

Was Atticus an Epicurean?

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Book 5 of *De Finibus* opens with a vivid scene of Cicero and his friends during their student days in Athens in 79.¹ Memory plays an important role in the dialogue:² during a leisurely stroll each interlocutor is drawn to monuments and memories relevant to their own philosophical or literary interests. Cicero, the Academic skeptic, is drawn to the Academy and imagines the great Carneades lecturing and refuting arguments; his brother Quintus, an amateur tragic poet, claims he can almost see and hear Oedipus speaking lines from Sophocles' plays. Their mutual friend T. Pomponius Atticus, however, thinks of Epicurus and his Garden, while offering a mild complaint about Cicero's teasing (*Fin.* 5.3):

As for me, you are accustomed to harass me as being devoted to Epicurus (*at ego, quem vos ut deditum Epicuro insectari soletis*), and I do indeed spend a good amount of time with Phaedrus, whom you know I cherish singularly (*unice diligo*), in Epicurus' Garden, which we just now passed by... even if I wanted to, I am not permitted to forget Epicurus, whose likeness my friends have not only in paintings, but even on their cups and rings.

Marcus³ adds "our Pomponius seems to be joking" (*iocari videtur*). Why is Atticus joking? And

¹ All dates are BCE. I follow Shackleton Bailey's translations of the letters, slightly modified; other translations are my own. My thanks to Katharina Volk for comments.

² Emphasized by a reference to the *ars memorativa* (*Fin.* 5.1.2; cf. 2.32, where its inventor Simonides is named); memory/remembering also resonate with the book's assessment of Antiochus' historical appeals to the Old Academy. The treatise more generally uses memory to critique Caesar, under whose dictatorship *De Finibus* was written: the two other dialogues of the work pointedly depict Cicero debating amiably with two stalwart Republicans who had recently died resisting Caesar (Torquatus and Cato).

³ Hereafter, for the sake of clarity "Marcus" refers to the character of Cicero in a dialogue; "Cicero" to the author and statesman, who may or may not concur with the opinions of "Marcus."

what about those rings? More generally, how seriously should we read Atticus' Epicurean interests?

There is no reason to believe that this conversation happened, but the rings did exist. A few have even survived,⁴ while Pliny the Elder mentions that some Epicureans even had portraits of the Master in their bedrooms (*NH* 35.2.5). And Epicurean philosophers and adherents did speak as though allegiance to the master meant something life-changing. Take, for example, Philodemus of Gadara's injunction (*On Frankness of Speech* fr. 45.8-11 Olivieri; cf. Konstan et al. 1998) that "the basic and most important principle is that we will obey Epicurus, according to whom we have chosen to live" (πειθαρχήσομεν Ἐπικούρῳ, καθ' ὃν ζῆν ἡγορήμεθα); the tyrannicide Cassius' citation of Epicurus in Greek to justify his conduct (*Fam.* 15.19, citing Epicurus, *K.D.* 5); the celebration of Epicurus' birthdays;⁵ or the suggestive funerary inscription of a Syrian freedman "from the joy-filled Epicurean chorus" (*ex Epicureio gaudivigente choro*).⁶ A Greek philosopher in Naples, a Roman senator, a Syrian freedman—and Atticus, a knight: the diversity of these Republican Epicureans is striking.⁷

This paper considers what such a commitment might have meant to an educated Roman. What did it mean for a Roman to wear a ring of Epicurus, celebrate his birthday, present oneself as an Epicurean on a tombstone, or "obey Epicurus"? More generally, did a commitment to the school affect the way a Roman approached politics? Or should we instead, as it is sometimes suggested, dismiss philosophy as an intellectual pastime segregated from real life or as the

⁴ Images in Richter 1965, fig. 1221-2 with p. 199; cf. Frischer 1982: 87 n.1 and Zanker 1995: 206.

⁵ See Philodemus' dinner invitation to L. Calpurnius Piso (epigram 27 in Sider 1997); for Epicurus' birthday, see Sider 1997: 152-3. Relevant here is Lucretius' exultation of Epicurus as a god (5.8).

⁶ *ILS* 7781 = *CIL* X.2971, funerary epigram of C. Stallius Hauranus, Naples, 1st century (see Rigsby 2008).

⁷ I do not suggest that Epicurus' diverse following was a particularly *Roman* phenomenon, only that his popularity in Rome is worth investigating. There is evidence for the school's popularity well beyond Athens: Syria was a hotspot, boasting Philodemus, Hauranus, and others. Further references in Crönert 1907.

cynical manipulation of Hellenic cultural capital for political or networking purposes?⁸

This chapter claims that Atticus offers a fruitful case study of Epicureanism in the Late Republic and can thereby contribute to broader questions of philosophical allegiance in the ancient world.⁹ There has, of course, been valuable discussion of philosophical allegiance in recent years. Some scholars have approached the question from a philosophical perspective and have examined normative statements of Greek philosophers on what philosophy should mean to an adherent;¹⁰ others focus on the relationship between philosophical ideals and political praxis.¹¹ There has also been a more focused discussion which has long struggled to come to terms with the surprising fact that the Late Republic saw several senators engage in politics while simultaneously claiming allegiance to a hedonistic school that has traditionally been read as hostile to political activity.¹²

A reconsideration of Atticus' Epicureanism will fruitfully extend these debates precisely because he is not a perfect fit for any of these categories. He was not a professional philosopher; in any case it is dangerous to assume that the thunderings of Lucretius or Philodemus on the Epicurean wise man map reliably onto the complexities of life. As for philosophical politics, Atticus' political activity was at best indirect and informal, and scholars trying to understand the socially-engaged Epicureanism of a Cassius or a Piso assume a problematic very different from Atticus' leisured equestrian lifestyle. Indeed, this latter strand of scholarship, which has discussed Atticus mostly fully, tends to dismiss his Epicurean interests as

⁸ I cite specific charges below. These interpretations accord with general appraisals of Republican uses of Greek culture: e.g. Gruen 1992 or White 2010: 104-15, esp. 114-15.

⁹ A secondary goal of this paper is to draw attention to Cicero's ongoing "teasing" of Atticus for his Epicurean beliefs, a charming and underappreciated subtext which spans decades of Cicero's writings.

¹⁰ Sedley 1989 and Hadot 1995.

¹¹ Griffin 1986 and 1989 (cf. 1995), Brunt 1975 and 1989, Trapp 2007: 226-57.

¹² Castner 1988 and Benferhat 2005. The problem stems from notorious Epicurean slogans ("avoid politics" or "live unknown," fr. 8 and 551 Us., respectively). This "problem" is more apparent than real: see Roskam 2007 and Roskam 2011.

those of an intellectual dilettante, an unconsidered eclectic,¹³ or it labels him, without much elaboration, as an exemplar of “Roman Epicureanism.” There are good reasons, then, to reexamine the rich but elusive evidence for Atticus’ Epicureanism.

Our evidence is indeed tantalizing: Atticus is present and absent. Present because we have a great deal of testimony about him from his contemporaries.¹⁴ Cornelius Nepos, for example, was his friend and biographer, and Atticus appears in Ciceronian dialogues. Pride of place, however, goes to the 16 books of the *Ad Atticum*. On a sometimes daily basis, these letters hint at Atticus’ intellectual interests and political advice; in a few passages, Cicero quotes Atticus’ *ipsissima verba*. On the other hand, Atticus is absent, for characterization in an ancient biography or dialogue is never beyond suspicion. Nor does our collection of letters preserve any from Atticus himself. Even if it did, their use as evidence would still demand scrutiny, since ancient letters are not neutral packages of fact untainted by political and rhetorical objectives.¹⁵ Indeed, I will underline how previous readings of Atticus’ Epicureanism have run into problems precisely because the letters do not permit straightforward readings.

Because space is limited, this study will focus on key passages in Cicero’s letters and dialogues in order to gauge in what sense he considered Atticus to be an Epicurean. This focus has two consequences: first, it will not provide a biographical reading of Atticus’ life in light of Epicurean doctrine in order to judge the seriousness of his commitment; it seems appropriate to analyze Atticus’ life in Epicurean terms only *after* his allegiance has been secured by less subjective criteria.¹⁶ Instead, I contend that an assessment of Cicero’s well-documented, cross-

¹³ Eclecticism is not necessarily a bad thing, but scholars have tended to use the label to dismiss the seriousness of Atticus’ Epicureanism. Donini 1996 (cf. Hatzimichali 2011: 9-24) provides a valuable history of scholarly use of the term “eclectic.”

¹⁴ On Atticus’ life and activities see Perlwitz 1992, Welch 1995, and Benferhat 2005: 98-169.

¹⁵ Work on Cicero’s letters has multiplied in recent years: White 2010 offers a good starting point; on philosophical matters, see Griffin 1995, McConnell 2014, and Gilbert 2015.

¹⁶ I offer a few suggestions in this direction in my conclusion; see further Volk (forthcoming).

generic estimation of Atticus' Epicurean beliefs provides a firmer foundation for analysis, and I argue further that Cicero was not likely to be mistaken about these convictions. The second consequence of this focus is that my engagement with Nepos' *Life of Atticus* will largely be limited to chronology or basic information about its subject's life. This is primarily because Nepos is vague on philosophical matters, including Epicureanism,¹⁷ but also because there is so much more varied Ciceronian evidence.

I. Was Atticus an Epicurean?

Atticus' Epicurean credentials have often been questioned or outright denigrated. For over a century the overwhelming consensus has been that Atticus' philosophical convictions were superficial, insincere, or amounted to a muddled blend of various schools. Boissier's judgment of 1897 is still indicative of the conclusions of more recent treatments, as well as of the confidence with which later verdicts are expressed (Boissier 1897: 131):

[Atticus] studied all of the schools for the pleasure that this study gave to his inquisitive mind, but he was determined not to be a slave to their systems. He had found a principle in Epicurean[ism]... that suited him, and seized it in order to justify his political conduct. As to Epicurus himself and his doctrine, he cared very little about them, and was ready to abandon them on the first pretext.

Some 90 years later, Rawson offers a similar verdict with equal confidence (1985: 101): "It is

¹⁷ Nepos, who himself disliked philosophers (fr. 5 Windstedt) says (17) that Atticus "so firmly held the precepts (*praecepta*) of the chief philosophers that he used them for leading his life, not for ostentatious display (*ad vitam agendam, non ad ostentationem*).” Compare the similar vagueness about L. Saufeius, who was definitely an Epicurean (12): “[Saufeius] lived in Athens for many years, drawn by a zeal for philosophy (*studio ductus philosophiae*).” Nepos also omits Atticus' cozying up to Caesarians during the civil war (Welch 1995: 470) and his financial dealings—matters which might be viewed as sordid. The *Life* therefore offers an idealized biography, and work on Atticus' Epicureanism that bases itself on Nepos' testimony yields non-committal conclusions (e.g. Lindsay 1998; Shearin 2012 explores Nepos' vagueness). For the *Life*, see Horsfall 1989, Millar 1988, Titchener 2003, and Stem 2012.

clear that [Atticus] was not a serious Epicurean... His adhesion to the School was probably little more than a warrant for the cult of private life, simplicity and friendship..." For others, Atticus emerges as an intellectual dilettante whose knowledge of Epicurus, much less commitment, was superficial and irrelevant. So Shackleton Bailey (1965-70: i.8 n.5): "[Atticus] may be supposed to have professed [Epicureanism] partly to be in the fashion and partly because as a devotee of things Hellenic he had to have a philosophy..." Brunt (1989: 197) includes Atticus among Romans who were "light half-believers of their casual creeds," while Castner (1988: 60) concludes that philosophy amounted to "a cultural mode of expression rather than a philosophical conviction or a guide to action." Perwiltz has developed these ideas and concludes that, even if we concede that Atticus was an Epicurean, his allegiance would nevertheless be *überflüssig*, "superfluous": Roman traditions are sufficient to explain his actions, leaving no need to consider philosophy at all (1992: 90-97). Recent treatments have become suspicious of such blanket condemnations, although doubts continue to linger. Benferhat believes Atticus was in fact an Epicurean, but that he (in a characteristically "Roman" way) avoided dogmatic allegiance;¹⁸ Griffin also harbors doubt.¹⁹

This review of scholarship underlines powerfully that dismissive readings of Atticus' Epicureanism have become commonplace. These conclusions are advanced with confidence and find their way into commentaries and footnotes without discussion. Even when not described as a pseudo-intellectual, the orthodoxy of his Epicurean convictions is questioned. The occasional study that does treat Atticus' Epicureanism seriously typically views this allegiance as

¹⁸ Benferhat 2005: 107 ("*En tout cas, il nous faut admettre que les Romains cultivés de cette époque manifestaient un certain éclectisme, ou plutôt, dans le cas d'Atticus, un refus manifeste d'esprit de chapelle.*")—an elaboration of the conclusions of Leslie 1950.

¹⁹ 1989: 17 n.28 ("I do not think we have grounds for saying that Atticus was not a serious Epicurean, only that he was less serious in manner than many members of the sect.").

straightforward and self-evident—not as a difficult concept requiring interrogation.²⁰

This study will challenge this dismissive consensus by examining a selection of “problem texts” that supposedly indicate superficial allegiance. I argue that these passages are allusive and complex, that they do not justify the negative conclusions drawn from them and that other readings are available that question neither Atticus’ Epicureanism nor his intelligence. Taking as a keystone for my interpretation the comment in *De Finibus* cited above, namely, that Cicero liked to harass his friend, I suggest that the playful and charming depictions of Atticus have been read all too literally, with the result that his Epicurean beliefs and Cicero’s ironic engagement with them have been obscured.

II. Problem passages and Cicero’s “conversion tactics”

We begin with a letter written in 50, which breezes through a variety of topics: from the health of Atticus and Tiro to Cicero’s travel plans and hopes for a triumph. After mentioning their mutual nephew Quintus, Cicero pivots from family to philosophy (*Ad Atticum* 7.2):

filiola tua te delectari laetor et probari tibi φυσικὴν esse τὴν <στοργὴν τὴν> πρὸς τὰ τέκνα. etenim si haec non est, nulla potest homini esse ad hominem naturae adiunctio; qua sublata vitae societas tollitur. 'bene eveniat!' inquit Carneades spurce sed tamen prudentius quam Lucius noster et Patron qui, cum omnia ad se referant, <nec> quicquam alterius causa fieri putent et cum ea re bonum virum oportere esse dicant ne malum habeat non quo<d> id natura rectum sit, non intellegunt se de callido homine loqui, non de bono viro.

²⁰ E.g. Welch 1995: 451. Several recent scholars are working to rescue Roman Epicureans from dismissive readings (e.g. Armstrong 2011), but Atticus has not yet received his due.

I am happy that your little daughter brings you delight and that you accept that there is a natural bond of affection towards our children. For if this does not exist, there can be no natural association of man to man; and if this is removed, then all society is abolished.

“Let’s hope for the best!” says Carneades—fouly—but nevertheless more prudently than our friends Lucius [Saufeius] and Patro, who do not understand that they are speaking of a clever man, not a good man, since they refer all things to themselves, do not think that anything should be done for the sake of another, and say that it is fitting to be a good man only in order to avoid trouble—not because it is right by nature.

Atticus apparently commented that he adored his daughter, and Cicero used this remark to embark on philosophical sermon on the necessity of a natural social impulse for a functional society—he alludes here to a Stoic/Peripatetic doctrine, “social *oikeiōsis*,” which grounds ethical obligations to other people in our natural sociability.²¹ Linked with this claim is an attack on self-interested Epicurean hedonism, which notoriously denied to humanity any natural sociability.²² The references to *noster Lucius* and Patro solidify the anti-Epicurean theme. Patro was the head of the Epicurean Garden after Phaedrus, an old friend and teacher of both Cicero and Atticus (cf. *Fin.* 5.3); other letters allow us to identify ‘Lucius’ as Lucius Saufeius, a mutual equestrian friend who had studied with Phaedrus and mingled with Epicureans in Athens for several decades.²³

Several commentators have seen here evidence for a superficial commitment or

²¹ See Donini and Inwood 1999: 677-82; in greater detail, Bees 2004.

²² This denial is pilloried by critics like e.g. Epictetus (*Discourses* 2.20.6—the verbal parallels are very close to *Att.* 7.2) and Plutarch (*De Amore Proles* 495A).

²³ That “Lucius” refers to Lucius Saufeius is certain: the previous letter mentions Cicero giving a letter to Saufeius to deliver to Atticus while the two men were in Athens. For this identification and Saufeius more generally, see Gilbert 2019: 27-31.

ignorance of Epicurean philosophy. Since the school rejected any natural affection for our offspring—or for that matter anyone else—Atticus should not have conceded this point. That he does so is, in the words of Shackleton Bailey, “one of the indications that the philosophy of Epicurus was not his lodestar.”²⁴ This is a very literal reading. There is no reason to think that Atticus, in confessing his love for his daughter, was refuting Epicurean doctrine. It is far more likely that Cicero seized on an innocent comment as an opportunity to deliver a clever philosophical provocation. There are other examples of this practice from his correspondence with philosophically literate friends. When L. Papirius Paetus, a Neapolitan Epicurean, used the word “*mentula*,” a coarse word for penis, Cicero latched onto it and delivered a philosophical sermon on frankness of speech.²⁵ In another letter, Cicero tells Cassius that the latter seemed to be present with Cicero as he was writing to him: this mundane pleasantries sets the stage for a sharp critique of Epicurean *eidōla* (thin films of atoms emitted from objects) and their causal role in thought and imagination.²⁶ Cicero does something similar in *Att.* 7.2: he twists for humorous purposes what was probably an offhand comment. There is no justification for the conclusion that Atticus asserted the existence of natural sociability, nor that he was an eclectic or uninformed Epicurean. This passage tells us more about Cicero, his philosophical likes and dislikes, and his epistolary technique, than it does about Atticus.

That said, this letter can help us in another way, since the correspondence reveals that Cicero assumes significant philosophical knowledge from his friend. That is to say: most letters do not namedrop Carneades, switch to Greek, or find parallels in Plutarch or Epictetus. Cicero tailored the content of his letters to the knowledge and interests of individual readers. This

²⁴ 1965-70: iii. 286; cf. Benferhat 2005: 106 n.74.

²⁵ *Fam.* 9.22 (see McConnell 2014: 161-94).

²⁶ *Fam.* 15.16 (see Gilbert 2015: 189-215).

passage, therefore, challenges any view that Atticus had a limited understanding of philosophical matters. He is expected to get a high-level joke, and we have no reason to doubt that he did. Finally, if we take seriously the claim at *Fin.* 5.3 that Cicero liked to harass his friend, this letter reads as a playful attempt to pounce on Atticus' loose language in order to trap him into confessing that his school is indefensible and that Cicero is, in fact, correct.

Next is a roughly contemporaneous passage from the unpublished *De Legibus* (probably written in the late 50s), which may seem to support a reading that Atticus was willing to betray the principles of Epicurus at the drop of a hat. In Book 1, Quintus and Atticus suggest that Marcus compose a book of *Laws*, as Plato did after his *Republic*. Marcus agrees, but he will not talk about mundanities of civil law. Instead, he explains the origin of law by providing a Stoic-inspired theory of natural justice. But first he asks Atticus to concede (*dasne igitur hoc nobis*) the existence of divine providence. Atticus agrees (*Leg.* 1.21-22):

Atticus: Do sane, si postulas; etenim propter hunc concentum avium strepitumque fluminum non vereor condiscipulorum ne quis exaudiat.

Marcus: Atqui cavendum est; solent enim... admodum irasci, nec uero ferent, si audierint, te primum caput viri optimi prodidisse, in quo scripsit nihil curare deum nec sui nec alieni.

Atticus: Perge, quaeso. nam id quod tibi concessi quorsus pertineat exspecto.

Atticus: I certainly grant this point, if you demand it; for due to the singing of the birds and the din of the streams, I am not afraid that one of my fellow schoolmates will overhear.

Marcus: But be careful: for they tend to get quite angry... and they will not take it lightly

if they hear that you've betrayed the first section of the book in which that excellent man has written, "God troubles himself not at all, concerning neither his own affairs nor of others."

Atticus: Continue, please, for I am eager to see what my concession will lead to.

The terminology of *condiscipuli*, "schoolmates," supports Atticus' connection with the Garden. That said, the concession looks like a blunder, for a dedicated adherent should have denied providence: Epicurean gods take no part in human affairs.

Once again, this text does not allow for a straightforward reading. Consider that Quintus, another interlocutor, is expected to accept this assumption about the gods (*nam Quinti novi sententiam*), and Cicero has his brother defend Stoicism's account of divine action in Book 1 of his *On Divination*. It would in fact not be surprising for a Roman to express such a conviction, unless, of course, that Roman were an Epicurean, who would deny divine interference in mortal matters—as Marcus has foreseen with his Latin translation of *Principle Doctrines* 1. This objection would mean that the discussion of natural law had to start with a battle over the nature of the gods—in other words, the whole project of *De Legibus* would become utterly sidetracked before it even began. Therefore, Cicero needs to signal to his readers (something he does quite explicitly²⁷) that he is making a key assumption and will bracket the Epicurean objection. He does so by enacting this bracketing in the structure of the narrative: Marcus asks his friend to suspend his Epicurean complaint for the sake of argument, and Atticus politely agrees. Like *De Finibus* 5 a decade later, this dialogue reenacts debates reminiscent of their student days in Athens.

The broader structure of Book 1 of *On Laws* supports this reading. Marcus makes a

²⁷ He qualifies his request with "if you do not assent to this, we must begin our case from this point."

similar move when he anticipates the dangers of Academic skepticism for his topic: “Let us implore the Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades to be silent, since it contributes nothing but confusion to all these problems....” (*Leg.* 1.39). Cicero throughout his works declares that he is an Academic skeptic, a school that questioned the possibility of certain knowledge and was therefore adept at attacking providence (years later Cicero would use these arguments in *On Divination* 2 and *De Natura Deorum* 3). Commentators used to claim, in part on the basis of this passage, that Cicero lapsed in the 50s from skepticism to Stoicism or the school of Antiochus of Ascalon.²⁸ Görler demolished this reading in an important article by collecting evidence for the practice of the ancient philosophical and rhetorical schools and showing that the use of hypotheses/concessions here is fully in line with this practice.²⁹ Görler’s analysis clarifies Atticus’ concession: he is playing the game of philosophical debate and concedes a point so he can hear the discussion that he requested—or rather, that Cicero the author wanted to write about.

The structural parallel of these two concessions is telling. In order to offer a treatment of natural law, Cicero needs to sideline certain Epicurean and Academic objections and does so by making Marcus and Atticus concede points to which their respective schools would object. The concessions mirror each other, and, unless we go back to doubting Cicero’s Academic allegiance (something nobody really does anymore), this passage supports the claim that Cicero considered Atticus to be a serious Epicurean.³⁰ Nor does this passage provide evidence for superficial or confused eclecticism. Finally, we once again see Cicero gleefully putting very un-Epicurean

²⁸ E.g. Glucker 1988.

²⁹ Görler 1995.

³⁰ Cicero characterized his interlocutors carefully: the first edition of the *Academica* was abandoned because Lucullus’ technical discussions were “παρὰ τὸ πρέπον” (*Att.* 13.16.1: see Griffin 1997); cf. his justification for the departure of Scaevola in *De Oratore* (*Att.* 4.16.3) and the careful characterizations of Antonius and Crassus, right down to their prose rhythm (von Albrecht 2003: 92-94). Dialogues set in the distant past like *De Republica* of course allowed Cicero more play.

ideas into the mouth of his friend; there are touches of irony and playfulness when “Atticus” hopes the din of the streams will prevent his *condiscipuli* from hearing “his” concession.

The next problem text arises in a celebrated letter to C. Memmius, which is given a prominent position at the beginning of *Ad Familiares* 13 as an example of how to ask a favor politely. Other letters provide context:³¹ Memmius, the exiled politician and dedicatee of Lucretius, either owned or had control of Epicurus’ house. He had apparently planned something drastic, but what exactly he proposed to do to the house—demolish it, renovate it, or something else—is unclear. What is clear is that these plans horrified Patro, now head of the Athenian Garden. Patro pressed Atticus and Cicero to write to Memmius, leading to 13.1.

The letter begins by noting that Patro had entreated Cicero earlier in Rome. He ignored the request because he did not wish to interfere with Memmius. When Patro repeated his plea and after Memmius had dropped his building plans, Cicero felt comfortable interceding. He summarizes Patro’s request, citing the latter’s *officium*, reverence for the *auctoritatem Epicuri*, the memory of Phaedrus, and the importance of preserving the “tracks of great men” (*vestigia summorum virorum*). But thereafter Cicero distances himself from Patro: he disagrees with Epicureanism, his support stemmed from fondness for Phaedrus, and he concedes that Patro acted boorishly. Atticus clinches Cicero’s request: stressing his friend’s close ties to Epicureans, above all to Phaedrus, Cicero underlines Atticus’ insistence on the matter. A later letter suggests Atticus was grateful for this intercession—there Atticus is, as in *De Legibus*, called a *condiscipulus* of the Garden.³²

We see, therefore, Atticus working to help two successive Greek heads of the Athenian

³¹ *Att.* 5.11.6 and 5.19.3: see Griffin 1989: 16-18, 1995: 333 n.36, and Benferhat 2005: 74-78.

³² *Att.* 5.19.3: “Concerning Patro and your fellow students (*tuis condiscipulis*), I am happy to hear you are pleased with the trouble I took...”

Garden in a dispute with the dedicatee of Lucretius over the house of Epicurus. Atticus' efforts here and his connections with such a range of Roman and Greek Epicureans over two decades suggests a strong affinity for Epicureanism. This letter has, nevertheless, prompted dismissive readings. The sticking point is the distancing of Atticus from Patro and other Epicureans:

is—non quo sit ex istis; est enim omni liberali doctrina politissimus, sed valde diligit Patronem, valde Phaedrum amavit—sic a me hoc contendit, homo minime ambitiosus, minime in rogando molestus, ut nihil umquam magis...

Now [Atticus]—not because he is one of *those* people, for he's very polished in every branch of refined culture—has great regard for Patro and had great love for Phaedrus—this Atticus, a man not at all self-seeking or troublesome in his requests, pressed me on this point like he never has before.

Cicero alludes to Epicurus' notorious advice to “set sail from all *paideia*” as well as to his charges elsewhere that Epicureans were bad stylists or myopically fixed on their school's literature.³³ On this reading, Atticus' culture and distance from Patro reveal insincere convictions.³⁴

A comparison of the language in this letter and Cicero's characterizations of Epicureans elsewhere dissolves this problem. In *De Finibus* 1.13, the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus is described as “a man skilled in every branch of learning” (*homine omni doctrina erudito*): compare the “*omni liberali doctrina politissimus*” of *Fam.* 13.1. At *De Natura Deorum* 1.58, the Epicurean Velleius is complimented as “more ornate in his language than [Epicureans] tend to be” (*ornatius quam solent vestri*); Zeno of Sidon, Phaedrus' predecessor as scholarch, is praised

³³ Epicurus, fr. 163 Us.; for charges of sectarianism and poor style, see Cicero, *TD* 1.6, 2.7.

³⁴ E.g. Shackleton Bailey 1980: 163; cf. Castner 1988: 59.

for his wide learning and style (*N.D.* 1.59; cf. *T.D.* 3.38). Even more strikingly, Philodemus is complimented in *In Pisonem*.³⁵ While Piso is savaged for crude, debauched Epicureanism, the Greek is characterized much in the same way as Atticus, Torquatus, and Velleius: “I am speaking of a man who is exceedingly polished not just in philosophy, but also in other studies as well (*ceteris studiis... perpolitus*), something which they say that the rest of the Epicureans commonly neglect” (*Pis.* 70). In each case Cicero politely compliments his friends and distances them from negative stereotypes about crude Epicurean sectarians. If we want to deny that Atticus was an Epicurean on the basis of this letter, then we must do the same for these other Romans and even prominent Greek philosophers like Zeno and Philodemus. That seems a bit much. Cicero treats Atticus as he does his other Epicurean friends: he courteously exempts them from his contemptuous attacks on the learning and polish of other devotees of the Garden. This passage provides no evidence for a dismissal of Atticus’ Epicurean credentials; on the contrary, it offers evidence of substantial involvement in the affairs of his life-long Epicurean friends, teachers, and even the house of Epicurus.³⁶

There is one last problem text, from a letter written in late May of 44 (*Att.* 15.4.2; cf. 15.2.4). Caesar had been dead for two months, Marcus Antonius was pressing his influence. In an effort at jocularly, Cicero writes, “and so it is foolish now to console ourselves with the Ides of March.... Let us then go back, as you often say, to the *Tusculan Disputations*. Let us keep Saufeius in the dark about you; I will never give you away!” (*itaque stulta iam Iduum Martiarum est consolatio.... redeamus igitur, quod saepe usurpas, ad Tusculanas disputationes. Saufeium*

³⁵ On Piso and Philodemus see Nisbet 1961: 183-8 and Sider 1997: 5-11.

³⁶ The distancing from Patro is also rhetorically motivated: by appealing directly and repeatedly to Cicero, a *Greek* went over the head of the influential—if exiled—Roman Memmius (see *Att.* 5.11.6 for Memmius’ annoyance with Patro). This carefully composed letter refocuses the issue as Cicero’s desire to oblige Atticus. The effect is to transform the request into a favor between gentlemanly Romans, which pays proper respect to Memmius—unlike the obstinate, presumptuous plea of a *loquax graeculus*. That Atticus is distanced from Patro is therefore not surprising.

de te celemus; ego numquam indicabo.). We meet again L. Saufeius, schoolmate of both correspondents and friend of two Epicurean scholars. As before, Saufeius serves as a shorthand for Epicureanism (Castner 1988: 66). The implication is that this indefatigable Epicurean diehard would not approve of Atticus' appreciation for the *Tusculan Disputations*. The supposed problem is the dialogue's content, an extended discussion of emotions and cognitive therapy indebted to Stoic ideas, in which Epicurus suffers heated criticism especially in Book 3. Atticus, then, must have been some sort of eclectic interested in Stoicism, or, according to Castner (1988: 60-1), broke away from a youthful enthusiasm for the Garden.

It is impossible to determine exactly why Atticus enjoyed the *Tusculan Disputations*, but there are several plausible explanations. For example, Atticus could have simply appreciated them as literature. That is to say, given his literary interests, he could have valued Cicero's claims that Latin was no worse than Greek and may have enjoyed the abundant literary and philosophical translations. If so, we have seen that wide reading and style is no strike against a serious commitment to Epicureanism. Second, Cicero drew on a wide range of consolatory traditions—e.g. the treatment of death in Book 1, which included material to which an Epicurean might not object. Alternatively, Atticus may have simply have been complimenting his friend's newest treatise. If so, Cicero has yet again seized on a passing comment to claim that he had *at last* convinced Atticus of the error of his Epicurean ways (and out of courtesy he would not tattle on Atticus to Saufeius). On this reading Cicero has enacted an imaginary philosophical victory when the chances of a political victory looked increasingly uncertain. These interpretations are speculative but no less plausible than dismissive readings, and this line of argument holds for other problem texts, which, I hope, no longer require discussion. To take just one example, Atticus had a bust of Aristotle in a villa and was a fan of the Peripatetic Dicaearchus—evidence,

we are told, of an impure, eclectic Epicureanism.³⁷ It should be clear by now that neither literary taste nor Aristotle's bust justifies the abuse Atticus has taken.

To sum up, Cicero repeatedly links Atticus with Epicureanism in his letters and dialogues. Scholarship favors literal readings of allusive and playful passages. In contrast, I have argued these passages do not offer evidence for a muddled eclecticism or a superficial commitment to, much less ignorance of, the Garden. Furthermore, I have offered readings which make better contextual sense of these complex passages. It turns out that, as is often the case, Cicero is really talking more about himself, but he does so in a way that does not make sense if he did not think Atticus was an Epicurean. Cicero could be wrong, but in light of the consistency of Atticus' treatment across genres and decades, their shared philosophical education in Athens, and Cicero's intimate relationship with him, we have good reason to take Cicero's testimony as correct, whereas doubt would be overly skeptical. Finally, I have suggested that Cicero delights, privately and in published works, in "harassing" his friend, depicting him to say very un-Epicurean things and presenting him as finally giving into Cicero's arguments.

III. Does it matter?

Cicero thought Atticus was an Epicurean, and, barring evidence to the contrary, we should believe him. But what does it mean to be a "serious" Epicurean? I now tackle one aspect of this slippery question by analyzing the role Epicureanism played in Atticus' political advice to Cicero, in order to see how philosophy interacted with politics. This begins with two letters in

³⁷ *Att.* 4.10.1 (Aristotle); 2.16.3 and 13.32.2 (Dicaearchus)—for Benferhat 2005: 107-8 such passages are examples of non-dogmatic Epicureanism. The most troubling passage is 2.16.3, where Cicero says that Atticus' "friend" Dicaearchus argued for the *politikos bios*, Cicero's Theophrastus for contemplation. This contrast is hard to take seriously: Cicero consistently extolls an active political life and questions the value of indulgence in scientific inquiry (e.g. *Off.* 1.19, 1.54-8; cf. *De Or.* 2.156 and *Acad. Pr.* 6)—perhaps Cicero ironically swaps their personal predilections in this letter. For Cicero and Dicaearchus, see McConnell 2014: 115-160.

which Atticus seems to have made explicit mention of the Epicurean dictum “stay out of politics” (μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι). Both letters were written in 44, shortly after the death of Caesar, and the correspondents were deeply worried about the increasing power of the consul Antonius. At the time of the first letter (early May), Antonius was making a power play: he had been assigned Macedonia as his province but was preparing to force through legislation to swap this for the two Gauls, along with an extended term and several legions. This was of course eerily similar to Caesar’s recent actions in Gaul, so Atticus and Cicero were deliberating their courses of action.

In the first letter (*Att.* 14.20) Cicero replies to three letters of Atticus and addresses various issues his friend had raised. Sandwiched between a discussion of their nephew Quintus and efforts to win the support of the consul designates Hirtius and Pansa, Cicero indignantly writes, “you make mention of Epicurus and *dare* to tell me to ‘stay out of politics’? Isn’t Brutus’ look enough to frighten you away from *that* kind of talk?” (*Epicuri mentionem facis et audes dicere μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι? non te Bruti nostri vulticulus ab ista oratione deterret?*). Atticus provided advice which explicitly appealed to Epicurus, but skeptics have argued that μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι is a “cultural mode of expression” (Castner 1988: 60), a trendy line quoted for effect; or alternatively, that philosophy is superfluous, since Atticus would have advised the same thing anyway. Before adjudicating this question, let us turn to the second letter, which has not received the attention it deserves.

Att. 16.7 is dated August 19th, by which point Antonius had forced through the provincial swap, Brutus and Cassius were losing ground, and hope for a peaceful solution seemed unlikely. Cicero decided in June to take a trip to Athens, ostensibly to check on his son’s studies. Elsewhere, however, Cicero speaks of a massacre, and says that he is departing “not to escape

but in the hope of a better death (*mortis melioris*)” (*Att.* 15.20.2). Over the next two months, Cicero hesitated and delayed, and one recalls his troubled mind in 49.³⁸ After he finally departed, however, Piso spoke out in the senate against Antonius. Cicero’s absence was sorely criticized, his presence required. He returned to Rome and began his final political struggle, which resulted in his *Philippics*, proscription, and dismemberment. His return demanded that he justify his departure and sudden change of mind; Atticus anticipated these criticisms and urged Cicero to reconsider. Luckily for us, Cicero was sufficiently annoyed to quote Atticus’ words (indicated by *scripsisti his verbis... deinceps igitur haec*, etc.), highlighted in bold:

illud admirari satis non potui quod scripsisti his verbis: “**bene igitur tu qui**
εὐθανασίαν, bene, relinque patriam.” an ego relinquebam aut tibi tum relinquere
videbar? tu id non modo non prohibebas verum etiam adprobabas. graviora quae restant:
“**velim σχόλιον aliquod elimes ad me oportuisse te istuc facere.**” itane, mi Attice?
defensione eget meum factum, praesertim apud te qui id mirabiliter adprobasti? ego vero
istum ἀπολογισμὸν συντάξομαι, sed ad eorum aliquem quibus invitis et
dissuadentibus profectus sum. etsi quid iam opus est σχολίῳ? si perseverassem, opus
fuisset. “**at hoc ipsum non constanter.**” nemo doctus umquam (multa autem de hoc
genere scripta sunt) mutationem consili inconstantiam dixit esse. deinceps igitur haec,
“**nam si a Phaetro nostro esses, expedita excusatio esset; nunc quid respondemus?**”
ergo id erat meum factum quod Catoni probare non possim?

What really did amaze me [in your letter] is what you wrote in these words: “**All right**

³⁸ See Brunt 1986.

then: you talk of an ‘easy death’—all right, forsake your country!’ I was forsaking my country, or you thought I was doing so? You not only made no effort to stop me, but you even approved! There is worse to come: **“I’d like you to polish up a little tract to show that such was your duty, and address it to me.”** *Really*, my dear Atticus? Does my action require defense, to *you* of all people, who enthusiastically approved it? Yes, I will compose this *apologia* of yours, but I’m going to address it to one of those men who were against my departure and were dissuading me. But what need is there for a tract now? If I had stuck to my plans, there would have been. **“But this is inconsistent.”** In all the many writings on this theme, no philosopher has *ever* equated a change of plan with a lack of consistency. And then there’s this: **“If you were of my friend Phaedrus’ school, it would be easy to find an excuse. As it is, what answer do we make?”** So you think that I couldn’t justify my action to Cato? (Att. 16.7.3-4)

Atticus was rather punchy: his mockery of Cicero’s reference to εὐθανασία (the *mortis melioris* of 15.20.2?) is striking, and his demand for an *apologia* clearly rankled Cicero. The palpable anger makes it difficult to reconstruct Atticus’ exact position, and our correspondence suggests that he had in fact approved of the trip to Athens. The key, I think, is Atticus’ charge of inconsistency: Cicero should never have left, or, since he had, he should have stuck to his guns. Additionally, Atticus had been reading for years in Cicero’s dialogues repeated denunciations of the *inconstantia* of Epicurus and his Roman followers (e.g. *De Finibus* 2) and may have thrown this criticism in Cicero’s face. Cicero’s counter-arguments certainly suggest that he took the criticism as philosophical (“no philosopher has *ever* equated a change of plan with a lack of consistency”), and Atticus’ final words support this reading: “If you were of my friend Phaedrus’ school, it would be easy to find an excuse.” I take *excusatio* in its more specific sense of

“exemption from public duty” (*OLD*, *excusatio* 2), along the lines of Atticus’ earlier advice to μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι. Cicero would not have had a problem if, like Atticus, he sat this fight out on Epicurean grounds. But Cicero is not an Epicurean; his departure and sudden return therefore opened him up to charges of inconsistency. Atticus is rubbing the situation in Cicero’s face. In part, perhaps, to get back at all those years of Epicurus-bashing, but almost certainly to press home the danger of leaping into the struggle against Antonius, who, unlike Cicero, had an army.

Atticus’ invocation of Phaedrus shows, furthermore, that philosophy offered more than clever one-liners. Atticus does not quote a Greek proverb, he makes a specific allusion to philosophical allegiance and its political consequences, expressed in terms of his personal relationship with Phaedrus. Both correspondents are taking philosophy seriously at a time of crisis. This exchange, then, shows that philosophy helped justify and frame political activity; it also reveals the difficulties Atticus faced when advising Cicero: equestrian, Epicurean *otium* offered advice which Cicero was not inclined to take. These two letters reveal the tension which resulted from fundamental differences in perspective—and anger: Cicero *very rarely* writes to Atticus so sharply. Epicureanism is not a joke anymore.

We can now consider the charge of Perlwitz and others that Atticus’ Epicureanism was “superfluous” or a mere pretext: equestrian life would have advised sitting out the fight, so Epicureanism does not matter.³⁹ It is true that Atticus might have acted the same without philosophy. This dichotomy between tradition and philosophy is, however, misleading. As soon as a Roman uses philosophy to support prior preferences or shape political deliberation, this belief or motivation is no longer the same: it is hybridized by tapping into some 500 years of

³⁹ Perlwitz 1992: 97 (“Die Zurückhaltung des Atticus gegenüber den angestammten Formen politischer Betätigung wird dabei zu großen Teilen aus den politischen Verhältnissen dieser Zeit selbst zu erklären sein und den Rückgriff auf geistesgeschichtliche Erklärungsmuster überflüssig machen.”). Cf. Maurach 1989: 52 (on Cato).

philosophical debates. We should not expect philosophy to make Atticus act completely differently but we should rather search for him (or others) using arguments and philosophical principles to structure possible courses of action, and to act with firmness and conviction based on these principles.⁴⁰ If we can find evidence of this, and I have argued we can, then we have good grounds for claiming that philosophy should be considered a factor relevant to historical analysis.

By way of conclusion I offer a few suggestions as to what a biographical reading that takes Atticus' Epicureanism seriously might look like. First, Atticus—unlike contemporaries like Cassius, Piso, or Torquatus—emerges as a textbook example of an Epicurean intellectual avoiding political office while cultivating friendship. His wide-ranging financial dealings should not surprise, either: Philodemus' contemporary treatise, *On Household Management*, shows that a committed Epicurean could engage in commerce if he understood money had no intrinsic value—there are no signs that Atticus hankered after ostentatious luxury.⁴¹ Indeed, Atticus' financial support to his friends and his survival of wars and proscriptions are perfectly in line with Epicurean doctrine.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. Brunt 1975: 31; Griffin 1989: 36-7.

⁴¹ See Tsouna 2012 (cf. Asmis 2004) for Epicurean economics (money has instrumental utility in providing security and helping friends) and Nepos' biography for Atticus' moderation. Philodemus argues that money has instrumental utility in providing security and helping friends.

⁴² Perlwitz and Welch argue that Atticus' behind-the-scenes manoeuvring represents an alternative form of politics. This may be right, but this is a modern category of political activity: when Epicurus warns against politics or Roman sources discuss the *cursus honorum*, they are not talking about the behind the scenes manoeuvring of bankers.

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