

# Francesco Verde, Epicuro (Roma: Carocci, 2013)

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**Francesco Verde**, *Epicuro*, Carocci editore, Milano, 2013  
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This is a clear, informative and philologically rigorous introduction to the philosophy of Epicurus. Francesco Verde has written extensively about ancient atomism and the Epicurean tradition: together with a remarkable number of essays in various languages, he has published an Italian translation with a detailed commentary of Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* (Rome: Carocci, 2010, prefaced by E. Spinelli) and, more recently, has edited (with S. Marchand) a volume of essays on *Épicurisme et Scepticisme* (Università Sapienza Editrice, Rome 2013), and (with D. De Sanctis, E. Spinelli, and M. Tulli) *Questioni epicuree* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2015). In 2011, he also translated into Italian and edited for Carocci

David Sedley's book on ancient creationism (Berkeley: California University Press, 2007), to which he added a useful afterword.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first is dedicated to Epicurus' life, education and works. In the very first lines (p. 9), quoting Timon of Phlius' portrait of Epicurus in the *Silloi*, Verde appropriately gives a telling sample of the sort of reputation that was to accompany the Epicurean tradition for a very long time: "The last, most pig-like and most-dog like of the physicists, having come from Samos, son of a schoolteacher, the most uneducated of living things" (51 Di Marco = 825 SH). In his reconstruction of Epicurus' life, Verde usefully provides historical context and is careful in his use of ancient biographical sources, especially when they belong to strands hostile to the Epicurean tradition, which was often perceived as radically distant from the Socratic orientation shared by the other main philosophical schools. As for the reasons behind the longevity and liveliness of the Epicurean school, which experienced a revival in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Verde stresses the cult of friendship and the importance of communal life and philosophical research (p. 22). The section on Epicurus' works includes a balanced discussion of the problems surrounding the portions of Epicurus' *On Nature* listed or recovered – among other Epicurean texts – in the library of the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum, whose selection, according to Verde, testifies to the significant transformations undergone by the Epicurean school over time (p. 32). The chapter ends with a note on the style and structure of Epicurus' surviving works, where Verde rightly calls attention to Epicurus' emphasis on clarity and accessibility, on his refusal of poetical language as a means of conveying philosophical truths, and on his innovative reliance on the epistolary genre as a way of condensing and disseminating the "essence" of his thought (pp. 32–41).

The second chapter is devoted to the so-called Canon, i. e. the first of the three parts into which Epicurus – according to Diogenes Laertius – hierarchically divided his philosophy. The other two (Physics and Ethics) are the subject of the two following chapters. The Canon (which was treated in a lost work, the *Kanon*) is the science of the criteria of knowledge and truth and functions as an indispensable introduction to the system. Verde describes in detail the three criteria at the basis of Epicurus' sensualistic theory of knowledge (sensations, *prolêpseis*, and feelings), and adds a discussion of a fourth criterion – the "presentational applications of the mind" – supposedly introduced by Epicurus and further developed by his school (pp. 43–76). The rest of the chapter (pp. 76–87) is concerned with the problem of distinguishing truth from error (an opinion is true only when confirmed or not disproved by the testimony of the senses), the "doctrine of multiple explanations" (which applies only to a certain kind of natural phenomena, such as the celestial ones), and the debate about inference from signs, a matter that attracted the attention of the Epicureans (particularly Philodemus) not because

of its abstract logical or dialectic implications, but because it allowed them to epistemologically justify the existence of “invisible” but fundamental realities such as the atoms and the void (p. 87).

It is only by assimilating the principles outlined in the *Canonic* that the Epicurean disciple can be introduced to the second part of the system, *Physics*, which forms the subject of the third chapter. Atoms and void are the foundation of everything, and Verde rightly points out that in Epicurus, unlike in Democritus, the ontological status of the void is as strong as that of the atoms, and the void cannot be simply defined as “privation or negation” of the properties of the atoms (p. 92). Verde also addresses the thorny question of the atomic minima (*elachista*), a subject to which he has dedicated a separate study (*Elachista: La dottrina dei minimi nell'Epicureismo*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2013), and argues that, as it appears more clearly in Lucretius than in Epicurus, these minima are “limits” (*perata*) of the atom rather than “parts” (*merē*) of it and their function is to explain the indivisibility of the atom (p. 101). A discussion of the doctrine of images (*eidōla*), which are the “true guarantee of the truthful content of sensations” (p. 107), is followed by a treatment of Epicurus’ utterly materialistic and audacious theory of the soul: among other things, Verde argues here that Lucretius’ division of the soul into a rational *animus* and a non-rational *anima* did not compromise Epicurus’ psychological monism and was ultimately a coherent development of a functional differentiation already sketched by Epicurus. As for the Epicurean “granular” notion of time (p. 122), Verde stresses that for Epicurus as well as Lucretius time has no ontological autonomy, but can only be “inferred” by the “comparative observation of the duration of phenomena” (p. 125).

In the section on cosmology (pp. 129–136), Verde, following Sedley, emphasizes the “decisive role” of the Epicurean notion of infinity: although limited in their shape, the atoms are infinite in number, and infinite is the void through which they constantly travel. As a result, there is also an infinite number of worlds (whose shape, like that of the atoms of which they are formed, is *limited* – another point of disagreement with Democritus). Verde calls the attention on some of the most striking features of Epicurus’ cosmology: the idea of an infinite and centre-less universe whose (temporary) orderly structure is the result of a law of equal distribution of things (later referred to as *isonomia*) and not the realization of a divine plan or the outcome of a teleological process; the contrast between the eternity of atoms and void and the precariousness of the aggregates they come to form (worlds included); the rejection of both the Aristotelian notion of natural places and the Democritean theory of vortex; the refusal to conflate the notion of *kosmos* with that of “perfection” and “sphericity” and the rebuttal of the idea of the world as a divine “great animal” and the notion of world soul (pp. 129–136). The rest of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the Epicurean and Lucretian

notions of progress (where Verde stresses that civilization is a condition achieved only through a long, arduous, and unpredictable journey), language (where a naturalistic view of the origin of language is combined with a conventionalist one) and theology (where Verde rejects the enduring view that Epicurus' was an atheist in disguise).

In the fourth chapter, Verde treats the third part of the system, Ethics, which represents the “crowning and the authentic goal of philosophy” (p. 159), a philosophy that can (and should) be practiced by everybody, man or woman, poor or rich. Epicurus' proposal is undoubtedly eudemonistic, but it is important to remember that for him pleasure (which is a state humans naturally, instinctively and congenitally seek) consists in the mere satisfaction of a need (*chreia*), to be pursued only if such satisfaction is required for the attainment of imperturbability, which is conceived as a state both of the mind (*ataraxia*) and the body (*aponia*). Therefore, pleasure for Epicurus is essentially a “negative concept” and has to do with the absence of pain rather than with an unrestrained pursuit of sensual gratifications (p. 167). Those who reach this state of supreme tranquillity – Epicurus writes at the conclusion of the *Letter to Menoeceus* – share the beatitude of the gods, in a sort of worldly, immanent, and therefore profoundly anti-Platonic version of the theme of the “assimilation to god” (p. 164). In what follows (pp. 164–189), Verde discusses the varieties of pleasures described by Epicurus (the natural and necessary, the natural but unnecessary, and the unnatural and unnecessary), the distinction between katastematic and kinetic pleasure, the role of virtues and of “sober reasoning” in the making of ethical choices (not all pleasure are to be pursued nor all kinds of pain are to be avoided), and the so-called *tetrapharmakos* (“four-part remedy”) contained in the first four maxims of Epicurus' *Principal Doctrines* (*Kuriai Doxai*), which Philodemus will subsequently condense as follows: “Not to be feared is god, not to be felt is death, what is good is easily done, what is dire is easily borne” (*PHerc.* 1005, col. V 8–13 Angeli – p. 184).

The fundamental importance of friendship and communal life and Epicurus' contractualistic conception of law (which, however, combines legal relativism with the maxim that in order to be just a law should promote happiness and the common good) are also addressed by Verde (pp. 189–195). The chapter ends with an in-depth examination of the doctrine of *parenklisis* or *clinamen* (“swerve”) which, although absent in the surviving works of Epicurus, certainly points to a difficulty he must have been well aware of: how can a materialistic view of the world be reconciled with the belief in the human capacity for self-determination? How, in other words, can Democritean determinism be avoided? In its Lucretian formulation, the doctrine of *clinamen* makes it possible to justify the “causal power” of the mind, which belongs to atomic matter, but “is not previously determined by it” (p. 211).

The final chapter (pp. 213–224) provides a useful overview of the history and fortune of the Epicurean school and, more generally, of the Epicurean tradition from the death of the master (271/270 BCE) to the imperial age. Two separate paragraphs are devoted, respectively, to Philodemus and Lucretius, the latter of whom famously presented Epicurus as the saviour of mankind from superstitious fears and compared him to a god. The “salvific mission” of Epicurean philosophy, as Verde recalls, is testified by a monumental inscription carved around 120 CE onto a portico wall in the city of Oenoanda (Lycia) and composed by a certain Diogenes, an Epicurean who apparently wanted to spread Epicurus’ liberating message as widely as possible.

Having assimilated the lesson of historians such as Marc Bloch and historians of philosophy such as Eugenio Garin, Giorgio Tonelli and Giuseppe Cambiano, Verde is critical of anachronistic interpretations of ancient philosophers and the widespread uses (and misuses) of their thought for contemporary purposes. In the Conclusions (pp. 225–228), he therefore resists the temptation to present Epicurus as a sort of modern scientist *ante litteram*. Following Cambiano and, in part, Christoph Horn, he also rejects the (often vaguely nostalgic) tendency – popularized by Pierre Hadot – to reduce the philosophical systems of antiquity to a “way of life”: Epicurus’ ethics was indeed the crowning of his philosophy, but that doesn’t mean his thought can be wholly identified with it. The canonic and physics were equally important, and were the necessary prerequisites for both the possibility and realization of ethics.

In sum, Verde’s analysis is philologically accurate, faithful to the original texts, up-to-date in its knowledge and discussion of secondary sources (at the end of the book – pp. 233–268 – there is a select bibliography organized by subject which includes a brief section on the fortune of Epicureanism until modern times and beyond), and, most of all, guided by such scholarly virtues as caution and doubt. Verde tends to emphasize the “inner coherence” of Epicurean philosophy (p. 227) rather than its unresolved tensions, but nonetheless he never twists the evidence or conceals alternative views. I have only minor critical remarks to make, most of which have to do with the fortune of Epicureanism rather than Epicurus per se: (1) The relationship between Epicurean ideas and *non-philosophical* traditions (medical, astronomical, etc.) is rarely discussed or mentioned. (2) More space could have been devoted to the problem of physical and moral evil, a dimension that in Lucretius played a very important role. I also did not find mention of the so-called “riddle of Epicurus”, attributed to him by Lactantius (*De ira Dei*, 13: *Deus, inquit, aut vult tollere mala, et non potest*, etc.), which was to play a decisive role in Pierre Bayle’s demolition of traditional theodicy: a brief discussion of the reasons behind Lactantius’ attribution and its history would have been quite interesting. (3) Finally, although Verde’s refusal to turn Epicurus

into a precursor of John Dalton or Charles Darwin is to be welcomed, it remains difficult, from a historical perspective, to ignore the fundamental contribution of the Epicurean-Lucretian (counter)tradition to the gradual emergence, between the 16th and the 18th century, of an image of the universe, of nature and man *alternative* to that promoted by Newton and his followers (a contribution that, to reinforce Verde's point, proves the inappropriateness of the reduction of Epicurean philosophy to its ethical part). To some extent, this alternative image is still with us, but at the time sounded unacceptable or heretic even to many of the protagonists of the scientific revolution. Take the idea of an infinite, centre-less and infinitely populated universe (a picture in which, to be sure, Copernican and Platonic-Hermetic themes were merged with the Epicurean ones), the rejection of finalism, anthropocentrism and the dogma of divine intelligent design, the corpuscular and mechanical explanation of the origin of the universe and the key role played by *chance* in this process, the insistence on the ambiguity of nature as a combination of generative and creative forces and destructive ones, the idea that men and animals are generated by the same primeval atomic seeds, that the soul is material, mortal and not divine in origin, the inglorious picture of the brutish, nasty and violent beginnings of human civilization – wouldn't it be right to say that some of these ideas have *become* established truths with the advancement of modern science, and that therefore they cannot be labelled (in retrospect) simply as theories among other theories? Are we sure that to raise such a question, as Verde seems to believe, means to abandon the solid ground of serious historical research and to reduce it to a list of the winners and losers? If, as Sigmund Freud thought, modern science has much to do with the infliction of painful blows upon our narcissistic convictions, then I would perhaps be a bit less hesitant than Verde in assigning to the Epicurean tradition as a whole a more secure role in the history of science.