EPICURUS

AN INTRODUCTION

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TO MY FRIEND

HENRY BLUMENTHAL
PREFACE

According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus wrote more than any philosopher before him, but of these writings there remain only three letters – of which one (to Pythocles) is sometimes said to be spurious, the so-called ‘Basic Doctrines’ (Κύριαι Δόξαι), and a quantity of fragments. Fragments are all that is left of the writings of many other Epicureans: Metrodorus, Polyaeus, Demetrius Laco, Philodemus and Diogenes of Oenoanda. Lucretius’ poem survives almost intact. And from this varied evidence, eked out by the expositions of hostile critics like Cicero and Plutarch, we must reconstruct Epicureanism.

Progress has been impressive since the pioneering labours of Gassendi, Giussani and Usener. Perhaps the greatest credit is due to Bignoné, who first realized how much we must emphasize Epicurus’ reaction to the thought of Plato and Aristotle. But Bignoné misled us for a while because he thought that it was only the early Aristotle, the Aristotle of the dialogues, that Epicurus knew. Later work, particularly by Diano and recently by Furley, has disposed of that unnecessary hypothesis. For while Bignoné was limited by disputable interpretations of what the ‘early’ Aristotle taught, we have since learned that precise parallels can be found in ethics, physics and psychology between Plato and the Aristotle of the treatises on the one hand and Epicurus on the other. We even have a fragment of Epicurus which speaks of Aristotle’s physical treatises – though not necessarily of our Physics – and of his Analytics (fr. 118 Arr.).

Epicurus has proved himself a hard man to help. From ancient times his philosophy has aroused both vehement opposition and enthusiastic approval. Judgments about it have often been emotional, and for this Epicurus himself must bear much of the responsibility. He himself set a depth of polemic hitherto unplumbed among ancient philosophers, and reserved some of his bitterest contempt for those from whom he learned the most. He is an ideologist, with an ideologist’s loves and hatreds, and among his modern admirers many of the most devoted are those who see his importance primarily as that of a man who
PREFACE

condemned the subordination of ethics to politics, of the happiness of the individual to the good of society, and, as Lucretius held, who liberated us both from the tyranny of the gods and from the opiates of false religious belief.

The scope of the present book is unambitious: it is to present an elementary account of what we know about the philosophy of Epicurus. Much of what is here has been said before somewhere. Yet several chapters will present a different Epicurus from that which emerges from other books in English. If we pass over the work of Farrington, especially his Faith of Epicurus, not because it is unhelpful — indeed to a considerable degree the reverse is true — but because his Marxist interpretations can only be properly evaluated by those already possessed of a firm grasp of the basic principles of Epicureanism, we are still to all intents and purposes left with the books of Bailey and De Witt. Bailey’s Greek Atomists and Epicurus has been very useful and its appearance marked a substantial advance in Epicurean studies, but much of it has now been superseded. In particular the work of Diano on Epicurean ethics and psychology, still unnoticed by Bailey in his edition of Lucretius, cannot be passed over, and Bailey’s discussion of Epicurean religion must be supplemented by a number of later studies, especially those of Kleve and Merlan. As for De Witt’s Epicurus and his Philosophy, it is essentially a work of special pleading, and his theses about Epicurus’ canonic and the general nature of the ethical writings have not won wide acceptance.

The present contribution to Epicurean studies is an attempt to redescribe the basic tenets of Epicurus himself. It is not a history of Epicureanism. I have only discussed other Epicureans, such as Philodemus and Lucretius, in so far as they enable us to understand the thought of Epicurus. In general too I have avoided more specialized problems of interpretation, though a few are touched on in appendices.

The most convenient collection of the writings and fragments of Epicurus is that of G. Arrighetti, entitled Epicuro: Opere (Turin 1960). Usener’s Epicurea (Leipzig 1887, reprinted Rome 1963) is an invaluable source-book of passages relating to Epicureanism.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to thank Professor T. M. Robinson, Professor F. H. Sandbach and the advisers of the Cambridge University Press for reading and commenting on *Epicurus* in manuscript. It is a better book for their criticisms.

J.M.R.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAHG  Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft, hrsg. von der Österreichischen Humanistischen Gesellschaft
ACGB  Actes du VIIIe Congrès, Association Guillaume Budé (Paris 1969)
AJA   American Journal of Archaeology
AJP   American Journal of Philology
Arr.  G. Arrighetti, Epicuro : Opere (Turin 1960)
ASNP  Annali della Scuola Normale di Pisa, Classe di Lett., Storia e Filosofia
BD    Epicurus, Basic Doctrines
BICS  Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London
CN    Plutarch, De communibus notitiis
CP    Classical Philology
CQ    Classical Quarterly
CR    Classical Review
DK    Die Fragmenta der Vorsokratiker, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz
E. Pap. Études de Papyrologie
GCFI  Giornale critico di filosofia italiana
GI    Giornale Italiano di Filologia
JHI   Journal of the History of Ideas
JP    Journal of Philology
Mus. Helv. Museum Helveticum
ND    Cicero, De Natura Deorum
PP    La Parola del Passato
PR    Philosophical Review
RAC   Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum
RAL   Rendiconti dell'Accademia dei Lincei
RE    Pauly's Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertums-wissenschaft
REA   Revue des études anciennes
REG   Revue des études grecques
RFIC  Rivista di filologia e di istruzione classica
Rh. Mus. Rheinisches Museum
ABBREVIATIONS

SBB  Sitzungsberichte der Kön. Akademie zu Berlin
SIFC  Studi italiani di filologia classica
SO  Symbolae Osloenses
SR  Plutarch, De Stoicorum Repugnantii
TAPA  Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association
VS  Epicurus, Vatican Sayings
WS  Wiener Studien