

TRAINING IN FRUGALITY IN EPICURUS AND SENECA

IVARS AVOTINS

IN SENECA *Ep.* 18.9¹ we read that Epicurus habitually set aside a number of days during which he satisfied his hunger cheaply:

Certos habebat dies ille magister voluptatis Epicurus quibus maligne famem extingueret, visurus an aliquid deesset ex plena et consummata voluptate, vel quantum deesset, et an dignum quod quis magno labore pensaret. Hoc certe in iis epistulis ait quas scripsit Charino magistratu ad Polyaenum; et quidem gloriatur non toto asse [se] pasci, Metrodorum qui nondum tantum profecerit, toto.

Scholars do not seem to have attempted, as far as I know, to relate this practice to any of the major tenets of his ethics. Schottlaender, for example, thinks that it was merely a sort of competition in frugality between Epicurus and Metrodorus.² However, if one considers its similarity to parts of Epicurus's section on αὐτάρκεια in the *Epistula ad Menoeceum*³ (henceforth *Ep. ad Men.*), the exercise of Epicurus may have been more than a private amusement between him and his disciple. In this article I wish to propose that practicing frugality on stated days may have been part of Epicurus's, and hence of the Epicureans', training⁴ to attain and strengthen αὐτάρκεια, to Epicureans a μέγα ἀγαθόν (*Ep. ad Men.* 130).

Before *Ep.* 18.9 is compared with other Epicurean writings, its own meaning must be established. Two facts clearly appear. First, the magistracy of Charinus dates the letter to 291–290 B.C.⁵ In this year Epicurus was 50 years old and had taught philosophy since 311 B.C.; he had established his school in Athens in 306 B.C.⁶ Secondly, the letter states that Epicurus did not normally live as cheaply as was possible for him. *Maligne famem extingueret* was the exception rather than the rule. It is likely that at this stage in his life Epicurus had perfected his philosophy in all its details of theory and practice. In consequence, it is plausible

¹L. D. Reynolds, ed., *L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 1 (Oxford 1965).

²R. Schottlaender, "Epikureisches bei Seneca," *Philologus* 88 (1954) 141.

³*Epicuro. Opere.* A cura di G. Arrighetti (Turin 1973) 113, 115.

⁴The concept of memorization and repetition is quite familiar to Epicureanism (see, e.g., W. Schmid, "Epikur," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 5 [1961] 743 ff. and I. Hadot, *Seneca* [Berlin 1969] 59 ff.). There seems to be no difference in principle between mental practice and practice that also involves a physical element.

⁵B. D. Meritt, "Greek Inscriptions," *Hesperia* 26 (1957) 53–54.

⁶J. M. Rist, *Epicurus. An Introduction* (Cambridge 1972) 1–9.

to assume that the activities described in *Ep.* 18.9 constituted established practice rather than experimentation recently begun.⁷

A question arises. If he did not live as cheaply as possible all the time, why did he live so at all, even if only at intervals? What was the purpose of these days of frugality? The answer lies in the boast of Epicurus that he could feed himself *non toto asse* whereas Metrodorus needed an entire *assis*. This boast reveals that frugality on the *certi dies* kept increasing the ability of a man to subsist on less expense. Why did Metrodorus require more money? Because he had not yet made as much progress: . . . *qui nondum tantum profecerit* . . . (*Ep.* 18.10). It is unlikely that the superiority of Epicurus lay in his being able, through long practice, to live on fewer calories than were needed by Metrodorus. The minimum amount of food on which a given person can survive is not that flexible, and can be discovered quickly. Gradual progress in frugality must have resided not in eating less and less but rather in learning to find *voluptas* in progressively viler foods.

What was the purpose of learning to be satisfied with cheap foods? In terms of Epicurean philosophy, the only answer seems to be: to become self-sufficient or *αὐτάρκης*: ἐξηλώσαμεν τὴν αὐτάρκειαν οὐχ ὅπως τοῖς εὐτέλεσι καὶ λιτοῖς πάντως χρώμεθα, ἀλλ' ὅπως θαρρῶμεν πρὸς αὐτά (Arrighetti 58). In *Ep. ad Men.* 130, too, *αὐτάρχεια* is described as the ability to live on little: καὶ τὴν αὐτάρκειαν δὲ ἀγαθὸν μέγα νομίζομεν, οὐχ ἵνα πάντως τοῖς ὀλίγοις χρώμεθα . . . κτλ. *Αὐτάρχεια*, then, is a disposition of mind that allows us to face straitened circumstances, actual or potential, with confidence. Now, the purpose of the frugality sessions in *Ep.* 18.9 appears to be precisely the acquisition of this disposition of mind, because learning to like cheap foods is synonymous with τὸ θαρρεῖν πρὸς τὰ εὐτελῆ καὶ λιτά. At this point, then, it can be provisionally assumed that in *Ep.* 18.9 Epicurus was eating poorly at intervals in order to increase his self-sufficiency. The boast of Epicurus that he could live on less than Metrodorus shows, as one would expect, that there were different levels of self-sufficiency. Because of natural endowment or length of training, some Epicureans could be satisfied with lower standards than others.

The connection between *Ep.* 18.9 and the concept of *αὐτάρχεια* is strengthened by another observation. The method employed in *Ep.* 18.9 to learn to find *voluptas* in cheap fare is the same as the method used to attain *αὐτάρχεια* in *Ep. ad Men.* 131, our main source of information on this concept. The method is, of course, training. In *Ep.* 18.19 the words *certi dies* indicate that progress in frugality involved regular practice sessions. In *Ep. ad Men.* 131 the association of training with the acquisi-

⁷Rist (above, n. 6) 8 feels that most of the major positions of Epicureanism were probably already reached by 310 B.C.

tion of αὐτάρκεια is found in the sentence τὸ συνθεῖσθαι οὖν ἐν ταῖς ἀπλαῖς καὶ οὐ πολυτελέσι διαίταις . . . τοῖς πολυτελέσιν ἐκ διαλειμμάτων προσερχομένοις (vel προσερχομένοις; the variation does not affect the present argument) κρεῖττον ἡμᾶς διατίθῃσι . . . I believe that in this text τὸ συνθεῖσθαι refers to the training in frugality, hence in αὐτάρκεια. The διαλείμματα are the periods during which this training takes place. By definition, they constitute interruptions in the normal standard of living. They correspond to the *certi dies* of *Ep.* 18.9. The phrase τοῖς πολυτελέσι refers to the normal, more abundant, diet.⁸

This, of course, is not the interpretation of Bailey.⁹ To him, τὸ συνθεῖσθαι appears to mean a permanent change to a simple life (336, n., and 337). But this interpretation, if I have understood it correctly, seems to me to be inconsistent with Epicurus's own words, which stated clearly in *Ep. ad Men.* 130 that having αὐτάρκεια did not mean that we ought to live by all means (or "always") on τὰ ὀλίγα, but ought to do so only if we did not have τὰ πολλά. Bailey's interpretation also fails to agree with Epicurus in Seneca, *Ep.* 18.9, where the latter states that frugality was observed only at intervals. Moreover, the acquisition of αὐτάρκεια, far from imposing mandatory frugality on an Epicurean, gave additional spice to πολυτέλεια: ἥδιστα πολυτελείας ἀπολαύουσιν οἱ ἥκιστα ταύτης δεόμενοι . . . (*Ep. ad Men.* 130). Those ἥκιστα ταύτης δεόμενοι are, no doubt, the αὐτάρκεις.

With respect to the relative length of the training periods and the periods of more generous living, Epicurus's phrase *certi dies* appears to indicate that the training periods were the shorter ones. And in the same letter Seneca advises Lucilius to continue frugality for three or four days, sometimes longer (18.7). So even if Bailey did not mean that simple living was to be the permanent standard, but rather that the training periods (τὸ συνθεῖσθαι) should be much longer than the encounters with πολυτέλεια, he would still be wrong.

The points I have been making seem to me to be strengthened by the Senecan context of the Epicurean section in *Ep.* 18. From 18.5 to 18.13 Seneca urges Lucilius to set aside a certain number of days during which he shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare (18.5). The pur-

⁸That the word πολυτελή need not refer to a level of prosperity unbefitting an Epicurean is clear from two phrases in this very letter: ἐὰν μὴ ἔχωμεν τὰ πολλά and ἥδιστα πολυτελείας ἀπολαύουσιν. R. Müller, "Geschichtsphilosophische Probleme der lukrezischen Kulturentstehungslehre," *Acta Conventus XI "Eirene"* 1968 (Warsaw 1971) 373-375, has adduced 456 Us. to show that τὰ πολυτελή need not always belong to the class of things unnatural and unnecessary. Rist, too, remarks that there may have been one distinction between different types of πολυτελή ([above, n. 6] 118, n. 2).

⁹Cyril Bailey, ed., *Epicurus, The Extant Remains* (Oxford 1926) 89 and 336-337. J. Bollack, *La Pensée du plaisir. Épicure: textes moraux, commentaires* (Paris 1975) 77 and 126-127, understands the Greek quite differently from everyone else. It is difficult to see, however, how his translation can be extracted from the Greek as it stands.

pose of these sessions is for a rich man to lose his fear of a reversal of fortune: *Exerceamur . . . ne inparatos fortuna deprehendat, fiat nobis paupertas familiaris; securius divites erimus si scierimus quam non sit grave pauperes esse* (18.8–9). Also: *quarum* (sc. *divitiarum*) *possessionem tibi non interdico sed efficere volo ut illas intrepide possideas* (18.13). Now, it can hardly be doubted that the regime recommended by Seneca to Lucilius corresponds in nearly every detail to the Epicurean training for acquiring *αὐτάρκεια*. It is also reasonable to assume that Seneca would not have inserted the letter of Epicurus to Polyaenus in his own letter unless he had thought that it was pertinent to his exhortation to Lucilius and strengthened it. And it would not be pertinent unless connected with the main topic of Seneca: to discover through practicing it that poverty is not a burden and that a rich man need not fear it.

If this interpretation is correct, information supplied by *Ep.* 18.9 has added to our knowledge of a part of Epicurean philosophy. We now know that training in *αὐτάρκεια*, i.e., *τὸ συνεθίζειν ἐν ταῖς ἀπλάϊς διαίταις*, was intended not only to accustom us to *τὰ ἀπλᾶ* but also to make us learn to derive pleasure from them. Moreover, this training took place at regular intervals (*certi dies*), in sessions of a few days' duration; and one's degree of *αὐτάρκεια* could be progressively increased through training. Finally, if Epicurus himself at the age of 50 still persisted in this training, it can be fairly concluded that it was a regular and permanent part of the Epicureans' way of life.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO, LONDON