

## ***Epicurean Philosophy in Cicero's De Republica: Serious Threat or Convenient Foil?***

Walter Englert  
Reed College, Portland  
Classics Department.  
englert@reed.edu

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores Cicero's treatment of Epicurean philosophy in his *De republica*, and argues against those who think that Cicero's criticisms of Epicureanism in the work are neither serious nor significant. Cicero engages the Epicureans at the beginning, middle, and end of the *De republica*. In the prologue to Book 1 he argues against the Epicurean view that one should not take part in politics unless required to, showing why it is a misguided and mistaken view; in Book 3 he represents the character Philus praising the Epicurean view that justice should be sought solely on the basis of self-interest as the least objectionable account of those who defend justice; and in Book 6 Scipio ends his account of his dream by almost humorously critiquing the Epicurean view of the soul and the afterlife by showing the souls of Epicureans surviving death and suffering punishment for their errors. The paper ends by suggesting that Cicero presents Epicurean political thought as a serious problem in the *De republica* for three different reasons: literary, philosophical, and personal.

### **KEYWORDS**

Cicero, *De republica*, Epicureanism, dream of Scipio

Cicero's acquaintance with Epicureanism was broad and deep. His earliest encounter with philosophy was with his Epicurean teacher Phaedrus, and his closest friend throughout his life, Atticus, was an Epicurean<sup>1</sup>. Despite this early introduction to the Garden, Cicero had a negative view of many aspects

---

<sup>1</sup> Cicero describes his early study of Epicureanism at *Ad Familiares* 13.1.2. The possible effects on Cicero of his early study of Epicureanism are well explored by S. Maso, *Capire e dissentire: Cicerone e la filosofia di Epicuro*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 2008: 31-63.

of Epicureanism<sup>2</sup>. He criticized Epicurean views in a number of his speeches, letters, and rhetorical and philosophical works, and one of the doctrines of Epicurus with which he disagreed most was that the sage, and people in general, should not take part in politics, unless necessity compelled them to do so. Cicero's sharpest attacks on Epicurean political theory occur in the *De republica*, but scholars disagree about how much of a threat Cicero thought the Epicurean view of politics was when he was writing the *De republica*<sup>3</sup>. In this paper I argue that in the *De republica* Cicero took Epicurean political thought as a serious problem, for literary, philosophical, and personal reasons, and included his critique of the Epicurean view on participation in politics as an important frame for the work as a whole.

As has often been noted, Cicero begins and ends the *De republica* with an attack on Epicureanism. Although he does not explicitly name his philosophical opponents in either place, it is clear that he is aiming at Epicurean positions in both places<sup>4</sup>. As the preface opens after the lost opening pages at the beginning of the work, we see Cicero arguing against the

---

<sup>2</sup> Modern studies exploring aspects of Cicero's generally negative views on Epicureanism include: G. D'Anna, *Alcuni aspetti della polemica anti-epicurea di Cicerone*, Roma, Edizioni dell' Ateneo, 1965; Maso, *Capire e dissentire*, cit.; C. Lévy, *Cicéron et l'épicurisme: la problématique de l'éloge paradoxal*, in C. Auvray-Assayas and D. Delattre, *Cicéron et Philodème: la polémique en philosophie*, Paris, Éd. Rue d'Ulm, 2001: 61-75; T. Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-epicureanism", *Eos* 62(1974): 55-78; J. Leonhardt, *Ciceros Kritik der Philosophenschulen (Zetemata 103)* Munich, Beck, 1999. Additional bibliography can be found in G. Gawlick and W. Görler, *Cicero* in "Hellenistische Philosophie," H. Flashar (ed.), Basel, Schwabe, 1994: 1132-1134.

<sup>3</sup> H.M. Howe, "Amafinius, Lucretius, and Cicero", *The American Journal of Philology* 72(1951): 57-62 had suggested that Cicero's anti-Epicureanism in the opening of the *De republica* was not that serious, while D'Anna, *Alcuni aspetti della polemica anti-epicurea di Cicerone*, cit.: 9; E. Andreoni, "Sul contrasto ideologico fra il De republica di Cicerone e il poema di Lucrezio", *Storia e lett. Racc. di studi e testi* 141-142(1979), and Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-epicureanism", cit., all see Cicero as taking the Epicurean threat seriously. J. Zetzel (*De republica and De rerum natura* in P.E. Knox and C. Foss (eds.), *Style and tradition: studies in honor of Wendell Clausen*, Stuttgart, Teubner, 1999: 230-247) argues that Cicero's main response to Lucretius is a literary one and is confined mostly to the Dream of Scipio.

<sup>4</sup> For the identification of Cicero's unnamed opponents as Epicureans in the passages in Book 1, see the discussion of Andreoni, "Sul contrasto ideologico fra il De republica di Cicerone e il poema di Lucrezio", cit.: 283-285 and Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-epicureanism", cit.: 59-60.

Epicurean view that one should not take part in politics<sup>5</sup>, and in Book 6 the work ends with the *Dream of Scipio*, the final lines of which describe the sad fate of the souls of Epicureans after death.

Cicero composed the *De republica* between 54 and 51 BCE, three years after he returned from exile during a busy period of his life. A number of other works he wrote between his exile and the time he finished the *De republica* mention or allude to Epicureanism, including the *Post Reditum in Senatu* (14-16), *Pro Sestio* (21-25), *Pro Caelio* (40-41), *In Pisonem* (in many sections, including 20, 37, 42-44, 56-61, and 68-72), and *De Oratore* (3. 62-64). A number of scholars had argued that Cicero, even though he mentions Epicureanism in these and other works, did not become seriously hostile towards Epicureanism until the philosophical works he wrote in 45-43, but several scholars<sup>6</sup> have shown that Cicero's comments on Epicureanism in his works before the *De republica* are more negative than others previously thought.

I think this is true, but I also think we can see a difference in the way he treats Epicureanism in these earlier works of the 50s from the way he treats it in the *De republica*. Cicero expresses a generally negative view of Epicureanism in these earlier writings, but in none of the works is Epicureanism his direct target: in the *Post Reditum in Senatu* in 57 BCE, Cicero discusses Epicureanism briefly to attack Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus and portray him as someone who does not understand Epicureanism and uses it as a cover for shameful living; in the *Pro Sestio* in 56 BCE, Cicero again discusses Epicureanism as part of his continued attack on Piso, and again portrays him as someone who is attracted to Epicureanism for his own vicious purposes without really understanding it; in the *Pro Caelio*, also in 56 BCE, he alludes to Epicureanism briefly as part of his defense of Caelius' behavior; in the *In Pisonem* in 55 BCE, Cicero writes a sustained attack on Piso in which his Epicureanism plays a part, but he claims that Piso has wildly misunderstood its major tenets. Finally, in the *De Oratore*, also written in 55, he alludes to the Epicureans as a school that promotes pleasure, and which because of its doctrines is not a philosophy that the active orator and politician can embrace. Here is part of the passage from the *De Oratore* (3.63-64):

---

<sup>5</sup> The Epicureans were famous for the dictum "Do not take part in politics" (μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι) which Cicero quotes at *Ad Atticum* 14.20.5.

<sup>6</sup> Including D'Anna, *Alcuni aspetti della polemica anti-epicurea di Cicerone*, cit., and Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-epicureanism", cit.

Ex illis autem quae remanent, ea philosophia, quae suscepit patrociniū voluptatis, etsi cui vera videatur, procul abest tamen ab eo viro, quem quaerimus et quem auctorem publici consilii et regendae civitatis ducem et sententiae atque eloquentiae principem in senatu, in populo, in causis publicis esse volumus. Nec ulla tamen ei philosophiae fiet iniuria a nobis; non enim repelletur inde, quo adgredi cupiet, sed in hortulis quiescet suis, ubi vult, ubi etiam recubans molliter et delicate nos avocat a rostris, a iudiciis, a curia, fortasse sapienter, hac praesertim re publica. Verum ego non quaero nunc, quae sit philosophia verissima, sed quae oratori coniuncta maxime; qua re istos sine ulla contumelia dimittamus; sunt enim et boni viri et, quoniam sibi ita videntur, beati; tantumque eos admoneamus, ut illud, etiam si est verissimum, tacitum tamen tamquam mysterium teneant, quod negant versari in re publica esse sapientis; nam si hoc nobis atque optimo cuique persuaserint, non poterunt ipsi esse, id quod maxime cupiunt, otiosi.

From those however who remain, this philosophy, which has undertaken the patronage of pleasure, even if it seems true to some, is still far removed from that man whom we are seeking. We want that man to be a source of public counsel, a leader in governing the state, and first in thought and eloquence in the senate, popular assemblies, and public cases. Nevertheless, this philosophy will not suffer injury from us, for we will not be removing it from a place where it desires to go: it will be resting in its own gardens, where it wishes to be. And there, while it reclines softly and luxuriously, it calls us away from the rostra, from the courts, from the senate house, perhaps wisely<sup>7</sup>, especially with the republic the way it is. But I am not inquiring now, which philosophy is the truest, but which is most closely linked to the orator. Let us therefore let these people go without any abuse. For they are good men, and, as they seem to themselves, blessed. Let us only issue a warning to them: that even if this thing is very true, let them guard it closely like a holy secret, that is, that they say the wise man should not be involved in public affairs (*in re publica*). For if they persuade us and the best people of this, they themselves will not be able to be what they most desire to be: at leisure.

In light of what follows in the *De republica* four years later, this is an important statement. In it Cicero comes closer to criticizing Epicureanism directly than he did in his earlier works after his exile, and seems to be

---

<sup>7</sup> On the phrase “perhaps wisely” (*sapienter fortasse*) see M.P. Grimal, *L'Épicurisme romain*, in *Actes Du VIIIe Congrès Association Guillaume Budé*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres (1969): 155.

preparing the themes of his attack on the views of the Epicurean school in the *De republica*. The major points he makes here in the *De Oratore* are: (1) the Epicurean school does not prepare the orator for full engagement in public life; (2) Epicureans, reclining at leisure in their gardens, summon others from their public work; (3) we warn them not to tempt others with their doctrine that the wise should not be engaged in politics; and (4) their project is ultimately self-defeating, because if all good men heeded their call, the state would collapse and in the resulting disarray no one would be able to have leisure<sup>8</sup>.

Turning to the *De republica*, to what extent is Cicero's attack on Epicurean views essential to his main goals in writing his work on the state? At first glance, Cicero's allusions to the Epicureans seem relatively minor and unimportant. He mentions them in the text by name only once<sup>9</sup>, and the references to Epicurean doctrines are confined to three sections of what remains of the *De republica*: in his own voice in the prologue to Book 1; in the voice of Philus, when Philus defends injustice in Book 3; and in Scipio's voice at the end of the work in Book 6, in the closing lines of the Dream of Scipio.

In the prologue of Book I, Cicero levels two major charges against the Epicureans. In 1.1, taking Marcus Cato as an example, Cicero explains why good people feel compelled to take part in politics (*De republica* 1.1):

M. vero Catoni, homini ignoto et novo, quo omnes, qui isdem rebus studemus, quasi exemplari ad industriam virtutemque ducimur, certe licuit Tusculi se in otio delectare salubri et propinquo loco. Sed homo demens, ut isti putant, cum cogeret eum necessitas nulla, in his undis et tempestatibus ad summam senectutem maluit iactari quam in illa tranquillitate atque otio iucundissime vivere [...] Unum hoc definio, tantam esse necessitatem virtutis generi hominum a natura tantumque amorem ad communem salutem defendendam datum, ut ea vis omnia blandimenta voluptatis otiique vicerit.

---

<sup>8</sup> This last point, that the leisure of Epicureans and others who do not take part in politics rests on the efforts of those who do, echoes the similar point that Cicero makes at *Pro Sestio* 138: *...patiantur virorum fortium labore se otio suo perfrui* ("...let them allow themselves to enjoy their own leisure through the hard work of brave men"). On this aspect of Epicurean political thought, see M. Schofield, *Epicurean and Stoic Political Thought* in C.J. Rowe & M. Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000: 442-443.

<sup>9</sup> Cicero mentions the "Epicureans" (*Epicurei*) in a fragment (K. Ziegler, *M. Tullius Cicero, Fasc. 39 De republica*, Stuttgart and Leipzig, Teubner, 1992: 6.3) from Favonius Eulogius that belongs to Book 6. I discuss this fragment later in the paper.

But Marcus Cato, a man unknown and undistinguished in birth, whom all of us who pursue the same things take as an exemplar of hard work and virtue – certainly he could have enjoyed himself in leisure at Tusculum, a place which is agreeable and close by. But that man – insane, as those people [sc. the Epicureans] think – when no necessity was compelling him, preferred to be tossed about in these waves and storms until advanced old age rather than to live most pleasantly in such tranquility and leisure<sup>10</sup> [...] this alone I declare, that nature has given to the human race so great a necessity of virtue, and so great a love of defending the safety of all, that this force has overwhelmed the delights of pleasure and leisure.

This passage forms part of Cicero's discussion in the prologue in which he deals with the positions of various philosophical schools and their attitudes to participation in political life. He singles out the Epicureans as the school he feels offers the most direct challenge to engagement in politics<sup>11</sup>. Taking Marcus Cato as an example, Cicero notes that Cato had the choice of participating actively in politics, or living a life of pleasure and leisure in Tusculum, and chose to engage in politics. Cicero claims that the actions of Cato and others, including his own, can be explained by the fact that nature has instilled in humans a need to be virtuous and help one another that is stronger than the desire for pleasure. The Epicureans fail to acknowledge this innate need to be virtuous when they call Cato insane for not staying out of politics and for not focusing on his own pleasure.

Cicero returns to a similar characterization and criticism of Epicurean political doctrines in a second passage in the prologue to Book I (*De republica* 1.10):

---

<sup>10</sup> As Andreoni (E. Andreoni: *Sul contrasto ideologico fra il De republica di Cicerone e il poema di Lucrezio (La genesi della società civile)*, in *Storia e lett. Racc. di studi e testi, CXXI & CXXII: Studi di poesia latina in onore di Antonio Traglia*. Roma, 1979: 284-285) points out, the language used by those who criticize Cato is Epicurean, both in the criticism that Cato took part in politics “though no necessity compelled him” (compare Seneca's comment at *De Otio* 3.2 that Epicurus taught the wise man should not take part in politics “unless something interrupted him”), and in the metaphorical imagery of the waves and storms parallel to imagery that Lucretius employs in the *De rerum natura*.

<sup>11</sup> The Epicurean doctrine to abstain from taking part in politics was famous. See M. Erler, “Cicero und ‘unorthodoxer’ Epikureismus”, *Anregung* 38(1992): 313-317, and D. Sedley, *The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius*, in “The Journal of Roman Studies” 87(1997): 45-47 for views of first century BCE Epicureans on the topic of political engagement.

Illa autem exceptio cui probari tandem potest, quod negant sapientem suscepturum ullam rei publicae partem, extra quam si eum tempus et necessitas coegerit? quasi vero maior cuiquam necessitas accidere possit, quam accidit nobis; in qua quid facere potuissem, nisi tum consul fuisset? Consul autem esse qui potui, nisi eum vitae cursum tenuissem a pueritia, per quem equestri loco natus pervenirem ad honorem amplissimum? Non igitur potestas est ex tempore, aut cum velis, opitulandi rei publicae, quamvis ea prematur periculis, nisi eo loco sis, ut tibi id facere liceat.

Who finally can approve of this exception, when they [sc. the Epicureans] deny that the wise man will take any part in public affairs (*rei publicae*), except if the times and necessity compel him? As if indeed any greater necessity could fall on anyone than what fell on us. What would I have been able to do in this, if I had not then been consul? But how could I have been consul if I had not arranged the course of my life from childhood so that I, born into the equestrian class, might reach the highest rank? For there is no power of helping the state at the spur of the moment or whenever you want, however much the state (*rei publicae*) is pressed by dangers, unless you are in the position that allows you to do this.

In this section Cicero picks up on what the Epicureans said about Cato in the previous passage, when they criticized Cato for entering politics when there was no necessity to do so. Here Cicero makes the point more personal. Criticizing the Epicurean view that one should not enter politics unless forced to do so, Cicero takes his own case, and asks how, in a time of national emergency, a Roman who had followed Epicurean principles and had stayed out of politics could in fact help. As Cicero notes, unless he had been a consul at the time of the Catilinarian conspiracy, and before that had undertaken the political career that led to the consulship, he would not have been able to save the state.

The next reference to Epicurean doctrines in the *De republica* occurs in Book 3, when Philus is presenting Carneades' arguments against justice and explaining why it is best for a state to be unjust. Philus states (*De republica* 3.26):

negant enim sapientem idcirco virum bonum esse, quod eum sua sponte ac per se bonitas et iustitia delectet, sed quod vacua metu, cura, sollicitudine, periculo vita bonorum virorum sit, contra autem improbis semper aliqui scrupus in animis haereat, semper iis ante oculos iudicia et supplicia versentur; nullum autem emolumentum esse, nullum iniustitia partum praemium tantum, semper ut timeas, semper ut adesse, semper ut impendere aliquam poenam putes, damna....

They [sc. the Epicureans] deny that a wise man is a good man because goodness and justice delight him automatically or in themselves, but because the life of good men is free from fear, care, worry, and danger, while in contrast some anxiety always clings to the mind of the wicked, and trials and tortures always stand before their eyes. (They say) that there is no advantage, no reward produced by injustice that is so great that you should always be afraid, always think that some punishment is always present and hanging over you, losses...

Given the fragmentary nature of Book 3, it is hard to know precisely how Philus was employing this reference to Epicurean arguments about why one should be just, but there can be no doubt that he is here referring to the Epicureans<sup>12</sup>. It looks like this passage was part of Philus' argument on behalf of injustice, arguing against the Epicureans, who though they argue that justice is better than injustice, do so not because they think justice is good in itself, but the best way to not be subject to worry and to attain *ataraxia*. Philus, arguing on behalf of the advantages of injustice, seems to regard the Epicurean account of justice as the least deceitful position of those who argue on behalf of justice. The Epicureans make the mistake of arguing for justice, Philus thinks, but at least they argue for justice on the basis of self-interest.

The final two references to Epicureanism in the *De republica* come in a rather unexpected place. The Dream of Scipio that ends the work presents a view of the universe that is in many ways the exact opposite of the Epicurean view. Responding to the Myth of Er that ends Plato's *Republic*, Cicero has Scipio relate a dream he had in which his grandfather Scipio Africanus explains the nature of the universe, and especially the place after death of the souls of virtuous politicians. We learn that great leaders, after toiling on earth on behalf of justice, their countries, and the good of mankind, ascend to the skies to attain their eternal reward.

We hear about the Epicureans at the very beginning and at the very end of the Dream of Scipio. The first reference is in a fragment of Book 6 preserved by Favonius Eulogius. This is the only place in the surviving fragments of the *De republica* where the Epicureans are referred to by name (*De republica* 6.3):

---

<sup>12</sup> See K. Büchner, *M. Tullius Cicero De republica. Kommentar*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1984: 299. For the Epicurean doctrine Philus mentions here, see A.A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Volumes I and II*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987: sections 21 L2, M, O, P.



*Imitatione Platonis Cicero De republica scribens locum etiam de Eris Pamphyli reditu in vitam, qui ut ait rogo impositus revixisset, multaque de inferis secreta narrasset, non fabulosa ut ille assimulatione commentus est, sed sollertis somnii rationabili quadam imaginatione composuit, videlicet scite significans haec quae de animae immortalitate dicerentur caeloque, <nec> somniantium philosophorum esse conmenta, nec fabulas incredibiles quas Epicurei derident, sed prudentium coniecturas. (Fav. Eul. P. 1,5 Holder).*<sup>13</sup>

Cicero, writing about the state in imitation of Plato, also included a passage about the return to life of Er the Pamphylian, “who”, as he says, “had been placed on a funeral pyre and had come back to life, and had narrated many secrets about the underworld”, but he did not contrive it, as Plato had, with the likeness of a fable but composed it with a certain reasonable imagining of an intelligent dream, in this way cleverly indicating that “these things which are said about the immortality of the soul and about the heavens are not the fictions of dreaming philosophers nor the unbelievable stories what the Epicureans make fun of, but the reasonable conjectures of prudent people”.

It is hard to tell exactly where Favonius’ summary leaves off and his direct quotation of Cicero’s words from the *De republica* begins, but most scholars accept that Cicero has Scipio, before he relates his dream, refer to the criticism that the Epicureans applied to the use of myths like the Myth of Er in Plato’s *Republic*<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, as E. Kechagia points out<sup>15</sup>, we are able to identify the particular Epicurean Cicero may have had in mind here from Macrobius’ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* and Proclus’ *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*. Both Macrobius and Proclus tell us that Colotes had specifically criticized the Myth of Er on a number of counts, including the implausibility of Er’s resurrection. As Kechagia notes<sup>16</sup>, “This objection of

---

<sup>13</sup> I have reproduced the text of Ziegler, *M. Tullius Cicero, Fasc. 39 De republica*, cit.: 125, who indicates what seem to be Favonius’ own words in italics, and Cicero’s words in a regular font.

<sup>14</sup> On the issue of whether Cicero had Scipio mention the Epicureans by name in this passage or not, see K. Büchner (*op. cit.*) 439 and J. Zetzel, *De republica: selections*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995: 14 n. 35.

<sup>15</sup> E. Kechagia, *Plutarch Against Colotes: A Lesson in the History of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011: 68-70.

<sup>16</sup> Kechagia, *Plutarch Against Colotes*, cit.: 70.

Colotes too reflects Epicurean doctrine and more particularly the view about the soul, which, according to Epicurus, is not immortal but dissolves into atoms and void when human beings die”.

By having Scipio mention the Epicureans just before he relates his dream, Cicero prepares his reader for the final reference to the Epicureans in the final section of the dream. The last people that we hear about in the Dream of Scipio, and in the *De republica* as a whole, are not the great rulers who receive their eternal reward after death, but another group of people (*De republica* 6.29):

Namque eorum animi, qui se corporis voluptatibus dediderunt earumque se quasi ministros praebuerunt impulsuque libidinum voluptatibus oboedientium deorum et hominum iura violaverunt, corporibus elapsi circum terram ipsam volutantur nec hunc in locum nisi multis exagitati saeculis revertuntur.

For the spirits of those who have surrendered themselves to the pleasures of the body and have made themselves like servants to them, and who, under the influence of passions obedient to pleasures, violate the laws of gods and humans, these spirits, once they have escaped their bodies, wallow around the earth itself and do not return to this place unless they have been tormented for many ages.

Scholars seem right to see a reference here not just to the fate of ordinary hedonists, but also to Epicureans, whose service to pleasure Cicero had attacked at the opening of the work<sup>17</sup>. This description certainly does not represent Epicurean teachings fairly. Although Epicureans held that the highest good was pleasure, they argued (as the passage reporting Philus’ words from Book 3 discussed above made clear) that Epicureans should always be virtuous and never violate laws because it helped insure their complete peace of mind (*ataraxia*). Cicero has Scipio here maintain what many non-Epicureans thought about the Epicureans: that no matter what their philosophy taught, once one centered one’s life on pleasure it was difficult not to give yourself over to it in destructive ways<sup>18</sup>. What is

---

<sup>17</sup> Zetzel, *De republica: selections*, cit.: 253.

<sup>18</sup> If this interpretation is correct, it would make this attack on Epicurean hedonism similar to the one made in *De Finibus* 2.1-25 and 69-70. On Cicero’s misrepresentation of Epicurus’ hedonism in this way through his mistranslation of Epicurus K.Δ. X in *De*

especially ironic here is that these Epicurean spirits must suffer quite a shock after they die. As Epicureans, they would have been certain that their souls would not survive after death. Here, Scipio informs us the Epicureans are wrong about the nature of the soul. Their souls do not break apart at death, but separate from their bodies and live on, to suffer torments for many ages here on earth. Indeed, given Cicero's mention of the Epicurean criticism of the Myth of Er at the beginning of the Dream of Scipio, it may be that Cicero is replying to Colotes' criticisms of Plato's account of the resurrection of Er. If Colotes can criticize the idea that Er could die and then be resurrected, in his account Cicero can criticize the Epicurean belief that the soul perishes along with the body, and show Epicureans who die and must be quite surprised to find that they have survived death and face great torments.

What, then, do we make of Cicero's treatment of Epicureanism in these passages from the *De republica*? Cicero does not engage Epicurean views continually throughout the work, but the passages in which he does show that he is worried about their ethical and political doctrines, indeed worried enough to begin and end the work by emphatically rejecting their views. On the Epicurean view, people by nature aim at their own personal pleasure, should not risk the great dangers of political life, should only take part in politics if absolutely compelled to, should only be virtuous to obtain pleasure, and should not worry about what happens after death because the soul will perish with the body. If the Epicurean position is correct, Cicero realizes that everything he writes about why good men should go into politics, what the best form of government is, what the ideal leader should look like, and indeed what the ultimate nature of the cosmos is, would be false illusions. Cicero clearly feels he must engage with Epicurean philosophy directly in the *De republica*, and he does so on three levels: the literary, philosophical, and personal.

At the literary level, as a number of scholars have noted, Cicero composed the *De republica* shortly after reading Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, and features of the *De republica* show Cicero's significant attempts to engage the literary and philosophic aspects of Lucretius' poem<sup>19</sup>. Thanks to a letter

---

*Finibus* 1.21, see T. Di Matteo, "Cicerone traduttore di Epicuro", *Paideia* 54(1999): 175-185. See also P. DeLacy, "Cicero's *Invective against Piso*", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 72(1941): 49-51 on Cicero's misrepresentation of Epicurus' doctrine of pleasure.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars who see Cicero's treatment of the Epicurean position in *De republica* as stimulated at least in part by Lucretius include Zetzel (in P.E. Knox and C. Foss (eds.),

Cicero wrote in February 55 BCE to his brother Quintus (*Letters to Quintus* 2.11), we know that Cicero was deeply impressed by his reading of Lucretius' poem just before he started writing the *De republica*<sup>20</sup>. Scholars have long speculated about how encountering Lucretius' poem affected Cicero, and why, if he was so impressed by it, he does not mention Lucretius or his poem in the *De republica* or anywhere else in his writings. Scholars have argued that there are many passages in the *De republica* that echo or respond to aspects of Lucretius' poem, and that show he took the challenge it represented very seriously. Although we cannot be sure about all of the ways Cicero may have designed the *De republica* to be answer to the *De rerum natura*, he clearly meant his dialogue to be a literary response to it. Given the nature of the *De republica*, and especially its dramatic date and setting, it would not have been appropriate or possible for Cicero to mention Lucretius's poem directly, but he made sure that the *De republica* presented a picture of the world that was radically different from the one found in Lucretius.

On the philosophical level, Cicero worried that members of the Roman elite would find the Epicurean view of *otium* and *ataraxia* as presented in Epicurus and Lucretius especially attractive during times of social unrest, when the state needed effective leaders the most. As we saw earlier in the passage from the *De Oratore* (3.63-64), Cicero was clearly worried about what would happen if the Epicureans kept up their call to others to retire from politics and enjoy a life of leisure in their villas and gardens. As we can see from the relevant passages in the *De republica*, Cicero criticizes the Epicurean position on political participation from many different angles. In the prologue to Book 1 he argues that nature has endowed humans with a drive for virtue and service to others that is much stronger than our desire for pleasure and leisure, and that the Epicurean position which argues one should only take part in politics when compelled by necessity is completely nonsensical. One must take part in politics continuously to be ready when emergencies arise. In Book 3, he characterizes the Epicurean view of justice as the closest to the

---

“*De republica* and *De rerum natura*”. *Style and tradition: studies in honor of Wendell Clausen*. Stuttgart, Teubner, 1998: 230-247), Andreoni, “Sul contrasto ideologico fra il *De republica* di Cicerone e il poema di Lucrezio”, cit., and Maslowski, “The Chronology of Cicero’s Anti-epicureanism”, cit.

<sup>20</sup> Cicero wrote, *Lucretii poemata ut scribis ita sunt multis luminibus multae tamen artis* (“The poems (*poemata*) of Lucretius are as you describe, full of flashes of genius but also of great artistic craft”).

completely immoral view that injustice is better than justice, and he ends the work in Book 6 with a biting characterization of the fate of Epicurean souls.

Finally, on the personal level, Cicero wrote the *De republica* when he was struggling with thoughts that his participation in politics may have come at too great a cost, and worrying that his own political career could be interpreted as supporting the Epicurean view about the dangers and futility of politics. In the prologue of Book 1 of the *De republica* Cicero talks about people<sup>21</sup> who point to the misfortunes of Greek and Roman politicians as evidence that one should not engage in politics, and who use Cicero's own political and personal misfortunes in their arguments as evidence to show it is better not to participate in politics (*De republica* 1.6):

Nec vero iam meo nomine abstinent, et credo quia nostro consilio ac periculo sese in illa vita atque otio conservatos putant, gravius etiam de nobis queruntur et amantius.

Nor do they now abstain from invoking my name. And I suppose because they think that it was through my deliberations and risk that that they live in a state of leisure that they also insistently and lovingly complain about how I have been treated.

Cicero goes on in the prologue (especially at 1.8) to argue against the use of his own actions and misfortunes as evidence for the truth of the Epicurean position, pointing out that his country (*patria*) has charged him and his fellow Romans to come to its aid, and has granted him and others only as much *otium* as is left over after such efforts on behalf of the state. Cicero thus makes it clear in the prologue that he does not want anyone to take him as an example of the cost or futility of participating in politics, and the rest of the *De republica* can be viewed as Cicero's response to those who question the value of political participation. The state requires all of its citizens, and especially its most able ones, to be actively engaged in helping it. As Cicero made clear in the passage of the *De Oratore* (3.64) discussed earlier, if everyone took the advice of the Epicureans and sought their own private pleasure and *otium*, there would be no one to help run the state and protect the *otium* of all. Cicero, then, saw and represented the Epicurean view of politics as a serious threat to the state. If the

---

<sup>21</sup> As Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-epicureanism", cit.: 63-65 points out, contemporary Epicureans including Philodemus cited cases of famous leaders who took part in politics and suffered disaster because of it.

Epicureans were correct, the dialogue *De republica* would have no purpose, and in fact there could be no *res publica* at all.