

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY • SERIES 1

Epicureanism and
Scientific Debates
*Epicurean Tradition
and its
Ancient Reception*

Volume 2

Edited by
Francesca Masi
Pierre-Marie Morel
Francesco Verde



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EPICUREANISM AND SCIENTIFIC DEBATES:
EPICUREAN TRADITION AND ITS ANCIENT RECEPTION

VOLUME II. EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

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In memory of David Konstan (1940-2024)

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PLUTARCH ON EPICURUS ON WINE

Mauro Bonazzi

Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur

1.

The aim of this paper is an analysis of some testimonies of Epicurus' lost dialogue *Symposium* (Συμπόσιον). A complete and exhaustive overview of this text is impeded by the scarce number of fragments, so much so that scholars disagree on its structure and actual content.¹ The title clearly indicates that it belonged to the literary genre of symposiastic literature. From the surviving evidence we also know that it was a dialogue, which further suggests the idea of a comparison (and confrontation) with Plato and Aristotle. Unlike the latter, however, we also know that Epicurus did not pay much attention to the formal aspects of the style, as it is customary of so many of his works, and he was for this reason reproached by ancient critics such as Athenaeus. Athenaeus also informs us that the main interlocutors were philosophers, all sharing the same basic tenets (προφήτας ἀτόμων, 187b; "flatterers who praise each other", 179d; one of these interlocutors is Polyaeus), thereby showing another difference from his predecessors Plato and Aristotle. Despite Athenaeus' dismissive comments about the random choice of the topics, in the surviving fragments the interlocutors appear to raise issues fitting to a symposiastic context, such as sex and wine (and their interrelation). Some scholars also argued that another topic under discussion was rhetoric, but this view is more controversial. In this paper I will explore the fragments dealing with wine because they raise some interesting issues, not only philosophically but also methodologically. Our major source for them is Plutarch of Chaeronea, a Platonist philosopher, who is well known for

¹ See fragments 57-65 Usener. For a quick but clear overview, see Erler 1994: 92-93, with further bibliography. On the form and style, the three most interesting (and critical) testimonies come from Athenaeus; see Athen. 5.186e ("We will now talk about the Homeric symposia. In these, namely, the poet distinguishes times, persons, and occasions. This feature Xenophon and Plato rightly copied, for at the beginning of their works they explain the occasion of the symposium, and who are present. But Epicurus specifies no place, no time: he has no introduction whatever. One has to guess, therefore, how it comes about that a man with cup in hand suddenly propounds questions as though they were discoursing before a class"); 5.187b ("Epicurus introduced none but the prophets of atoms, although he had before him these as his models, I mean the variety of the symposia in Homer, and the charm of Plato and Xenophon as well"); 5.187c ("Again, Epicurus in his symposium puts questions about indigestion in order to get omens for it; following that he asks about fevers. What need is there even to speak of the lack of proportion which pervades his style?") – all transl. Gulick.

his hostility to Epicurus. By investigating these testimonies, it will be also possible to assess how Plutarch he uses his sources for his polemics.

2.

Plutarch mentions Epicurus' *Symposium* and the discussion on wine in two different passages, from two different treatises (fragments 58-60 Usener).² In both cases, under investigation is his account of the effects of wine on human bodies.

The first reference comes from one of the *Table Talk Questions*:

"Now for wine! I should like to know what made you suspect that it is cold". I replied: "Do you actually think that this is my own theory?" "Whose else?" Florus said. And I answered: "I remember coming on Aristotle's discussion also of this question, not recently but a long enough time ago. And Epicurus in his *Symposium* has discussed the matter at great length. The sum of what he has to say, I think, is this: he holds that wine is not hot in an absolute sense, but has in it certain atoms productive of heat and others of cold; some of these it throws off when it comes into the body and others it attracts out of the body until it adapts itself to us, whatever our constitution and nature may be. Accordingly, some men become thoroughly hot when drinking, others experience the contrary". "This", said Florus, "carries us via Protagoras straight to Pyrrho; for it is clear that we shall go on about oil, about milk and honey, and other things in like manner and shall avoid saying about each what its nature is by defining them in terms of their mixtures and union with each other (ταῦτ', εἶπεν ὁ Φλῶρος, ἀντικρυς εἰς τὸν Πύρρωνα διὰ τοῦ Πρωταγόρου φέρεי ἡμᾶς; δῆλον γὰρ ὅτι καὶ περὶ ἐλαίου καὶ περὶ γαλάκτος μέλιτός τε καὶ ὁμοίως τῶν ἄλλων διεξιόντες ἀποδρασόμεθα τὸ λέγειν περὶ ἐκάστου ὁποῖον τῇ φύσει ἐστίν, μίξεσι ταῖς πρὸς ἄλληλα καὶ κράσειν ἕκαστον γίνεσθαι φάσκοντες; Plut. QC 651e-652a; transl. Hoffleit).

What is remarkable in this testimony is the final reference to Protagoras and, even more, to Pyrrho. With this mention, it appears that Plutarch was reading Epicurus' text from an epistemological perspective, arguing that empiricism leads to scepticism. This is not just an erudite quotation, as it sometimes happens in symposiastic literature, but part of a polemical argument against the limits of Epicurus' philosophy. It is not by accident, therefore, that the same idea returns also in the *Adversus Colotem*, a virulent anti-Epicurean treatise:

Consider the discussion that Epicurus in his *Symposium* presents Polyaeus as holding with him about the heat in wine. When Polyaeus asks, 'Do you deny, Epicurus, the great heating effect of wine?', he replies, 'What need is there to generalize that wine is heating?' A little later he says, 'For it appears that it is not

² In the *Quaestiones conviviales* (653b, 654d) he also quotes and discusses Epicurus' views on sexual intercourse. In this case as well there are references to wine, in a physiological perspective.

a general fact that wine is heating, but a given quantity of wine may be said to be heating for a given person.' Again, after assigning as one cause the crowding and dispersal of atoms, and as another, the mixture and alignment of these with others, when the wine is mingled with the body, he adds in conclusion, 'Therefore one should not generalize that wine is heating, but only say that this amount is heating for this constitution in this condition, or that that amount is chilling for another. For in an aggregate such as wine there are also certain natural substances of such a sort that cold might be formed of them, or such that, when aligned with others, they would produce a real coolness. Hence, deceived by this, some generalize that wine is cooling, others that it is heating.' If then the man who asserts that the majority are deceived in supposing that what heats is heating or what cools is cooling should refuse to recognize 'Everything is no more this than that' as a conclusion from his premises, he is himself deceived. He proceeds to add, 'And often the wine does not even possess the property of heating or cooling as it enters the body. Rather, the bodily mass is so set in motion that the corpuscles shift their position: the heat-producing atoms are at one time concentrated, becoming numerous enough to impart warmth and heat to the body, but at another time are driven out, producing a chill.' (Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1109d-1110d; transl. De Lacy).

As several scholars have shown, the *Adversus Colotem* takes over and develops the same polemical reference we found in the *Quaestiones convivales* as part of a wider argument in favour of the superiority of Platonist philosophy.³ The assumption, implicitly shared by both the Platonist Plutarch and the Epicureans, is that scepticism is not a viable option. Yet the analysis of Epicurus' text, as confirmed by the specific case of the effects of wine, shows that scepticism is precisely the outcome of his empiricist stance. By implying (and this is a second assumption) that what can be said of Epicurus is valid also for any kind of empiricist and materialistic approach, Plutarch's conclusion will be that knowledge must be grounded not in data provided by senses – which are always inconsistent and unstable – but in reason and intellect. And this is Platonism. In short, the general argument of Plutarch's anti-Epicurean polemic in the *Adversus Colotem* is: either empiricism or Platonism; but not empiricism (because of scepticism), therefore Platonism, which turns out to be the solution.

The essential point is therefore the link between empiricism and scepticism. Plutarch's answer seems to rely on the fact that empiricism presupposes the existence of matter only (atoms, in the specific case of Epicurus); a reality made of colliding atoms, though, does not have any stability, nor does it allow for any kind of stable knowledge, because everything is perpetually changing. Given this materialistic approach, we cannot determine any given thing as it really is, but can only state how it appears to us. Since appearances vary from subject to subject and from time to time also in the same object, the materialistic approach inevitably paves

³ See, for instance, Kechagia 2011; Bonazzi 2012.

the way to scepticism, meant to be a kind of philosophy that makes any discourse about reality untenable and, therefore, life impossible. This conclusion is what Epicureanism ultimately amounts to.

That this view is a legitimate description of scepticism is highly debatable. Yet it remains that this is a standard account of scepticism in non-sceptical circles in the early Imperial centuries. An interesting parallel comes, for instance, from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where he discusses the same author discussed by Plutarch, that is, Protagoras:

What he states is this – that matter is in flux, and as it flows additions are made continuously in the place of effluxions, and the senses are transformed and altered according to the times of life and to all the other conditions of the bodies. [...] And men, he says, apprehend different things at different times owing to their differing dispositions [...]. We see, then, that he dogmatizes about the fluidity of matter [...], this being a non evident matter about which we suspend judgment (Sext. Emp. *PH* I 217-218; transl. Bury).

In the background, as it has now been demonstrated by several scholars, we have Plato's *Theaetetus*:⁴

I mean the theory that there is nothing which in itself is just one thing; nothing which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing. If you call a thing large, it will reveal itself as small [...] What is really true, is this: the things of which we naturally say that they 'are', are in process of coming to be, as the results of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say that they 'are', since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be (Plat. *Tht.* 152d-e; transl. Levett).

3.

The relevance of the *Theaetetus* has been recently underlined by Francesco Verde in an interesting paper reconstructing the influence of Plato's dialogue on Epicurus' epistemology.⁵ More precisely, Verde refers to a section in the dialogue where reference is made to wine and its effects:

Now, if I drink wine when I am well it appears to me present and sweet – Yes. – Going by what we earlier agreed, that is so because the active and passive factors moving simultaneously, generate both sweetness and perception; on the passive side, the perception makes the tongue percipient, while on the side of wine, sweetness moving about it makes it both to be and appear sweet to the healthy tongue [...]. Then this

⁴ See the seminal Declava Caizzi 1988.

⁵ Verde 2020: 13-44, *praes.* 21-23.

pair, Socrates, Socrates ill and the draught of wine, generates, presumably, different things again: a perception of bitterness in the region of the tongue, and bitterness coming to be and moving in the regions of the wine. And then wine becomes, not bitterness, but bitter; and I become, not perception, but percipient (Plat. *Tht.* 159b-e; transl. Levett).

This reference, along with the epistemological context, does seem to find a confirmation at the very beginning of the discussion, before the quotation of Epicurus' *Symposium*:

But whatever we think of that, whoever held that nothing is any more of one description than of another is following an Epicurean doctrine, that all impressions reaching us through the senses are true. For if one of two persons says that the wine is dry and the other that it is sweet, and neither errs in his sensation, how is the wine more dry than sweet? (Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1009a-e [= fr. 250 Usener]; transl. Einarson-De Lacy).

Verde's general hypothesis is interesting and can further confirm the importance of the role played by the *Theaetetus* in the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic debates. In the specific case of Plutarch's quotation, however, a close scrutiny of the text seems to suggest that something else is also at stake, and that we must distinguish between Plutarch's use of Epicurus and Epicurus' own words and stance. That Epicurus is primarily dealing with epistemological issues is indeed Plutarch's inference, as part of the above-mentioned argument against empiricism.⁶ The reference to the *Theaetetus*, in other words, comes more from Plutarch's pen than Epicurus'. Epicurus' use of wine in the above-quoted fragment, instead, seems to point in a different direction. Epicurus is indeed dealing with the issue of the wine producing heat, which is not the same as saying it to be or appear hot (or sweet or bitter). An alternative, more reasonable hypothesis is that Epicurus is addressing another important issue, related to his atomist philosophy, yet as an ontological problem more than an epistemological one.

Under investigation, it is the problem of sensory qualities. In this specific case, the (polemical) reference point would be more Democritus than Plato (and the *Theaetetus*). Indeed, the problem of the status of sensory qualities is a major problem for the Epicureans, given their atomist stance and Democritus' influence.⁷ Interestingly, Plutarch's quotation comes precisely from the section devoted to a discussion and defense of Democritus. For a better understanding of Plutarch's polemic, we also need to consider the context of the quotation in the *Adversus Colotem*.

⁶ In this sense, the passage can be used as further evidence of the importance of the *Theaetetus* for early Imperial Platonists; see, for instance, Opsomer 1998: 27-82.

⁷ See, for instance, Sedley 1988; Furley 1993.

4.

As is well known, Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* is a treatise written in response to another treatise by the Epicurean Colotes. Colotes had accused several philosophers of making life impossible with their doctrines. Plutarch's goal is to show that it is indeed Colotes and, therefore, Epicurus who make life impossible with their philosophy. The section where the *Symposium* is quoted is part of a discussion devoted to Democritus, who is the first to be introduced (by both Colotes and Plutarch).⁸ More specifically, Colotes had levelled two charges against Democritus:

1. *Oude mallon*-thesis. The *ouden mallon* makes life impossible: "Colotes first charges him with asserting that no object is any more of one description than of another, thus throwing our life into confusion" (1108f-1009a).
2. *Nomoi*-thesis. In the famous fragment on everything being by *nomos* apart void and atoms he made everything worse, if possible, by attacking the senses: The thesis, propounded by Democritus, that "colour is by convention, all compound by convention, <but in reality the void and> the atoms [are]" goes against the senses and he who abides by, and employs, this argument could not even think of himself that he is a human being or living. (1110e-f)

Interestingly, Plutarch's quote seems to match the second charge better than the first. Yet the quotation occurs in relation to the first charge. Be that as it may, this context seems to suggest that what was at stake was not so much Plato and the epistemological problem of sense-perception as it was about the attempt to detach atomistic philosophy from Democritus' reductionism about sensible qualities.⁹ If the only properties for atoms are shape, form, and size, what about colour, smell, and the other properties? Democritus' thesis risks leading to paradoxical outcomes, which was Colotes' criticism. By tracing back Epicurus' position, as presented in discussion of wine, to the *oude mallon* formula, Plutarch shows that it is instead (or also)¹⁰ Epicurus' problem.

Indeed, a) if one takes the *ouden mallon* formula too strictly, the outcome would be Parmenidean: since they do not even exist, it makes no sense to consider these properties; and b) if one takes the formula less strictly, the problem would be relativism (and by consequence subjectivism and scepticism – that is, Protagoras and Pyrrho – as in the above text from the *Quaestiones convivales*): these properties depend on the encounter with the perceiving subjects. Yet the perceiving subjects

⁸ On this section of the *Adversus Colotem*, see Morel 1996: 336-346; Kechagia 2011: 179-212; Castagnoli 2013.

⁹ On the reasonable assumption that Democritus is an eliminativist, a problem that we cannot discuss here.

¹⁰ On Plutarch and Democritus, see Hershbell 1982: 81-111, *praes.* 82-95.

differ, therefore the same things bring about different experiences, and nothing can be said about the object itself (there is a severe discontinuity among the properties to which we have access and the real object), and our life is thrown into confusion.

To confirm the claim that Epicurus and his followers are faced with the same limits they level against Democritus, Plutarch quotes the *Symposium*.¹¹ Pace Plutarch, however, what Epicurus is doing in the *Symposium* is precisely to find an alternative solution to this problem, by defending the reality of sensible qualities without dismissing atomism. The quotation indeed shows that Epicurus' goal is to explain how properties or effects are produced from quality-less atoms and do in fact exist. In this sense he is opposing both readings of the *ouden mallon* formula. As opposed to a), secondary properties do indeed exist; as opposed to b), most importantly, they are relative but not subjective. Whatever is sensible – be it a compound body or one of its properties – is real and does exist. Just to give an example,¹² we could observe that peanuts are healthy for some and dangerous for others. This quality does not mean that this property is not real, in relation to the person with the allergy. It is a real property, albeit a relational one, of the peanut. It is not subjective, however. In other words, these qualities emerge as a result of the atoms colliding with the sense organs and are real properties of the bodies.¹³ This seems to be Epicurus' point in the discussion about wine's effects: sensible qualities are dispositional qualities that cause certain effects and sensory affections under certain conditions.¹³ In this sense Epicurus can react to Democritus' reductionism, without abandoning atomism.

5.

If this reconstruction is correct and it is Epicurus' position, what about Plutarch's criticism? From a philosophical perspective, it is difficult to give a balanced judgment. On the one hand, as far as the problem of sensible qualities is concerned, one may argue that Plutarch's objection has little force. As a matter of fact, Plutarch's criticism that the relativity of perceptual properties undermines the claim that they are real properties (and thus constitute a typical application of the *oude mallon* formula) does not seem to consider with due attention Epicurus' position. As we

¹¹ I borrow this example from O'Keefe 2010: 37-38, repeating O'Keefe 1997.

¹² An interesting parallel comes from Polystratus, who in his *On irrational contempt* (XXIII 26-XXVI 23 Indelli) also "subsumes observer-dependent attributes under the broader heading 'relative', then shows excellent reasons why the relative, albeit different in status from the *per se*, is not in consequence any less real" (Long – Sedley 1987, I: 37). I thank the anonymous reviewer to this text, which clearly confirms the importance of this problem in the Epicurean circles, not only from an ontological perspective but also from an ethical one.

¹³ See O'Keefe 2010: 38: "this theory would allow Epicurus to admit the phenomena of sensory variability and retain the basic Democritean account of how sensations arise as a result of the interactions of atoms, while still holding that sensible qualities are real properties of bodies".

have seen, his point lies precisely in the attempt to show that a relative property does not automatically imply that it is also subjective or non-existent. So far so good. Yet how is this so? How does Epicurus really account for the reality of sensible qualities, apart from asserting the evident fact that they exist? And what about the epistemological consequences of his doctrine, in addition to the problem of scepticism? Here Plutarch might have a point, as Eleni Kechagia has argued.¹⁴ For it is well known that the thesis that all senses are true, which Plutarch (correctly) linked to the thesis about the reality of sensible qualities, risks ending up in a sceptical outcome.¹⁵ Still, it could also be countered that it is equally well known that Epicurus' epistemology was much more sophisticated and included more than the simple claim about the senses being true. In order to properly address the problem Plutarch should have addressed Epicurus' position in all its complexity, not focusing on the senses merely. Since he did not do it, what we can learn from his polemics is probably more useful to reconstruct his views and assumptions than Epicurus' views – which is the typical problem of ancient (and modern) polemics: they help to understand more the one who is attacking than the doctrine under attack.

After all, it might be remarked that Plutarch is liable of the same charge he levelled against Colotes, that is, of misusing the fragments he quotes (*Adv. Col.* 1108d-e: Colotes detaches certain sayings shorn of their real meaning and rips from their context mutilated fragments of argument). Indeed, it is a recurrent problem of ancient philosophical polemics, whose goal is more to emphasize one own's views than to account for a given problem.¹⁶ On this point at least, Plutarch and Epicurus are much closer than they would have expected to be. In Epicurus' *Symposium* there were only atomist philosophers; likewise, in Plutarch's treatise against Colotes, Epicureans are explicitly rejected at the very beginning of the discussion. In both cases, it is not an ideal context for a fruitful discussion.

¹⁴ Kechagia 2011: 200-201.

¹⁵ For a typically Academic move, see for instance *Cic. Ac.* 2.79.

¹⁶ De Lacy 1964: 77: "ironically, Plutarch in his reply is at times guilty of the same faults he complains of in Colotes: he does not give careful consideration to the Epicurean explanation of their views but rather draws his own inferences from them and on the basis of these inferences undertakes to demolish the school."

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