mortality, but they insist that it is precisely in the seduction of immortality that politics represents a danger to human happiness. Not only is the immortality of states merely relative, but the posthumous fame promised by the public realm is something that of course cannot usually be enjoyed by the individuals who would seek it.[9] Crucial to the Epicureans was accepting the limits of what was possible: "our aim [is not] to achieve the impossible," Epicurus (1994, 19 [P, 86]) taught. Even more fundamentally, the elongated temporal expanse of politics—its primary focus on the past and the future—rendered it suspect on Epicurean grounds, insofar as Epicureans' exhortation to live a life of tranquility and happiness among friends took the shorter temporality of the *day* as its basic horizon. As the Epicureans taught: "we're born only once, and we cannot be born twice; and one must for all eternity exist no more. You are not in control of tomorrow yet you delay your [opportunity to] rejoice. Life is ruined by delay and each and every one of us dies without enjoying leisure" (Epicurus 1994, 36 [VS, 14]).

That Epicureans taught withdrawal from politics is clear, but *why* they did so—*why* they understood politics to constitute a basic threat to the equanimity, painlessness, and bliss of human beings—too often has gone unanalyzed. In attending to that question here, my primary interest has been to emphasize the key point that Epicureanism operates as a *critique* of politics. This critical aspect is one key reason why one can speak of Epicureanism as a kind of political theory and find it a potentially useful tonic for ordinary citizens, whose relative political silence generates (for some at least) frustrations and disappointments. Epicureanism, of course, does not promise to cancel these frustrations and disappointments, but in suggesting that politics frustrates and disappoints everyone who engages in it and by therefore raising the possibility that those with limited political opportunities may find themselves with greater opportunities for contentment and fulfillment than those with active, political careers, Epicureanism offers a kind of solace to those fated to endure unremarkable and ordinary political and socioeconomic lives. By itself, such a perspective might seem to have little civic value. But when conceived as a kind of solace for political beings committed to making use of whatever political opportunities they have—and when joined to certain sublimations of the political energies (which I shall presently examine)—Epicureanism's critique of politics can be seen as in the service of ordinary citizenship rather than as a simple flight from it.[10]

Epicureanism as a sublimation of politics

The capacity of Epicureanism to provide solace inheres not simply in the fact that Epicureanism puts forward an important critique of active political life. Crucially, what also is key is that the therapeutic practices of Epicureanism still made appeal to political concepts but for extrapolitical ends. What I mean to demonstrate is that Epicureanism can be seen as *reconfiguring*, rather than rejecting outright, political, and especially democratic ideas—and, furthermore, that such a reconfiguration is compelling in its recognition that deeply held political values may be more intensely realized in spaces beyond those of conventional political life. Epicureanism can be described as an apolitical sublimation of egalitarian political commitments and ideas in at least five ways.[11]

First, within the Epicurean paradigm the idea of equality takes on a psychological meaning—a mind (*animus*) that is equal, *equ-animity*, that is, a mind undominated by any

particular passion—rather than only the standard institutional meaning. On the linguistic level, this extrapolitical appropriation of equality is perhaps best seen in Latin, where the word for equal, *aequus*, also means "calm." Thus, for Lucretius (1977,V.1119; also see III.938–9, III.962, I.42), and the some-time Epicurean poet Horace (1929a, 376 [I.xviii.112]), the central Epicurean value of ataraxia (tranquility or equanimity) often is rendered in terms of an "equal mind" [*aequus animus*].[12] Epicurus' therapeutic teachings can be read as a means to achieve a relaxed or calm mind but with the difference that, for Epicureans, political matters become the primary *obstacle* to equanimity rather than the site of its achievement. As I have related, politics for the Epicurean is perceived as almost always something that disturbs equanimity, generates pain, and prevents bliss. Epicureanism suggests, then, not just that equanimity is an authentic egalitarian ethic, but that it is an ethic best fulfilled outside of ordinary political life, thereby raising the possibility that democracy itself has an extrapolitical significance.

Second, the Epicurean framework reimagines human equality in a way that undermines its functionality as a political notion. Ordinarily we think of political equality as something that requires formal institutions affording equal respect and concern to the material interests of citizens. Yet, from the Epicurean perspective, human equality already exists outside of and independent from political life. On one hand, such equality most basically inheres in the shared destination of death awaiting all human beings. The Epicurean doctrine—"one can attain security against other things, but when it comes to death all men live in a city without walls"—should be read to assert that death is like a democratic city insofar as it imposes a kind of equality onto otherwise diverse and unequal citizens (Epicurus 1994, 37 [VS 31]). On the other hand, such already-achieved equality arises from the degree to which Epicurean teachings about how to achieve happiness are accessible to virtually all people independent of their socioeconomic condition and political status. As the Epicureans taught, "the disturbance of the soul will not be dissolved nor will considerable joy be produced by the presence of the greatest wealth, nor by honor and admiration among the many, nor by anything which is a result of indefinite causes" (Epicurus 1994, 40 [81]). In fact, the poor, unknown, and unpowerful are to a meaningful degree *better* at achieving a life of ataraxia, as those who are seemingly privileged tend to be rendered unhappy by unending, extravagant desires. Those with less, who accept the idea of "enough" and learn to live with it, can free themselves from the pain of generating limitless needs that cannot be realized. At its extreme, such reasoning deconstructs the very idea of wealth and undermines the relevance of socioeconomic life and perhaps also of political life, since if material abundance is not correlated with human happiness then neither is a political realm that claims to be working for the material advantage of its citizens.

The point I mean to emphasize is that in its assertion that the socioeconomically disadvantaged were as likely if not more likely to achieve happiness relative to the advantaged, Epicureanism rested on a kind of egalitarianism that marginalized the significance of politics. This teaching might be accused of quietism if Epicureans practiced it in complete, unadulterated fashion. But if we understand Epicureanism *extrapolitically*, as a kind of solace for those who were, inescapably, caught up in political and socioeconomic hierarchies, then the Epicurean deconstruction of wealth and advantage ought to be conceived as a periodic measure by which ordinary citizens could realize that the equality they sought unsuccessfully in political life might be temporarily rediscovered in the relation to death and in their equal opportunity for equanimity, bliss, and painlessness.

A third way in which Epicureanism represents a kind of appropriation and sublimation of egalitarian political values concerns the concept of *solidarity*. Epicureans affirmed that

solidarity is more properly and meaningfully sought in private relations of friendship (*philia* in Greek, *amicitia* in Latin) outside of public life. As the Epicureans taught, "of those things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one's whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (Epicurus 1994, 34 [PD 27]). Epicureans were not of course alone in praising friendship, but they departed from conventional approaches when they sharply differentiated civic friendship from what they considered the more genuine friendship between private individuals.[13]

Now why did Epicureans privilege private over civic friendship, finding in the former a deeper and more genuine form of solidarity? One answer suggests that private friendships were better than civic friendships in providing the tranquility, bliss, and painlessness they prized—that, specifically, private friendship helps one to recognize the above-mentioned three limits that produce happiness. Such a claim, in any case, is implied in the Epicurean doctrine that friendship is a superior source of security (*asphaleian*) relative to civic relations, when confronting bad things.[14]

For this argument to make full sense, it would seem that the safety provided by private friendships is not only their capacity to prevent certain harms, which might after all be best achieved by political relations, but their special capacity to make us see that much of what worries us ought not do so, something for which political life, with its distribution of glory and commitment to generating ever-increasing prosperity, is ill-suited. In any case, the point to stress is that Epicureans raised the issue of the *setting* in which solidarity might be forged, claiming that a fuller variant might be pursued and realized outside of politics. From a modern perspective it is probably not very surprising that private relations may provide a more authentic kind of solidarity than civic relations. But this appreciation for the relative differential in solidarity between civic and private forms of friendship remained largely unacknowledged in ancient discussions of friendship. The Epicureans in effect took a political idea—solidarity with fellow citizens and the *protection* such solidarity afforded—and argued that its fullest expression would need to take place outside of political life.[15] Such a conviction might offer some solace to ordinary plebeian citizens who lacked opportunities for articulate public speech, office-holding, and individuated judgment. It was simply not possible for plebeians, qua citizens, to construct more than haphazard and superficial relationships on the margins of the public stage, but Epicureanism stood for the idea that political marginality in no way meant the denial of opportunities for friendship, as these were best conducted *off* the public stage, not upon it.

A fourth element of the Epicurean extrapolitical appropriation of political ideas concerns the idea of *free speech*, specifically, the notion of *parrhesia*. Initially, parrhesia had a specifically political and, indeed, governmental meaning, designating primarily the practice of free speech (or truth telling) among citizens as they addressed each other in public. But as the classical polis gave way to Hellenistic polities less shaped by norms of political equality, parrhesia became increasingly redefined in relation to a private virtue of frank and candid discourse (Konstan 1996, 9–14; Momigliano 1973, 2:260). The Epicureans, who conceived of parrhesia in this latter fashion, were thus part of a larger movement of thinkers engaged in the reconsideration of the meaning of free speech. Importantly, however, whereas other writers and thinkers still tend to rely on the political significance of even the private virtue of frank and candid speech, for the Epicureans, the idea of free speech is even more stripped of political function, as parrhesia is above all the value of speaking truly and deeply with one's friends, often for the sake of philosophical inquiry or the moral reform of participants in the discussion (Konstan 1998, 5–6). Such a celebration of free speech, and friendship, presupposes that most of the time—especially in politics—we do not fully reveal our thoughts, concerns, and feelings, indicating yet

again how private relations among friends more fully realizes a value arguably originating in the public sphere. Thus, free conversations among friends not only were likely pleasant in themselves, but provided a kind of extrapolitical comfort to ordinary, plebeian citizens who could realize a political value largely denied to them—the opportunity for meaningful, unconstrained speech before one's equals—in arguably purer form beyond the boundaries of ordinary politics. The Epicureans thereby appealed to the political ideal of parrhesia even as they reinterpreted this ideal in extrapolitical terms.

Finally, a fifth way in which the Epicurean tradition represents an extrapolitical reconfiguration of formerly political notions concerns the idea of self-sufficiency, or *autarkeia*. For Epicureans, autarkeia is continually theorized as a quality of persons rather than economies and states, and as a quality, furthermore, that is usually best achieved through the internal regulation of wants rather than through public achievement in the form of political and economic institutions. To be sure, Epicureans do not deny that some basic amount of political security is useful for self-sufficiency, nor that wealth in certain cases is something to enjoy. But their major focus is to explain, on the one hand, how autarkeia can be attained without great wealth or power and, on the other hand, how the active pursuit of wealth and power could erode autarkeia.

With regard to the former of these, the Epicureans emphasized how a frugal life usually maximized pleasure and made periods of abundance more enjoyable, whereas habituation to luxury posed obstacles to such things. To be self-sufficient, then, did not require much. In part because self-sufficiency could be achieved with few resources, the Epicureans taught the importance of taking inventory of one's desires, constantly thinking through whether happiness and equanimity might be better served by curtailing rather fulfilling one's wants.[16] What this inventory most often revealed, they believed, was that whatever amount of goods one already possessed was usually enough to achieve a happy life, full of personal fulfillment and generosity toward friends. When Epicureans upheld the view that "the greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom [*eleutheria*, especially the negative freedom of not being a slave]," they in particular had in mind the freedom from servitude, however severe or mild, to the opinions and preferences of others (Epicurus 1994, 40 [VS 77]).[17] Epicureans did not seek total avoidance of social interactions but rather only opposed the active seeking of fame, wealth, and success: "praise from other men must come of its own accord; and we must be concerned with healing ourselves" (Epicurus 1994, 39 [VS 64]).

With regard to the latter, Epicurean thought returns to the idea that, more often than not, the fulfillment of numerous desires—above all the desire for wealth and power—is not in fact conducive to the minimizing of pain and anxiety that they took to be the core achievement of a happy life. In labeling the improper sources of happiness indefinite (*adioristous*), Epicurus likely had in mind not just their uncertain relationship to human fulfillment, but their endless quality, as Epicureans objected to the misery, and lack of self-sufficiency, that resulted from constantly pursuing objects such as wealth and fame, which always seemed to leave their seekers wanting more. In its account of self-sufficiency, then, Epicureanism continually aimed to expose apparent needs as merely unnatural or unnecessary desires and thus expose, too, the way human life often frustrated itself in what Lucretius called "empty cares" (*curis inanibus*), among which political ambition was a paradigmatic example.[18]

In these five respects, then—as a psychological account of equality in the form of equanimity, as an insistence on a human equality transcending all political relations, as a call for a deeper form of solidarity than that offered by politics, as a defense of a purer and more intimate free speech than the kind practiced on the public stage, and as a defense of

an internalized form of self-sufficiency—the Epicurean tradition translated political values into commitments that found their fullest realization outside of politics. This sublimation not only reminds us, *pace* Cicero and many later critics, of the enduring connection of Epicureanism to politics but also demonstrates how Epicurean philosophy and practice may have been an effective therapy for those feeling the strains of plebeian political life. The Epicurean could live outside of conventional political spaces without entirely sacrificing—and indeed in a certain sense gaining—some of the core elements of what political life, on the individual ethical level, had to offer.

Defending Epicureanism from the charge of political irresponsibility

I have discussed two kinds of therapeutic functions of Epicureanism that were especially relevant for ordinary, relatively silent plebeian citizens fated to live with middling amounts of wealth, power, and fame: a critique of active politics and the quest for socioeconomic success and an extrapolitical reinterpretation of traditional political values like equality, solidarity, free speech, and self-sufficiency. But such functions do not by themselves fully respond to the main point of criticism traditional republican thinkers, since Cicero, have leveled against Epicureanism: namely, that Epicureanism is *civically irresponsible*. For Cicero (1999b, I.32–39,116–119; 1918, III.46–48),the irresponsibility of Epicureanism stems from numerous considerations. Its proto-utilitarianism makes it unable to comprehend or defend intrinsic values such as virtue, self-sacrifice, and altruism allegedly required for a vibrant and just political order. Its view of the mortality of the soul and elevation of pleasure inhibit the motivations for just action.[19] Its ethic of withdrawal, and its parallel limitation of political activity to rare instances of emergency, denies the state the services and political training of otherwise talented and capable citizens (Cicero 1999a, I.5–6, p. 4). And its apparent hedonism threatens to make many of its adherents who do engage in politics too narrowly selfish to reliably pursue causes in the public interest (Cicero 1999b, I.32–39, pp. 116–119).

Even for a modern reader, Epicureanism may very well seem civically irresponsible on at least three different grounds: its central tenet of political withdrawal has *no relevance* for politics, it arguably *does harm* to the state by demotivating political action, and it is *defeatist* (in the sense it is a product of political decline and urges us to accept as unchangeable certain political circumstances that in fact are reformable). In suggesting that Epicureanism be treated as a paradigmatic instance of an extrapolitical philosophy capable of providing solace to those today forced to endure similar difficulties of a plebeian political existence, I think there is good reason to resist these three forms of critique.

First, the idea that Epicureanism is politically irrelevant must be resisted on numerous grounds. Epicurus and his followers did not teach an absolute rejection of political life. In Rome, for example, involvement in politics from professed Epicureans was not at all uncommon (Momligliano 1941; Sedley 2009, 43; Clay 2009, 10, 16–17). Moreover, even if it were the case that some Epicureans wished to achieve a more complete withdrawal from politics, their subjection to various legal orders would have made complete apoliticism nearly impossible to achieve. These considerations only emphasize the likely fact that Epicureanism functioned more as a therapy for inescapably political beings than as a plan for how to abandon politics altogether. Epicurean teachings are not merely logical arguments detached from a particular purpose but contextualized interventions intended to provide soul-healing to specific, usually plebeian individuals, most of whom neither could nor wanted to detach themselves entirely from their political communities,

but presumably felt sufficient strain from political life so as to find some kind of potential solace in its doctrines. Understood as a therapy for political beings rather than as a philosophy of complete detachment, Epicureanism not only responds to the frustrations of a plebeian political life from which complete withdrawal may be impossible, but does so in a way that cannot be seen as being irrelevant to the study or practice of politics.

But even if Epicureanism is not politically irrelevant, there is still the second element of the critique that Epicureanism is civically irresponsible: that Epicureanism does harm to the state by denying it the service of public-interested citizens. Cicero (1999b, I.37–39, pp. 118–19), for example, consistently worries that citizens under the sway of Epicureanism will either not perform acts of public service or will have their service corrupted by purely private considerations.[20] In response, it should be said that if all citizens have the chance for active political life, then Cicero's concern about the alleged deleterious impact of Epicureanism on the kind of public-spirited citizenship thought necessary to maintain republican institutions and a free way of life would deserve more merit. But insofar as political opportunity is not equally shared and some enjoy systematically more of it than others, then worries about the dangers of Epicureanism to the vitality of the state must have their hyperbolic aspect exposed. After all, in any existing regime, including liberal democratic ones, 'live unnoticed' is as much a condition to endure as something for which to aspire: given the scarcity of political office and opportunity for meaningful forms of active engagement, most citizens find themselves living unnoticed—a condition that, especially in liberal democracies with their official doctrines of equal political influence for the similarly talented and motivated, is likely to be a perpetual source of anxiety. Epicurean doctrines, which decenter and critique active political life and suggest how fundamental political values may be realized in reconfigured form outside of the public sphere, suggest a way of resisting this anxiety—or at least confronting it with dignity. They do this insofar as they imply that the ordinary lives of unknown plebeian citizens still afford meaningful opportunities for fulfilling basic political longings and that, conversely, the lives of active public servants are not as admirable, or as consistent with norms of free speech, self-sufficiency, and civic equality, as republicans like Cicero believe. Conceived more as a therapy for citizens without full or satisfying opportunities for a meaningful political existence than as a call for citizens to squander whatever political potential they possess, Epicureanism, then, should not be seen as detrimental to the health of the polity, but only as a way of coping with the psychosocial dilemmas of a plebeian political existence.

A final critique of the civic irresponsibility of the Epicurean tradition concerns the idea that Epicureanism is irresponsible because it is defeatist: it unnecessarily accepts as inevitable various forms of correctible political pathologies. Something like this critique appears, for example, when it is suggested that Epicureanism is symptomatic of political decline (Festugière 1956, ix–xi; Witke 1970, 4; Sharples 1996, 3).[21] The implicit idea here is that reformist energies should be deployed toward improving underlying institutions rather than devising therapeutic strategies for enduring disappointment. However, "political decline," if it signifies something less than a fully fair or inclusive political regime, is never entirely escapable, even in the most advanced, well-ordered regimes. While one certainly can strive to achieve better rather than worse outcomes, our liberal democracies will always fall short due to the inevitable incursion of socioeconomic status into political and educational opportunities (Green 2015). In the face of such shortcomings, and their permanence, it is not misguided to seek strategies for enduring the strains of political life, especially when it is impossible for citizens to combine, in the course of a day, active commitment to plebeian political reforms and extrapolitical efforts

to transcend the inevitable difficulties and disappointments of political life. This mix of political activism and occasional transcendence of politics is perhaps well-expressed by Horace, when he says: "accept the gift of pleasure when it̄ s given Be willing *for now* to be a private person, unworried about the city and how it's doing. Put serious things aside" (1997, III.8.25–28, p. 187 [emphasis added]).[22]

I do not mean to deny that, for some individuals, Epicureanism stood simply for the antipolitical withdrawal from politics. My point is only that it is also possible – and indeed likely – that, for many others, Epicureanism functioned in an extrapolitical fashion. Moreover, what I am claiming is that the extrapolitical elements of Epicureanism should be interpreted as a set of ongoing therapeutic strategies for actual citizens in enduring the strains of their political lives, as an ethics whose value and legitimacy stem from the unavailability of robust political opportunities, and, finally, as a teaching whose relevance comes from its capacity to respond to the frustrations arising from the constitutive unfairness besetting any liberal-democratic regime. What I suggest, in other words, is that Epicureanism is not low and objectionable, but a philosophy especially relevant to ordinary, "plebeian" citizens who do not have the same opportunities for active political life as compared to a much smaller group of recognized elites. In the final analysis, the significance of Epicureanism for contemporary democratic theory is not that its specific ethical teachings are uniquely authoritative, but rather that it is a paradigmatic example of how a periodic, principled, and therapeutic withdrawal from politics might rest on some of the same basic egalitarian grounds that elsewhere and otherwise inspire political engagement.

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Notes

1. To clarify, I do not think that *all* plebeians necessarily experienced their relatively silent form of citizenship as a psychological strain, only that some, if not many, can be surmised to have felt this way given their relative subordination vis-à-vis aristocratic elites.
2. Although my own extrapolitical reading of Epicureanism is distinct, in recognizing the political–philosophical dimension of Epicureanism, I follow Nichols (1976) and Colman (2012). Moreover, it should be emphasized that, in recovering the extrapolitical significance of Epicureanism, I do not mean to deny that it might also have functioned in an antipolitical fashion, leading some to withdraw once and for all from politics to the maximum extent that such withdrawal might be possible.
3. On the latter, see Epicurus (1994, 35 [PD, 31–33]).
4. Nichols, who delineates and defends an Epicurean political philosophy, still recognizes that the pervasive view historically has been that "the Epicurean teaching seems to be altogether hostile to politics as such and to urge men to avoid public life" (1976, 14).

5. For *makaria*—i.e. bliss, blessedness, and happiness—and its variant forms, see Epicurus (1994, 30–31 [M, 128, 134], 34 [PD, 27], 37 [VS, 17]).
6. See also, Epicurus (2010, Fragment 485, translated in Epicurus 1994, 103): "For a man is unhappy either because of fear or because of unlimited and groundless desire; and by reining these in he can produce for himself the reasoning [which leads to] blessedness."
7. Insofar as tranquility might be understood as a kind of democratic value, something I elaborate below, then its defense over and against active or excessive political involvement may be seen as having a justification beyond the purely selfish concern with one's own pleasure.
8. Here I follow the translation from Lucretius (1957).
9. It is possible, of course, for rare individuals while living to have a clear sense of their future fame. See, e.g. Horace (1997, II.20; III.30).
10. If Epicureanism is understood as preaching antipolitical withdrawal from politics—a reading I am trying to show in this article is not the only way to make sense of the Epicurean tradition— then, it cannot of course be of civic use to ordinary citizens who, as such, are defined by their enduring commitment to make use of their civic potential, however, inferior relative to that of the powerful, the very wealthy, and the prominent.
11. In addition, recall, too, that it is just this feature of extrapoliticism—its temporary withdrawal from politics *in the name of* political ideas—that differentiates it from other sorts of apoliticism.
12. Note as well the idea of a "pacified mind [*pacata mens*]" (Lucretius 1997, V.1203), which conveys a similar idea, also on the basis of a political metaphor.
13. See, e.g. Brown (2009, 182): "Epicurus' conception of friendship is much more demanding than the traditional ideal of 'civic friendship'."
14. See, e.g. Epicurus (1994, 34 [PD 28]: "The same understanding produces confidence about there being nothing terrible which is eternal or [even] long-lasting and has also realized that security among even these limited [bad things] is most easily achieved through friendship."
15. Such an idea is perhaps further suggested in Epicurus' claim: "Friendship dances around the world announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness" (1994, 38 [VS, 52]).
16. See, e.g. Epicurus (1994, 40 [VS 71]: "One should bring this question to bear on all one's desires: what will happen to me if what is sought by desire is achieved, and what will happen if it is not?" Also, see Horace (1929b, I.1.111–113).
17. On the association of *eleutheria* with the negative status of not being a slave, see Hansen (2010). Similarly, with Lucretius (1977, V.1132–35), it is argued that rule does not normally benefit the ruler, because the ruler sacrifices independence: those involved in politics are wise "from the mouth of others" (*alieno ex ore*), because they must wage their pursuits based on other people's ideas. Also, see Nichols (1976, 142).
18. Lucretius (1977, V.1430–35): "Therefore the human race always toils idly and in vain and consumes its lifetime in empty cares **[*curis inanibus*]**. No wonder, for it has not learned what the limit of possession is nor at all how far true pleasure can increase. And that [ignorance] little by little has carried life out onto the deep [sea] and stirred up from the bottom great waves of war." Also, see ibid., V.1423–24; Nichols (1976, 172).
19. See Cicero (1918, II.6): "What duty, what reputation, what glory will be of such value that the man who has once convinced himself that pain is the highest evil will be willing to seek to secure them at the cost of bodily pain? And further what shame, what degradation will a man not submit to in order to avoid pain, if he has once decided it to be the highest evil?"
20. That Cicero worries about Epicureans' irresponsible *involvement* in politics—and not just their irresponsible withdrawal—is a further reminder that we miss out on the full meaning of Epicureanism if it is reduced to an apolitical or antipolitical standpoint.
21. Arendt, for instance, associates Epicureanism with "world alienation" and a "deep mistrust of the world" Arendt, (1958, 310; also see 112–13).
22. ["neglegens, ne qua populus laboret, parce privatus nimium cavere et dona praesentis cape laetus horae, linque severa."]

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