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Chapter 7

Augustine and Epicureanism

It may come as a surprise to find Augustine included in a collection of contributions on the theme of Epicurus and Roman literature. Like other Church Fathers before him, Augustine did not regard Epicurus' philosophy as a serious philosophical option; rather, he denigrated it because of its hedonistic, materialistic and sensualist aspects, which led to its founder being regarded as a *homo carnalis*. Certain basic tenets of that philosophy, such as the denial of the immortality of the soul and the rejection of the providence of gods, were preferred targets of Christian polemics. Epicureanism even became an abusive tag among Christian apologists, so that the very name "Epicurus" was occasionally used as an insult.¹ Epicurean teachings were often used to darken negative aspects of a writer's own world view – a strategy that Philo of Alexandria deployed in describing the snake in the Garden of Eden.²

In Augustine's time, Epicurus' teachings had receded into the background because of the dominance of Neo-Platonism and Christianity. In a letter from the year 410 CE, Augustine states that Stoics and Epicureans no longer played any part in the schools of rhetoric and that their ashes were already cold. As early as 387 CE, Augustine asserted that there no longer existed any philosophers other than Platonists, Peripatetics and Cynics.³ To be sure, this sweeping assertion does not exclude the possibility of the continued existence of other schools at that time, like the Epicureans, but Augustine obviously did not pay much attention to them or regard them as a valid disciplinary tradition.⁴ Elsewhere, he observes that "the Epicureans flourished among the unlearned masses,"⁵ which is an observation that revives a traditional polemical stance against the Epicureans regarding them as ill-educated.⁶ In his *De finibus*, for instance, Cicero teasingly accuses his friend Torquatus, who was a confirmed Epicurean, of reading historical and literary texts, just as all other educated contemporary Romans, even though the latter's philosophical master, Epicurus, did not favor this pursuit on the grounds that in the poets one cannot find

1 Hier. *C. Ruf.* 1.30.67; see also Jungkuntz 1966.

2 Cf. Booth 1994.

3 August. *C. acad.* 3.42; cf. August. *Ep.* 118.21. On this general topic see also Verde in this volume.

4 Cf. Ferguson/Hershbell 1990, 2257–2327, esp. 2317.

5 August. *Ep.* 118.14 = *CSEL* 34.2; 679.10.

6 Fr. 163 Us.; cf. also Cic. *Fin.* 2.12; see Erler 1992a, 171–200, esp. 177.

anything but childish delight.⁷ These pejorative remarks on the part of Augustine indicate that Epicureanism was probably not “dead” in his time; on the contrary, it is plausible to assume that Epicurus’ teachings still belonged to the educational canon in Augustine’s day. It has to be admitted, however, that it manifestly did not play as significant a role in the intellectual life of his era as it had in the centuries before, when Epicureans had participated in philosophical discourses even with Christians.

Indeed, despite the mutual antagonism and many divergencies between them, both Epicureans and Christians acknowledged some points of convergence in their respective teachings. For instance, they were prone to join forces as allies and critics whenever there was need for resistance against false prophets and oracles, which were crooked because their sources were dishonest. Christians and Epicureans were also generally united in their aversion to pagan religious tradition, which they both denigrated as superstition. Lucretius, for instance, illustrates the baneful result of superstition by describing the sacrifice of Iphigenia or by emphasising the negative role of religion throughout Rome’s history.⁸ The Epicureans, of course, accepted conventional religious practices, such as prayer, but they strongly denied that they could somehow influence the gods. What both Christians and Epicureans had in common was their wish to provide human beings with an alternative way of life; the main difference between their respective visions, however, was that the Epicureans aimed at attaining happiness in this world, while the Christians promised a blessed state in another world. In addition, the Epicureans fought against any form of religious enthusiasm, while the Christians were convinced that they alone had access to the true faith and the blessed state offered to them in the afterlife.

Despite these differences, both traditions were attacked in their heyday because they distanced themselves from any ambitions of engaging in public life. There are even some elements of Epicurean doctrine that could be regarded by Christians as pointing in a positive direction, like the Epicurean concept of friendship, which seemed to anticipate, to some degree, the Christian idea of ἀγάπη.⁹ For, according to Epicurus, friendship and empathy are essential to providing security, which for Epicureans is the *condicio sine qua non* of happiness. Furthermore, of all schools the Epicureans in their cultivation of “friendship” (φιλία) came closest to anticipating Christian ἀγάπη. Now, if according to the Epicureans friends are necessary to provide ἀταραξία and happiness, and if friendship can

7 Cic. *Fin.* 1.71.; 2.12; cf. Asmis 1995, 22–25; Erler 2006, 247–248.

8 Lucr. 5.1161–1240.

9 Cf. Armstrong 1979, 128–129.

be achieved only if one loves someone as much as oneself, the Epicurean egoistic desire of security can only be fulfilled if one acts altruistically, i.e., if we treat someone as an end in itself, which in a way anticipates Christian teaching at least partially.¹⁰

In view of the Epicureans' regard for their founder as a savior who lived to redeem mankind, many Christians might, at least to some extent, have seen a parallel with the philanthropy of Jesus Christ, even though they firmly rejected fundamental tenets of Epicurus' doctrines. Epicurus, in fact, was often held in high esteem by pagan and Christian opponents because of his way of life. Clemens of Alexandria, for instance, valued Epicurus as a person because of his lifestyle, which he found to be moderate and controlled. He also appreciated Epicurus' request to philosophize at any age.¹¹ This partially positive reception of certain Epicurean ideas, topics, motifs or even arguments – for example, those surrounding the question whether the world was created or not – does not signal a serious commitment of any Christian thinker to Epicurean doctrine but rather a rhetorical tactic intended to undermine other pagan philosophies. In the *Confessiones*, Augustine describes how, in a certain phase of his spiritual life, he weighed the Epicurean against the Platonic position in relation to death, and how, in doing so, he was taken by the suggestive power of the Epicurean arguments. Nevertheless, he sees that only the fear of God's judgment on the other side keeps him from lust and its temptations.¹²

These mixed reactions on the part of Christian writers corroborate the observation that Epicurean teachings remained in continuous circulation, not only during the time of Augustine but also until the end of Late Antiquity.¹³ From the first century BCE onwards, two strands in the reception of Epicureanism in the Roman and Platonic-Christian contexts can be observed: the rejection of fundamental Epicurean doctrines, on the one hand, and a quite positive appreciation of practical elements of Epicurean ethics, on the other. Epicurus' ethical system, which included a range of techniques for securing a life ruled by rational principles, was treated with respect even by those who sharply rejected his materialistic physics and theology. In particular, the Epicurean conception of philosophy as a therapy (*philosophia medicans*),¹⁴ which was expected to assist in the practical management of life, combined with the focus later Epicureans laid on this aspect of the

¹⁰ Two Christian writers look back to Lucretius' hymn to Epicurus in composing their own eulogies of Christ; cf. Lucr. 5.1–8; Arnob. *Adv. nat.* 1.38; Lact. *Div. inst.* 3.14.1.

¹¹ Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.69.2–4.

¹² August. *Conf.* 6.16–26; see Erler 2004, 81.

¹³ Cf. Ferguson/Hershbelle 1990, 2316–2317; Erler 1994, 29–490, esp. 189; Fuhrer 2000.

¹⁴ Cf. Gigante 1975.

canon, not only helped his teachings to become a vital part of the pagan philosophical tradition in Rome, but even came to exert an influence on the thought of Christian writers like Augustine (albeit in the reduced form of an *Epicurus dimidiatus*). In short, Epicurus' teachings appear to have continued educational value in Augustine's time.

Despite Augustine's general hostility towards basic Epicurean doctrines, which he accused of being untidy,¹⁵ certain aspects of the system played a not insignificant role in his own intellectual life. In this regard, it is useful to examine the sources for his knowledge of the basic tenets of Epicurean thought. Some passages in his work prove that he acquired it primarily through the works of Cicero. We learn from his own writings, for instance, that Cicero's *De finibus* sparked his interest in Epicurean philosophy and, more broadly, in the dispute among the Hellenistic schools about the nature of "pleasure" (ἡδονή) and the role of friendship in attaining a "secure and happy life" (εὐδαιμονία).¹⁶ Other important Ciceronian sources of his knowledge of Epicurus were the *De natura deorum* and the *Tusculanae disputationes*.

In addition to these Ciceronian texts, Augustine demonstrably had direct knowledge of the text of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*.¹⁷ He not only refers to themes and doctrines articulated in this influential poem, which is, of course, a major source for our knowledge of Epicureanism, but he also occasionally uses phrases that are arguably borrowed from it; sometimes he even alludes to particular passages.¹⁸ When discussing topics like friendship, peace, sexual love and freedom from anxiety in his works, Augustine gives the impression that he did not disagree with everything Epicurus and Lucretius had to say.

These partial compatibilities fit into the frame of Augustine's general thesis that pagan philosophy – including even Epicureanism – anticipated certain tenets of Christian belief. It therefore makes sense to take Augustine at his word when he claims in his *Confessiones* that Epicurean doctrines played a momentous role in his mental development; as, for instance, when he reflects in Book 6 of this work on his intellectual struggle to find the truth after he left Manichaeism and became, first a Platonist, and then a Christian.¹⁹ As the *Confessiones*, as well as *Civitas Dei* and other writings of Augustine show, identifiable ingredients of Epi-

¹⁵ August. *Serm.* 150.10.

¹⁶ August. *Conf.* 3.4.7 (= Cicero's *Hortensius*, fr. 10 Mueller).

¹⁷ August. *Util. cred.* 10.

¹⁸ Cf. Hagendahl 1967, 211–212; cf. Arnob. *Adv. nat.* 3.11.25 and Lucr. 5.96; August. *Trin.* 4 praef. and Lucr. 1.73; August. *Lib. arb.* 1.6.14 and Lucr. 1.80–101; August. *Gen.* 12.25 and Lucr. 4.387–394; Ferguson/Hershbelt 1990, 2316–2317; Erler 2002a.

¹⁹ Cf. Simpson 1985, esp. 41.

curean doctrines occur not only in polemical contexts. Like others before him, Augustine, it seems, was influenced in some ways by Epicurus' ethical theories and actual praxis.

Augustine's attitude towards Epicurus proves that he shares the ambivalent approach that can be observed in other Christian authors as well.²⁰ Whereas Epicurus' doctrines merely serve as a target for Augustine's polemics, he occasionally makes use of Epicurean teachings to give profile to his own positions, and sometimes – though rarely – he even approves of elements of Epicurean ethics. In the end, it is apparent that Augustine's attitude towards Epicurus is as ambivalent as that of many other Church fathers before him, despite all their polemics.

Apart from this shared ambivalence, however, Augustine's general attitude towards Epicureanism is preponderantly hostile. When he criticizes pagan philosophy, Epicureans constitute his main target and, in this context, he tends to resort for the most part to traditional arguments, such as their lack of erudition, their appeal to human weaknesses, their denial of God's providence and their belief in the mortality of the soul and hedonism, all of which can also be found in the texts of earlier Christian writers like Tertullian or Origen.²¹ A prominent theme in Augustine's polemics is his reproach that Epicurus turns the conventional virtues into slaves of carnal desire.²² Other points of his critique are directed at Epicurean materialism, psychology and theology. Like others before him, Augustine calls Epicurus a fool or – because of his hedonistic position – a Bacchus; or else he compares him to a pig, thereby transferring to the philosopher a metaphor that Horace ironically applies to himself.²³ Epicurean hedonism was commonly interpreted by Christians as a license for humans to live a luxurious life and to surrender to the desires of the flesh. Augustine, too, regarded Epicurus' denial of the immortality of the soul as being more fitting for pigs than humans, and he claimed that Epicurus argued for the mortality of the soul only in order to find an excuse to live a more hedonistic life (*Ep.* 104.3):

Hoc enim potius in illis litteris legi, quoniam vita ipsa qua fruimur brevis est, in qua tu arbitraris, et frequentatum in litteris iam mones, aeternam esse posse calamitatem: mortem autem malorum omnium esse finem, habent quidem vestrae litterae, sed nec ipsae omnes; Epicureorum est quippe ista sententia, et si qui alii mortalem animam putant. At illi quos

²⁰ A good example is Dante. The poet of the *Divina Commedia* banned the Epicureans to the tenth circle of the *Inferno*. But in his work entitled *Il Convivio* (cf. Dante, *Convivio* 3.14.15), he nevertheless allows Epicureans, in company of Peripatetics and Stoics, to prepare for the path to truth, although he denied that Epicurus would succeed in reaching the truth in the end.

²¹ Tert. *Apol.* 3; for Origen see Marksches 2000.

²² August. *Serm.* 348.3; cf. *De civ. D.* 5.20; Cic. *Fin.* 2.69.

²³ Hor. *Epist.* 1.4.16; on Horace and Epicureanism, see Davis in this volume. See also August. *Psalm.* 73.25; *C. acad.* 3.7.16; *Ep.* 104.3.

Tullius quasi consulares philosophos appellat, quod eorum magnipendat auctoritatem, quoniam cum extremum diem fungimur, non exstingui animam, sed emigrare censent, et ut merita quoque eius asserunt seu bona, seu mala, vel, ad beatitudinem, vel ad miseriam permanere.

In the writings referred to, I for my part have read, not that in this life – as you think, and as you allege that these writings frequently affirm – there can be an eternity of wretchedness, but rather that this life itself which we here enjoy is short. Some indeed but not all of your authors have said that death is the end of all evils: that is indeed the opinion of the Epicureans and of such others as believe the soul to be mortal. But those philosophers whom Cicero designates “consulates” in a certain sense, because he attaches great weight to their authority, are of the opinion that when our last hour on earth comes the soul is not annihilated, but removed from its tenement, and continues in existence for a state of blessedness or of misery, according to that which a man’s actions, whether good or bad, claim as their due recompense. (Translation: Cunningham 1887)

Polemics notwithstanding, Augustine’s criticism is often, at bottom, perceptive, and shows that he is well acquainted with the main tenets of Epicurean teachings, such as the theory of the existence of multiple worlds.²⁴

In rendering an account of his intellectual education in the *Confessiones*, Augustine tells us that Epicurean teachings were quite attractive to him at a time when he had renounced Manichaeism and was looking for new ways that might help him discover the truth. He confesses that in his progress towards Christianity via Platonism, Epicurus’ teachings played a pivotal role and even inspired him, to some extent, in his search for theological certainty. In this decisive phase of his life – as he discloses in the sixth book of the *Confessiones* – he felt a kind of affinity with Epicurean ideas that he later came to consider as deeply misguided. In this phase of his intellectual journey, however, Augustine regarded Epicurean doctrines as belonging to the part of ancient pagan philosophy that appeared to foreshadow certain aspects of Christian belief. Thus, he admits to the reader that, like others before him, he was especially impressed by Epicurus’ ethical precepts, his manner of life and his ideal of moderation as far as pleasures are concerned.

This viewpoint seems to be the background to the story Augustine tells in the *Confessiones* in the context of a discussion of conceptions of the ideal life. He relates that, when he was still teacher of rhetoric in Milan, he came upon a beggar on the street, who obviously was drunk, but seemed to be happy (*Conf.* 6.6.9): *animadverti pauperem mendicum iam, credo, saturum iocantem atque laetantem* (“I observed a poor beggar man, half-drunk I believe, very jocund and pleasant upon

24 Cf. August. *Ep.* 118.28; *De civ. D.* 6.5.20.

the matter”).²⁵ This observation made him reflect upon and discuss his own way of life at that time as an ambitious rhetorician. Augustine had to admit that the only thing he was longing to secure was pleasure and he therefore recognised the life of the beggar as superior to his own (*Conf.* 6.6.9):

Quod enim iam ille pauculis et emendicatis nummulis adeptus erat, ad hoc ego tam aerumnosis anfractibus et circuitibus ambiebam, ad laetitiam scilicet temporalis felicitatis.

What he had acquired with a few small coins obtained by begging I was still circumnavigating with difficulties and digressions – namely the joy of worldly happiness.

This anecdote from Book 6 of the *Confessiones* illustrates well Augustine’s reflections on his choosing a different ideal of living, which obviously is meant to remind us of his youthful attraction to Epicurean teachings.²⁶ Augustine describes the beggar as a creature who, though poor and obviously drunk, nonetheless seems to be happy, because he loves to live a secluded life filled with pleasure by means of avoiding pain, and obviously succeeds in doing so without any anxiety. It has been plausibly argued that this beggar and his behaviour reminded Augustine (and the reader) of the virtues of a typical Epicurean practitioner: a person withdrawn from social life and its obligations but enjoying himself in the pursuit of bodily pleasures. This exemplification is based, of course, on a basic misconception regarding Epicurean ethics, for by no means does Epicurus encourage the pursuit of immoderate bodily pleasures in order to live a happy life, as he himself says in his letter to Menoeceus (DL 10.131–132):

τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταραττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν· οὐ γὰρ πότοι καὶ κῶμοι συνείροντες οὐδ’ ἀπολαύσεις παίδων καὶ γυναικῶν οὐδ’ ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα φέρει πολυτελὴς τράπεζα, τὸν ἥδὺν γεννᾷ βίον, ἀλλὰ νήφων λογισμός.

[By pleasure we mean] the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not the enjoyments of boys and women, fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning. (Translation: Hicks 1972, slightly altered)

It is nevertheless interesting and important to note that Augustine does not seem to reject the way of life represented by the beggar in all respects, for although he hastens to agree that the beggar does not represent the ideal life (*verum gaudium*), he obviously was impressed by him and regarded him as being on the right track towards security and pleasure, which he himself – as he admits –

²⁵ The quotation is borrowed from Simpson 1985, 44.

²⁶ See Fuhrer 2000.

failed to achieve at that time (*Conf.* 6.6.9): *sed et ego illis ambitionibus multo falsius quaerebam. Et certe ille laetabatur, ego anxius eram, securus ille, ego trepidus* (“But yet I with those my ambitious designs, hunted after a much uncertainer [scil. joy]. And certainly that fellow was jocund, but I perplexed; he void of care, I full of fear”). Augustine seemed to be persuaded, at this stage in his life, that striving for pleasure and avoiding pain belonged to the innate drive of man, and he phrases this insight as follows (*Conf.* 8.3.7):

Easque ipsas voluptates humanae vitae etiam non inopinatis et praeter voluntatem intruentibus, sed institutis et voluntariis molestiis homines adquirunt. Edendi et bibendi voluptas nulla est, nisi praecedat esuriendi et sitiendi molestia.

These are the actual human pleasures of life that people strive for, not only derived from difficulties that are unexpected and unlooked for but also from those that have been anticipated and willingly accepted. There is no pleasure in eating and drinking unless they are preceded by the discomfort of hunger and thirst.

When Augustine expresses the thought that among the fundamental desires of human nature are peace, friendship and security, and even mentions an innate impulse to avoid pain²⁷ and to strive for pleasure by eating and drinking,²⁸ his assertion has an Epicurean ring to it and has been rightly compared to some passages in Lucretius or Cicero.²⁹ The thought is reminiscent of the Epicurean observation that, as soon as they are born, humans long for pleasure and try to avoid pain – the so-called “cradle argument.”³⁰ Augustine seems to side with the Epicureans when he confirms that the basic desire of human nature is to avoid pain, to achieve pleasure and to gain security. At the moment when he regards the beggar as more advanced than himself and as leading a life superior to his own, he signals that certain aspects of Epicurean ethics, rightly understood, should be regarded in positive terms, since he admits that at that time he still wished to play a role in social life and was striving for recognition and glory, and therefore could not bring himself to say farewell to ambition and adopt the humble life-style of the beggar.

It would be only at a later stage in his development that Augustine started to relinquish secular ambition and the pursuit of honours, peace of mind and friendship. In any case, this brief autobiographical anecdote illustrates well that at a certain stage of his life Augustine did not disagree with everything the Epicureans stood for. He even goes so far as to confess that he almost became an

²⁷ August. *Conf.* 1.20.31; cf. Simpson 1985, 42.

²⁸ August. *Conf.* 10.31.43–47.

²⁹ Cf. Simpson 1985, 40–41 n. 8.

³⁰ Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 1.30; Erler/Schofield 1999, 650; Brunschwig 1986.

Epicurean and that only his conviction of the immortality of the soul, which Epicurus flatly denied, kept him from handing over the palm of victory to the founder of the Garden (*Conf.* 6.16.26):

Et disputabam cum amicis meis Alypio et Nebridio de finibus bonorum et malorum Epicurum accepturum fuisse palmam in animo meo, nisi ego credidissem post mortem restare animae vitam et tractus meritorum, quod Epicurus credere noluit.

I disputed in those days with my friends Alypius and Nebridius concerning the limits of good and evil: determining, that Epicurus in my judgement should have won the garland, had I not verily believed that there remained a life for the soul after the body was dead and the fruits of our deservings, which Epicurus would not believe.

In the same context, Augustine makes the confession that he had considered, albeit hypothetically, the possibility of combining both philosophical positions: Epicurus' hedonism and the Christian belief in the immortality of the soul. He poses the question (*Conf.* 6.16.26): *si essemus immortales et in perpetua corporis voluptate sine ullo amissionis terrore viveremus, cur non essemus beati aut quid aliud quaereremus* ("Suppose that we were to be immortal, and were to live in perpetual enjoyment of bodily pleasures, and that without fear of losing them, why should we not then be fully happy, and wherefore should we seek for any other thing?"). Augustine eventually came to the conclusion that, without belief in the immortality of the soul, there would be no fear of punishment for sinful people and no prospect of compensation after death for good behavior in life – a deficit that would make the life of pleasure impossible to sustain because it would entail worrying that a morally bad life would not be punished later on. He therefore became convinced that Epicurus' teachings could not be reconciled with the anxieties of daily life.³¹

According to Augustine, the Epicureans failed to help avoid the grief that is caused by the death of a loved one – a circumstance that, in his estimation, would crush one's pleasure. From the vantage-point of authentic Epicureans, however, this did not pose an insurmountable problem, since they believed that emotions like grief at the death of a friend were quite natural and therefore to be acknowledged.³² Excessive grief, on the other hand, was to be avoided.³³ Consequently, they disagreed with those who would not accept emotions like the sorrow and grief caused by the death of friends. On the contrary, they argue that an absence of grief would stem from another, even greater evil, because this absence would

³¹ August. *Conf.* 6.16.26.

³² Cf. Lucr. 3.320f.; Heßler 2015.

³³ Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.24.

render us totally insensible to the afflictions of life. In fact, “the memory of a dead friend” for Epicureans “is pleasurable on every account.”³⁴ According to their view of human nature, emotions like grief do not diminish pleasure in life at all. Augustine, on the other hand, undoubtedly wished to belong to those who prefer to do away with grief altogether, so he felt impelled, as he says, to transcend the material world and to adopt more amenable views and theories. At this juncture in his quest, he turned to Platonism and Christianity.

In retrospect, Augustine later came to consider his openness to Epicurean teachings an error and, on many occasions, he rebuts them in no uncertain terms. It was only when he felt able to accept emotions like grief without falling into despair that he entertained the hope for a happy afterlife. It was thanks to his formal conversion to the Christian faith that he could even experience joy at the death of his beloved mother because of his certainty that she would rest in peace.³⁵ But this conceptual turn did not prevent him from preserving at least part of the Epicurean system of values. In this respect, a few ingredients of Epicurean teaching remain recognizable in his mature thought and work. Indeed, sometimes he includes Epicurean material in his own teaching in order to demonstrate that it could be reconciled, at some level, with certain aspects of Christian dogma. His purpose in doing so was to show that a few key Epicurean desiderata, like peace of mind and security, could only, in the end, be achieved by embracing Christian belief.³⁶ According to Augustine’s theory of sensation, for instance, the conviction that the soul is watching over the organs of the body³⁷ may plausibly be regarded as an answer to Epicurean materialist epistemology. In addition to this, Augustine manifests a residual attraction to Epicurus’ hedonism, although making personal mental and physical pleasure the standard of all decisions could, from a Christian point of view, lead to eternal damnation. The Christian theologian also agrees with the pagan Epicureans that friendship is of great importance in achieving happiness. The high value accorded to friendship among the Epicureans is a prominent theme in Augustine’s main sources, most notably in the enthusiastic defence mounted by the figure of Torquatus in Cicero’s *De finibus*.³⁸ Augustine, too, calls friendship “sweet to me above all sweetness of this life” (*suavis mihi super omnes suavitates illius vitae meae*, Watts 1968)³⁹ and is drawn to the prospect of a life within a community of friends that is removed

34 Plut. *Non posse* 1105e, transl. Einarson/De Lacy 1967.

35 August. *Conf.* 9.13.37 along with Simpson 1985, 44.

36 August. *Conf.* 2.6.13; for the Epicurean concept of security, see Schofield 1999, 748–756.

37 August. *Ep.* 118.4.29.

38 Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 1.65.

39 August. *Conf.* 4.4.7, transl. Watts 1968.

from the affairs of the world. He himself tried to establish a community of friends, as he mentions in his discussion with Alypius (*Conf.* 6.14.24):

Et multi amici agitaveramus animo et conloquentes ac detestantes turbulentas humanae vitae molestias paene iam firmaveramus remoti a turbis otiose vivere, id otium sic moliti, ut, si quid habere possemus, conferremus in medium unamque rem familiarem conflaremus ex omnibus, ut per amicitiae sinceritatem non esset aliud huius et aliud illius.

And we were many friends, who debated together, conferring about detesting these turbulent molestations of human life; and we had now almost resolved to sequester ourselves from company, and to live at peace; we hoped so to obtain that peace, by putting together that stock every man was able to make, and making one household of all; that through the plain dealing of a common friendship, one thing should not be this man's, and another that man's. (Translation: Watts 1968)

This utopian plan failed to materialize, however, because his friends had doubts about how their wives would react. Historically, the original Epicureans did not encounter this particular problem, since they readily accepted women into the community of the Garden. At the beginning of the third book of the *Confessiones*, Augustine also expresses agreement with what Epicurus had to say about the problems created by sexual desire and the turmoil caused by youthful sensuality along the lines described by Lucretius in the diatribe against love.⁴⁰ Despite these reservations, Augustine apparently did not heed Epicurean advice regarding sexual intercourse for a long time in his life.⁴¹ That is shown by his struggle with the attractions of the flesh, which he cannot overcome but with the help of God.⁴²

Other aspects of Epicurean teaching may help to clarify what Augustine has to say about the role of justice and of contracts in the earthly city (*terrena civitas*). In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine discusses the issues of community, laws, justice and peace and their interrelations. He disagrees with Plato, Aristotle and Cicero in so far as he does not grant a fundamental role to justice in the ideal polity. He adduces the example of the Roman Empire, whose citizens, according to him, are characterized as utilitarian in their striving for wealth, military success and peace, with peace being understood in this case as freedom from all external threats. Augustine claims that Rome was never a republic because true justice never existed in it.⁴³ He is convinced that justice, although desirable, cannot be found in any worldly state including the Roman Empire, owing to the fact that, in the normative social fabric, love of oneself prevails over the love of God. Such communi-

⁴⁰ August. *Conf.* 3.1.1; Lucr. 6.1037–1208.

⁴¹ August. *Sol.* 1.25.

⁴² August. *Conf.* 10.41.

⁴³ August. *De civ. D.* 2.21.4.

ties, in his view, are based on “common interests” (*communiones utilitatis*) rather than on principles of justice. He therefore disagrees with Cicero, who had defined the Republic as a group of humans with common interests which acknowledges right,⁴⁴ and he alters this definition by retaining the notion of common interest (*utilitatis communione sociatus*) while omitting the reference to right or justice (*iuris consensus*).⁴⁵ In Augustinian thought, then, it is not justice but common agreement of the citizens in respect to the objects of their love that keeps members of the community together without regard for the moral quality of those objects.⁴⁶ In coming to the conclusion that no profound difference exists between human societies and robber gangs (as Carneades had argued previously),⁴⁷ Augustine appears to hold the opinion that mundane human society is founded on social contracts rather than on moral concepts – a view that is partially in accord with the utilitarian account of the origin of laws which we find in the work of Epicurus’ Roman disciple, Lucretius (see 3.1143–1150).

It is a truism that Augustine is not the first thinker in antiquity to make the case for the social contract. In this regard, consider especially the sophists,⁴⁸ whose position is well defended by the interlocutor Glaucon in the second book of Plato’s *Republica*, where he virtually summarizes the chief assumptions of the sophist’s contractual theories.⁴⁹ These theories are based on a rather harsh and unflattering concept of the nature of men, who regard it as most desirable to have maximum power to inflict hurt on others while incurring minimal risk of being injured in turn. When Augustine deals with this topic, he mentions not only the sophists but also Epicurus, for he, too, defends a version of the contract theory and denies that justice is that upon which human society is fundamentally based. There remains, however, an important difference between Epicurus’ position and that of the sophists – a difference that is especially relevant to a fuller understanding of the Augustinian position on this matter. Augustine arguably comes quite close to defending an Epicurean, rather than a sophistic, conception of an original social contract, for, according to the latter school of thought, man’s behavior is characterised by a certain aggressiveness and an innate desire to exercise power over others. From this jaundiced perspective human nature is typified by πλεονεξία, i.e. the constant desire for more, regarded as a natural good.⁵⁰ Such

44 Cic. *Resp.* 1.39; 2.70; August. *De civ. D.* 19.21.

45 August. *De civ. D.* 2.21.2; 19.21; see Weithman 2001.

46 August. *De civ. D.* 19.24; see Fortin 1997; Weithman 2001, 235–236.

47 August. *De civ. D.* 4.4.

48 Cf. Kahn 1981.

49 Pl. *Resp.* 358e–360e; for the comparison with Epicurus, see Mitsis 1988, 82.

50 Pl. *Resp.* 359c.

an underlying attitude is problematic in terms of harmonious human interaction, since it inevitably leads to conflicts among individuals. It is only because of this intrinsic danger to mutual security that sophists like Glaucon devise a utilitarian theory of social contracts. By their very nature, such contracts are based on a kind of negotiated compromise, whereby persons agree to give away some of their power in order to gain some security in exchange. In Glaucon's account, contracts were invented by the majority of the weak in order to prevail over the minority of the strong, which is a position that has often been compared to the theory of social contract that Augustine sustains in *De civitate Dei*.

Whereas Augustine would agree that a contract between men to prevent mutual harm is of great importance in human society – even more so than justice – and that this communal agreement is constitutive of social life, he would disagree that a principle of subjection should be essential to the basis of any society. Rather, he emphatically repudiates the idea that aggressiveness and the desire for power are part and parcel of human nature and that conflicts originate among men for that inherent reason.⁵¹

In his worldview, everyone strives for peace as the ultimate good and, since he holds this to be true not only for Christians who long for eternal life and peace, but also for pagans, he believes that this desire is the basic principle underlying communal agreements. He observes that wars are waged as a means to arrive finally at peace and that conspirators maintain a kind of peace among themselves in order to achieve their ends. Even robbers, he points out, will keep peace with their comrades in order to be able to attack their victims successfully. Augustine goes so far as to claim that monstrous figures like Cacus, whom Vergil describes as a non-social cave dweller and a savage creature, will in the end desire peace because every sentient being preserves “traces” (*vestigia*) of this natural desire.⁵² Accordingly, he maintains that contracts or communal agreements are to be regarded not as the result of forced compromises, but rather as a means to achieving the ultimate aim of all human desire, which is peace – a conclusion that rebuts the false assumption, as presupposed most notably by Glaucon and the sophists, that humans are aggressive by nature. A longing for peace therefore constitutes a *Leitmotif* in the argument of *De civitate Dei*.

It is this view of human character that marks the disparity between the Epicurean position and that of the sophists, for the Epicureans did not believe in an aggressiveness innate to human beings or in their natural desire to harm others, but rather that they resorted to violence only when obliged to secure their own

51 Cf. Erler 2009a.

52 Verg. *A.* 8.190–275; August. *De civ. D.* 19.12.2.

protection. Lucretius indeed argues that, even in the earliest stage of human development, men do not naturally desire to harm others. Later, in fact, they are only “too happy” (*aventes*) to form communal agreements, because they neither wish to harm others nor to suffer harm themselves.⁵³ The Epicurean wise man, therefore, cultivates desires that satisfy one’s natural psychological needs, which, according to the doctrine, do not include human aggression. Consequently, he seeks to satisfy natural desires, which mainly lie in acquiring peace of mind.

The Epicureans therefore did not regard social contracts as compromises or as second-best solutions, but as welcome instruments designed to provide personal security and peace of mind.⁵⁴ Such contracts are based on mutual interests and do not force the parties into accepting agreements deemed untoward. This position differs strongly from what sophists like Glaucon professed, but it comes close to Augustine’s preconception, for he also does not assume that mankind is aggressive by nature; rather, he sides with the Epicureans in believing that humans always strive naturally for security and peace. Epicurus concedes that the natural desire for peace and “peace of mind” (*ἀταραξία*) might be misguided sometimes but claims that it is never relinquished.

Interestingly, Augustine signals to the reader that his own understanding of human nature and communal agreements has an Epicurean ring to it, for in *Civitas Dei* he employs the phrase *naturae extrema vestigia*⁵⁵ to describe the way in which the human desire for peace is rooted in human nature. The phrase carries an allusion to a passage in Vergil’s *Georgica*,⁵⁶ where a life of tranquillity is praised, and the reader is reminded of the Epicurean background of this praise because Vergil himself had borrowed the expression from Lucretius, who uses almost the same words when talking about the nature of the human soul.⁵⁷ By this indirect means, Augustine points to the tradition that stands behind his view of human character and of a society that is not based on justice but on communal agreement. In my judgment, Augustine once again makes use of elements of Epicurean precepts in order to clarify his own position. This is not to deny that the philosophical outlook of the Epicureans and that of Augustine were worlds apart, as regards fundamental tenets like materialism, deism or mortality of the soul. Nevertheless, it proves to be worthwhile to reckon with the influence of Epicureanism on Augustinian thought, as far as aspects of practical ethics and common life are concerned. In this respect, it is striking that certain positions that were

53 Cf. Lucr. 5.925–1457, esp. 1011–1027; Mitsis 1988, 84.

54 KD 40; cf. Mitsis 1988, 87.

55 August. *De civ. D.* 19.12.2.

56 Verg. *G.* 2.458–474, esp. 473–474.

57 Cf. Lucr. 3.308. and 3.20.

defended by Augustine along with some Platonists⁵⁸ are strongly reminiscent of fundamental Epicurean tenets.

As noted above, Augustine kept open the door for accepting certain aspects of Epicurean practical ethics. In doing so, he paved the way for the close affinity between Epicureanism and Christian beliefs that can be observed in the writings of Renaissance and early modern philosophers. Thus, when Augustine's thought experiment that aimed at combining Epicurean pleasure and Christian belief in the immortality of the soul was eventually rejected by him, it was subsequently defended by the eminent Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla and ultimately came to be regarded as corroborating a positive view of the natural world.

58 Cf. Erler 2009b, 59–63.

