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### Nietzsche and Kant on Epicurus and Self-Cultivation<sup>1</sup>

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Epicurus has been alive in all ages and lives now, unknown to those who have called and call themselves Epicureans, and enjoying no reputation among philosophers. He has, moreover, himself forgotten his own name: it was the heaviest burden he ever cast off. (Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow* 227)

#### **Introduction: The Name ‘Epicurus’**

Kant and Nietzsche are typically seen as standing outside the eudaemonist tradition in ethics, with Kant positioned as an ethicist of duty and Nietzsche positioned as an idiosyncratic virtue ethicist with ‘power’ conceived as the principal component of human activity. However, this familiar appreciation does not do full justice to the position of either, and in this essay I want to show that both have a concern with self-cultivation and the flourishing of the self. I shall do this by highlighting the Epicurean dimension of the ideas of both thinkers, no doubt much to the surprise of many readers of the history of modern philosophy since my reading goes against the grain of how both Kant and Nietzsche are typically portrayed, with Kant often associated with a Stoic tradition (see

the essays in Engstrom and Whiting, 1996) and Nietzsche associated with a virtue ethicist tradition running from Aristotle to Hume (see Swanton 2015).

For both Kant and Nietzsche, I contend, self-cultivation and an ethics of self-care are to be practised in a spirit of cheerfulness and equanimity. Both are promoting philosophical sobriety: Nietzsche wants a modest human comportment in the world, whilst Kant appeals to a self that can exercise itself ethically by drawing on an Epicurean-inspired teaching of cheerfulness. At stake in the modern German reception of Epicureanism, and perhaps not only German, is the meaning of the name 'Epicurus': this is true of the young Marx and of the middle period Nietzsche, but as we shall see it is also true of Kant. We tend to associate Nietzsche with a strenuous morality of Dionysian self-overcoming and a quest for power and expansion, in which he attacks the concern with happiness: 'Man does *not* strive for happiness; only the English do that' (Nietzsche 2008: 'Maxims and Barbs', 12).<sup>2</sup> Yet in his middle writings Nietzsche is working with a philosophy of happiness and pleasure, especially concerned with the cultivation of modest pleasures, as well as offering the reader a philosophy of small doses and slow cures.

At this time Nietzsche has hopes for creating his own Epicurean garden. As he writes in a letter of 1879 to his amanuensis Peter Gast, '*Where* are we going to renew the garden of Epicurus?' (*Wo* wollen wir den Garten Epicurs erneuern?). Nietzsche wants the work of the self upon itself to be a cheerful exercise and part of the gay or joyful science. Nietzsche can at times appear as rationalist as Kant and yet he wants ethics, involving duties one has to oneself and to others, to be something *pleasurable*. Nietzsche has the hope that one day, after much long practice and daily work, each of us could say –

as an ethical injunction since it can't be anything else – ‘we *want* to become those that we are’ (Nietzsche 1974: 335), not we need or we ought to become this, but that it is our desire, something we enjoy and take pleasure and pride in. Indeed, Nietzsche speaks of the task of giving style to one's character as one that is practiced ‘by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye’ (Nietzsche 1974: 290).

In this essay I am especially interested in Nietzsche as an ethicist, especially as we encounter him in *Dawn* (1881), and with how he construes Kant in the text. Both are keen to contest the received misinterpretation of Epicurus and Epicurean doctrine, and both favour an ethics of self-cultivation and draw on aspects of Epicurean teaching to promote such an ethics. This is made explicit by Kant in his lectures on ethics, and seems to be implied in Nietzsche's attack on the presumptions of ‘morality’ (Epictetus is also pivotal for him, as we shall see). It is possible to show that Kant is more sympathetic to the moral character of Epicureanism than is widely or commonly supposed. We might suppose, though, that Kant falls prey to Nietzsche's critique of morality, say on account of the universalising logic of the moral law. However, in this essay I want to show that this is only part of the story to be told about Nietzsche's reception of Kant. My suggestion is that we need a fresh appreciation of the rapport between the two as ethicists of self-cultivation.

## **Nietzsche on Morality in *Dawn***

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche informs his readers that his ‘campaign’ against morality begins in earnest with *Dawn* and he adds that we should not smell gunpowder at work here but, provided we have the necessary subtlety in our nostrils, more pleasant odours. His act is not one of simple wanton destruction. It is important we appreciate that Nietzsche is not in *Dawn* advocating the overcoming of all possible forms of morality. Where morality centres on ‘continually exercised self-mastery and self-overcoming in both large and the smallest of things,’ he champions it (Nietzsche 2012: *The Wanderer and His Shadow* 45). His concern is that ‘morality’ in the forms it has assumed in the greater part of human history has opened up an abundance of sources of displeasure and to the point that one can say that with every ‘refinement in morality’ (*Sittlichkeit*) human beings have grown ‘*more and more dissatisfied* with themselves, their neighbour, and their lot...’ (Nietzsche 2011: 106)

Nietzsche’s ‘campaign’ against morality centres largely on a critique of what he sees as the modern tendency, the tendency of his own century, to identify morality with the sympathetic affects, especially *Mitleid*, so as to give us a definition of morality. Nietzsche has specific arguments against the value accorded to these affects, but he also wants to advocate the view that there are several ways of living morally or ethically and the morality he wants to defend is what we can call an ethics of self-cultivation (not that Nietzsche ever promotes this ethics in explicit terms, unlike say Kant). At one point in *Dawn* he writes: ‘You say that the morality of being compassionate is a higher morality [*Moral*] than that of Stoicism? Prove it! But remember that what is “higher” and “lower” in morality is not, in turn to be measured by a moral yardstick: for there is no absolute

morality [*Moral*]. So take your rule from somewhere else – and now beware!’ (Nietzsche 2001:139) With regards to the modern prejudice, which is one of the main foci of his polemic in the book, here there is the presumption that we know what actually constitutes morality: ‘It seems *to do* every single person *good* these days to hear that society is on the road to *adapting* the individual to fit the needs of the throng and that the *individual’s happiness as well as his sacrifice* consist in feeling himself to be a useful member of the whole...’ (Nietzsche 2011: 132) As Nietzsche sees it, then, the modern emphasis is on defining the moral in terms the sympathetic affects and compassion (*Mitleid*). We can, he thinks, explain the modern in terms of a movement towards managing more cheaply, safely, and uniformly individuals in terms of ‘*large bodies and their limbs*’. This, he says, is ‘*the basic moral current of our age*’: ‘Everything that in some way supports both this drive to form bodies and limbs and its abetting drives is felt to be *good*’ (ibid.)

Nietzsche’s main target in the book is what he sees as the fundamental moral tendency of modern commercial society. Here ‘morality’ denotes the means of adapting the individual to the needs of the whole, making him a useful member of society. This requires that every individual is made to feel, as its primary emotion, a connectedness or bondedness with the whole, with society, in which anything truly individual is regarded as prodigal, costly, inimical, extravagant, and so on. Nietzsche’s great worry is that a healthy concern with self-fashioning will be sacrificed and this, in large part, informs his critique of what he sees as the cult of the sympathetic affects within modern society.

For Nietzsche it is necessary to contest the idea that there is a single moral-making morality since every code of ethics that affirms itself in an exclusive manner ‘destroys too much valuable energy and costs humanity much too dearly’ (Nietzsche

2011: 164). In the future, Nietzsche hopes, the inventive and fructifying person shall no longer be sacrificed and ‘numerous novel experiments shall be made in ways of life and modes of society’ (ibid.). When this takes place we will find that an enormous load of guilty conscience has been purged from the world. Humanity has suffered for too long from teachers of morality who wanted too much all at once and sought to lay down precepts for everyone (Nietzsche 2011: 194). In the future, care will need to be given to the most personal questions and create time for them (Nietzsche 2011: 196). Small individual questions and experiments are no longer to be viewed with contempt and impatience (Nietzsche 2011: 547). In place of what he sees as the ruling ethic of sympathy, which he thinks can assume the form of a ‘tyrannical encroachment,’ Nietzsche invites individuals to engage in self-fashioning, cultivating a self that others can look at with pleasure and that still gives vent to the expression, albeit in a subtle and delicate manner, of an altruistic drive:

*Moral fashion of a commercial society* – Behind the fundamental principle of the contemporary moral fashion: ‘moral actions are generated by sympathy (*Sympathie*) for others’, I see the work of a collective drive toward timidity masquerading behind an intellectual front: this drive desires...that life be rid of *all the dangers* it once held and that *each and every person* should help toward this end with all one’s might: therefore only actions aimed at the common security and at society’s sense of security may be accorded the rating ‘good!’ – How little pleasure people take in themselves these days, however, when such a tyranny of timidity dictates to them the uppermost moral law (*Sittengesetz*), when, without so much as a protest, they let themselves be commanded to ignore and look beyond themselves and yet have eagle-eyes for every distress and every suffering existing elsewhere! Are we not, with this prodigious intent to grate off all the rough and sharp edges from life, well on the way to turning humanity into *sand*? ... In the meantime, the question itself remains open as to whether one is *more useful* to another by immediately and constantly leaping to his side and *helping* him – which can, in any case, only transpire very superficially, provided the help doesn’t turn into a tyrannical encroachment and transformation – or by *fashioning* out of oneself something the other will behold with pleasure, a lovely, peaceful, self-enclosed garden, for

instance, with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well (Nietzsche 2011: 174).

Nietzsche's ethical commitment is clear from this aphorism: it centres on a care of self that strives for independence and self-sufficiency. One does not isolate oneself from others, but neither does one seek to effect a tyrannical encroachment on them. Instead, one offers a 'hospitable gate' through which others can freely enter and leave, and through self-cultivation one seeks to fashion a style of existing that others will behold with pleasure.

### **The Teaching of Epicurus**

Before looking at Nietzsche and Kant's interest in Epicurus let me say something about Epicurean teaching. The teaching of Epicurus is centred on the study of nature, and this is its first and most fundamental principle. But Epicurus does not restrict himself to being a philosopher-scientist simply producing a doctrine of physics. Rather, he wishes to be a teacher, and to this end he produces a summary of his system so as 'to facilitate the firm memorization of the most general doctrines, in order that at each and every opportunity [his readers] may be able to help themselves on the most important issues, to the degree that they retain their grasp on the study of nature' (Epicurus in Inwood and Gerson 1994: 5). According to one commentator, Epicurean arguments, 'have a clear therapeutic intent: by removing false beliefs concerning the universe and the ways in which the gods might be involved in its workings, they eliminate a major source of mental trouble and lead us towards a correct and beneficial conception of these matters' (Tsouna 2009: 257).

Moreover, as Foucault shows, Epicurus has an 'ethopoetic' appreciation of knowledge,



which is a mode of knowledge that provides an *ethos*. In the Epicurean texts knowledge of nature is called *phusiologia*, which is a ‘modality of knowledge (*savoir*) of nature insofar as it is philosophically relevant for the practice of the self’ (Foucault 2005: 238).<sup>3</sup> Epicurus opposes knowledge as *paideia*, which is a cultural learning that aims at glory and is little more than a kind of boastful knowledge. Foucault notes that Epicurus rejects this mode of knowledge as a culture of boasters, one mainly developed by concocters of words that seek admiration from the masses. The knowledge Epicurus promotes is one that prepares the self for the events of a life. Foucault explains:

...what does *phusiologia* do instead of producing people who are only pompous and inconsistent boasters? It *paraskeuei*, that is to say it prepares...*Paraskeue* is the equipping, the preparation of the subject and the soul so that they will be properly, necessarily, and sufficiently armed for whatever circumstance of life may arise...it is the exact opposite of *paideia* (Foucault 2005: 240).

The knowledge that is *phusiologia* serves to provide the individual with boldness and courage, what Foucault calls a kind of intrepidity, a preparedness that enables the individual to stand firm not only against the (many) beliefs that others seek to impose on him, but also against the hazards of life and the authority of those who wish to lay down the law: ‘Absence of fear, a sort of recalcitrance and spiritedness if you like: this is what *phusiologia* gives to the individuals who learn it’ (ibid.). This means that, strictly speaking, *phusiologia* is not a branch of knowledge (*savoir*), but rather a knowledge (*connaissance*) of nature, of *phusis*, to the extent that this knowledge serves as a principle of human conduct and as the criterion for setting individuals free.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this knowledge of nature is to transform the subject, one that is originally filled with fear and

terror before nature to one that is a free subject able to find within itself, ‘the possibility and means of his permanent and perfectly tranquil delight’ (Foucault 2005: 241).<sup>5</sup>

For Epicurus, then, the mind has a tendency to live in fear of nature, to be overly and unduly anxious about existence and is easily led astray by religious teachings that tempt the person to embrace metaphysical-moral doctrines, that is, doctrines that fail to appreciate that there is a natural causal order and that we, as human beings, are fully implicated in it. On Epicurean teaching the natural world is an order of things devoid of design, agency, intention, and revelatory signs. For Epicurus, what is needed for the popularization of philosophy are ‘simple principles and maxims’, ones that can aid the mind to readily assimilate, when occasions necessitate, the core doctrines derived from the study of nature: ‘...it is not possible’, he writes, ‘to know the concentrated result of our continuous overview of the universe unless one can have in oneself a comprehensive grasp by means of brief maxims of all that might also be worked out in detail with precision’ (ibid.) Epicurus states clearly the aim of the exercise: it is to bring calm to one’s life, in which one has a mind that is all too quickly agitated by our being in the world and by the things that afflict us.

From these basic philosophical principles Epicurus builds up a philosophy of nature that is highly novel and far-reaching, anticipating much modern scientific thought, as well as ecological thought (see Donald Hughes 1994). For example, he wants us to appreciate the following key insights and to then to adopt them as part of a practice of wisdom: (1) first, nothing comes into being from what is not for if it did ‘everything would come into being from everything, with no need of seeds’; (2) second, when something disappears it is not destroyed into nothing since if it was all things would have

been destroyed, 'since that into which they were dissolved does not exist'; (3) third, the totality of what exists has always been just like it is now at present and like it will always be simply because there is nothing else than what there is, that is, nothing for it to change into: '...there exists nothing in addition to the totality, which could enter into it and produce the change' (Inwood and Gerson: 6). The totality of which he speaks is made up of bodies and void. Our sense perception, he argues, testifies to the former, and it is through sense perception that we infer by reasoning what is not evident, namely, the void: if this did not exist (space and intangible nature) then bodies would be devoid of a place to be in and to move through, and it is obvious that they do move. The principles of bodies are atomic in nature, and here we refer to the composition of bodies, in which some exist as compounds and some as things from which the compounds are made. The elements out of which things are made are 'atomic and unchangeable' in that they are not destroyed into non-being but 'remain 'firmly during the dissolution of compounds, being full by nature and not being subject to dissolution in any way or fashion' (ibid.: 7).

Even when he is outlining the details of his physics, as in the letters to Herodotus and Pythocles, Epicurus never tires of drawing attention to the blessedness that comes from knowledge, by which he means knowledge of nature, including meteorological phenomena. The task is to strip the workings of the natural world of the activity of the gods and to free it of agency and teleology. In the Epicurean teaching natural phenomena admit of a plurality of explanations, but in spite of this plurality – say with respect to explaining lightning, thunder, the formation of clouds, the waning and waxing of the moon, the variations of the length of nights and days, and so on – the task is to ascertain natural causes, and in this respect knowledge of celestial phenomena has no other end

‘than peace of mind and firm conviction’ (see letter to Pythocles). Epicurus states clearly and emphatically:

For in the study of nature we must not conform to empty assumptions and arbitrary laws, but follow the promptings of the facts; for our life has no need now of unreason and false opinion; our one need is untroubled existence (Epicurus in Diogenes Laertius 1931: X: 87, 615).

In the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus seeks to identify what the study of philosophy can do for the health of the soul and on the premise that, ‘pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly’ (Epicurus in Inwood and Gerson, 1994: 30). Epicurus stresses that he does not mean the pleasures of the profligate or of consumption; rather, the task, is to become accustomed to simple, non-extravagant ways of living. Although Epicurus regards *voluptas* as the highest good, in which we can take delight in all that nature has provided to stimulate pleasure, it is an error to suppose that for him happiness is to be found ‘simply in eating, drinking, gambling, wenching, and other such pastimes’ (Jones 1989: 152). Both Kant and Nietzsche fully appreciate this point. The key goal for Epicurus is to liberate the body from pain and remove disturbances from the soul. Central to his counsel is the thought that we need to accustom ourselves to believing that death is nothing to us; our longing for immortality needs to be removed: ‘...there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life’ (Epicurus in Inwood and Gerson 1994: 29). What appears to be the most frightening of bad things should be nothing to us, ‘since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist’ (ibid.). The wise human

being 'neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad' (ibid.) If, as Epicurus supposes, everything good and bad consists in sense-experience, then death is simply the privation of sense-experience. The goal of philosophical training, then, is freedom from disturbance and anxiety in which we reach a state of *ataraxia* or psychic tranquillity: the body is free from pain and the soul is liberated from distress. James Porter describes this state as one of 'stable (*katastematic*) pleasure,' and, furthermore, as the 'basal experience of pleasure' on account of it being the criterion of all pleasure. In this sense, then, it is more than a condition of simple or mere happiness: 'it seems to operate as life's internal formal principle, as that which gives moral sense and shape to a life that is lived...' (Porter 2003: 214) Phillip Mitsis corroborates this insight when he suggests that Epicurus is not analysing pleasure primarily as a subjective state of consciousness or mental event, but rather 'as the overall healthy condition or functioning of a natural organism': pleasure is to serve as the objective, natural goal that structures our actions and provides our lives with an overall unity and organization (Mitsis 1989: 8).

For Nietzsche the garden of Epicurus does not represent, as might be supposed, a retreat from existence, but is for him a place where one can find the time necessary to undertake the labours of the free spirit. The Epicurean attachment of life entails a specific mode of being in the world, a new attunement to nature as a source of pleasure, removing oneself from the false infinite and stripping away various disabling phantasms such as the idea of immortality with its regime of infinite pleasures and eternal punishments. There remains a strong and firm desire for life but, as Nietzsche points out, this voluptuous appreciation and enjoyment of life is of a modest kind: it is modest in terms of the kinds

of pleasure it wants from existence and cultivates, and in terms of its acknowledgment of the realities of a human existence. This is a happiness that Nietzsche appreciates and admires, seeing it as the essential component of the heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing in which the mind's illusions about the world are stripped away and one is left with a way of being in the world that brings true pleasure since the mind has been liberated from the terrors, superstitions, and phantoms that disturb it. Epicurus is one of the first naturalists since he speaks about nature rather than the gods and wants us to focus our attention on this. This, then, is a philosophy as a project of demystification, with the human being living a modest life. In today's world, with its frenzy of consumption, its lessons in how to live well could not be more relevant.

### **Nietzsche on Epicurus and Epictetus**

Let me now turn to illuminating the reception of Epicurus we find in *Dawn* and in Nietzsche's middle period in general. In his middle period Nietzsche singles out for special praise Epicurus and Epictetus as figures in whom wisdom assumes bodily form. The point is perhaps obvious: philosophy is not simply sophistry or mere *paideia* but an incorporated wisdom that enables the individual to negotiate and affirm the most demanding and challenging questions of existence, notably including tests of the self, such as the fact of our mortality and the task of how to live.

For the middle period Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have graced the earth and the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing' (Nietzsche 2012: *The Wanderer and His Shadow* 295). In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche, with typical exaggeration, claims to experience the character of Epicurus perhaps differently to

everybody else. He adds: ‘Whatever I hear or read of him, I enjoy the happiness of the afternoon of antiquity’ (Nietzsche 1974: 45). Nietzsche admires Epicurus for cultivating a modest existence and in two respects: first, in having ‘spiritual and emotional joyfulness (*Freudigkeit*) in place of frequent individual pleasures,’ as well as ‘equilibrium of all movements and pleasure in this harmony in place of excitement and intoxication’ (Nietzsche 2012: p.400), and, second, in withdrawing from social ambition and living in a garden as opposed to living publicly in the market-place (see Young 2010: 279). As Nietzsche stresses, ‘A little garden, figs, little cheeses and in addition three or four good friends – this was luxuriance for Epicurus’ (Nietzsche 2012: *The Wanderer and His Shadow* 192).<sup>6</sup>

What appeals to Nietzsche about Epicurus is the teaching on mortality and the general attempt to liberate the mind from unjustified fears and anxieties. If, as Pierre Hadot has suggested, philosophical therapeutics is centred on a concern with the healing of our own lives so as to return us to the joy of existing (Hadot 1995: 87), then in the texts of his middle period Nietzsche can be seen to be an heir to this ancient tradition. Indeed, if there is one crucial component to Nietzsche’s philosophical therapeutics in the texts of his middle period that he keeps returning to again and again it is the need for spiritual joyfulness and the task of cultivating in ourselves, after centuries of training by morality and religion, the joy in existing. In the final aphorism of *The Wanderer and his Shadow* Nietzsche writes, for example:

Only to the *ennobled human being* may the freedom of spirit be given; to him alone does *alleviation of life* draw nigh and salve his wounds; he is the first who may say that he lives for the sake of *joyfulness* [*Freudigkeit*] and for the sake of no further goal... (Nietzsche: WS 350)

In the middle period, then, Epicurus is an attractive figure for Nietzsche because of the attention given to the care of self, and also because he conceives philosophy not as a theoretical discourse but one that, first and foremost, is a kind of practical activity aimed at the attainment of eudemonia or the flourishing life (see Young 2010: 279ff.). Nietzsche wants free spirits to take pleasure in existence, involving taking pleasure in themselves and in friendship. Nietzsche is keen to encourage human beings to cultivate an attitude towards existence in which they accept their mortality and attain serenity about their dwelling on the earth, to conquer unjustified fears, and to reinstitute the role played by chance and chance events in the world and in human existence (see Nietzsche 2011: 13, 33, 36; see also Hadot 1995: 87, 223, 252). In the middle period Epicurus is one of Nietzsche's chief inspirations in his effort to liberate himself from the metaphysical need and to aid humanity in its need to now cure its neuroses. The task, Nietzsche says, is to live in terms of 'a constant spiritual joyfulness [*Freudigkeit*]' (Nietzsche 1997: 292) and to prize 'the three good things': grandeur, repose or peace, and sunlight, in which these things answer to thoughts that elevate, thoughts that quieten, thoughts that enlighten, and, finally, 'to thoughts that share in all three of these qualities, in which everything earthly comes to be transfigured: that is the realm where the great *trinity of joy* rules [*Freude*]' (Nietzsche 2012: *The Wanderer and His Shadow* 332).

At this time Nietzsche is committed to a philosophical therapeutics in which the chief aim is to temper emotional and mental excess. Where science is needed now, as part of a general therapeutic practice of reflection and observation, is in tempering the human mind: 'shouldn't we, the *more spiritual* human beings of an age that is visibly catching fire in more and more places, have to grasp all available means for quenching and cooling,



so that we will remain at least as steady...and moderate as we are now...' (Nietzsche 1997: 38) The illnesses and neuroses we encounter in humanity require that 'ice-packs' be placed on them (ibid.). Nietzsche speaks of the 'over-excitation' of our 'nervous and thinking powers' reaching a dangerous critical point in our present and notes that 'the cultivated classes of Europe have in fact become thoroughly neurotic' (Nietzsche 1997: 244).

Nietzsche's search for a non-fanatical (*nicht fanatisch*) mode of living leads him to the Stoic Epictetus. Although this ancient thinker was a slave, the exemplar he invokes is without class and is possible in every class. He serves as a counterweight to modern idealists who are greedy for expansion. Epictetus's ideal human being, lacking all fear of God and believing rigorously in reason, 'is not a preacher of penitence' (Nietzsche 2011: 546). He has a pride in himself that does not wish to trouble and encroach on others: 'he admits a certain mild rapprochement and does not wish to spoil anyone's good mood – Yes, he can smile! There is a great deal of ancient humanity in this ideal!' (Nietzsche: 546) The Epictetean is self-sufficient, 'defends himself against the outside world' and "lives in a state of highest valor' (ibid.). Nietzsche offers this portrait of the Epictetean as a point of contrast to the Christian. The Christian lives in hope (in the consolation of 'unspeakable glories' to come) and allows himself to be given gifts, expecting the best of life not to come from himself and his own resources but from divine love and grace. By contrast Epictetus 'does not hope and does allow his best to be given him – he possesses it, he holds it valiantly in his hand, and he would take on the whole world if it tries to rob him of it' (ibid.). This portrait of Epictetus contra the Christian provides us with a set of invaluable insights into how Nietzsche conceives the difference between fanatical and

non-fanatical modes of living: one way of life is self-sufficient and finds its pride in this, renouncing hope and living in the present; the other devotes itself to living through and for others, its attention is focused on the future (as that which is to come), and it lacks the quiet and calm dignity of self-sufficiency that is the Epictetean ideal.

Nietzsche also admires Epictetus on account of his dedication to his own ego and for resisting the glorification of thinking and living for others (Nietzsche 2011: 131). Of course, this is a partial and selective appropriation of Epictetus on Nietzsche's part.

Although his chief concerns are with integrity and self-command, Epictetus is also known for his Stoic cosmopolitanism in which individuals have an obligation to care for their fellow human beings, and Nietzsche is silent about this aspect of Stoic teaching. Nevertheless, it is true that the ethical outlook of Epictetus does invite people 'to value their individual selves over everything else,' (Long 2002: 3) and for Nietzsche he serves as a useful contrast to Christian thinkers such as Pascal, who considered the ego to be something hateful:

If, as Pascal and Christianity claim, our ego (*Ich*) is always *hateful*, how might we possibly ever allow or assume that someone else could love it – be it God or a human being! It would go against all decency to let oneself be loved knowing full well that one only *deserves* hate – not to mention other feelings of repulsion. - 'But this is precisely the kingdom of mercy'. – So is your love-thy-neighbour mercy? Your compassion mercy? Well, if these things are possible for you, go still one step further: love yourselves out of mercy – then you won't need your God any more at all, and the whole drama of original sin and redemption will play itself out to the end in you yourselves (Nietzsche 2011: 79).

Nietzsche wishes to replace morality, including the morality of compassion, with a care of self. We go wrong when we fail to attend to the needs of the ego and flee from it.

We can stick to the idea that benevolence and beneficence are what constitute a good

person, but such a person must first be benevolently and beneficently disposed towards himself or herself. A 'bad' person is one that runs from himself and hates himself, causing injury to himself. Such a person is rescuing himself from himself in others, and this running from the ego (*ego*) living in others, for others 'has, heretofore, been called, just as unreflectedly as assuredly, "*unegotistical*" and consequently "*good*"! (Nietzsche 2011: 516) Such passages clearly indicate, I think, that Nietzsche has what I am crediting him with in *Dawn*, namely, an intimate concern with the care of self through self-cultivation.

In his book *Nietzsche and Modern Times* Laurence Lampert notes that the portrait of Epicurus that can be drawn from Nietzsche's scattered reflections provides us with an important component in understanding his genealogy of philosophy. He rightly notes, however, that Nietzsche provides his readers only with fragmentary glimpses of his interpretation of Epicurus even though it forms a major element in his re-working of the history of philosophy (Lampert 1993: 423). Lampert claims that Nietzsche's recovery of Epicurus forms a key component in his new history of philosophy, providing a point of access to its all-important themes such as the philosophical and scientific tradition prior to Socrates – typically demoted in the history of philosophy to the status of mere *pre-Socratic* thought – that Epicurus sought to preserve (Lampert 1993: 427). He further argues that Nietzsche experienced Epicurus in a way different to everybody else because he was able to experience him as an heir to what was best in Greek science. However, this cannot be right since it is precisely in these terms that F. A. Lange writes in praise of him and that Nietzsche knew well. Much better, I think, is when Lampert claims that Nietzsche located a peculiar happiness in Epicurus's life and teaching. He notes that the

happiness of Epicurus does not stem from Epicurean *ataraxia*, conceived as an indifference to all passions, but that it arises *from a passion*, from a *Wollust* ‘grown modest and transformed into the observing eye that watched the sun set out on the magnificence of antiquity’ (ibid. 423). Curiously perhaps, and going against the intuitions of most readers of him, such an appreciation of Epicurus can also be found in Kant, and to which I now turn. For Kant, the teaching of Epicurus is a cheerful one: but what is the character of this cheerfulness?

### **Kant on Epicurus and Self-Cultivation**

Interestingly, in *Dawn* Kant is seen by Nietzsche in a largely favourable light: in spite of the alleged remnant of ascetic cruelty within the moral law, Kant is seen as standing largely outside the movement of modern morality with its emphasis on the sympathetic affects (Nietzsche 2011: 132; 339). It is the relation to Kant on self-cultivation I wish to explore now in this section of the essay.

Kant is an interesting modern figure who he explicitly speaks of the care of life (Kant 1997: 149) and caring for oneself (Kant 1997: 371) and in ways that fruitfully connect with the legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity, including figures such as Epicurus, Diogenes, and Zeno the Stoic. We can ask: is Nietzsche right to think he experiences the character of Epicurus perhaps differently to everybody else, and as he claims in *The Gay Science*? Much depends on what is meant here, and his articulation of his position is typically enigmatic. However, Nietzsche is far from being alone in his judgement that Epicurus is a figure in whom wisdom assumes bodily form: such an

insight is also part of the young Marx's appreciation of Epicurus, and also, perhaps surprisingly, of that we find in Kant. In his lectures on ethics Kant distinguishes between a 'brutish Epicureanism' and a 'true Epicureanism' (Kant 1997: 66), and even goes so far as to contest the widespread idea that Epicurus's philosophy is one of pleasure (Kant 1997: 46), seeing him espouse instead 'voluptas' conceived as a 'constantly cheerful heart' (Kant 1997: 386). For Kant, Epicurus teaches contentment with oneself and in this self-contentment is to be found an embodied wisdom. It is an embodied wisdom in that it is an embodiment of *reason*. Kant writes:

Epicurus did in fact enjoin independence of all natural things, and told us: Act so that you can be content with your own person. Be resigned in all circumstances, learn to endure evils that cannot be averted, cherish all the joys and pleasures of life in such a way that they can be dispensable to you...he demanded, therefore, a cheerfulness that arose from and was founded on contentment with oneself. He demanded intellectual desire, i.e., desire that was confined to the lawfulness of reason (ibid.).

For Kant, Epicurus is admirable in his wisdom since he is content with the whole condition of being human.

For Kant, ethics, including the Epicurean variety, is bound up with self-cultivation and love of self, properly understood. Kant explicitly speaks in his lectures on ethics of cultivating oneself and expresses his interest in theories of 'autarchia,' that is, 'the capacity to master oneself, to possess oneself, to be sufficient to oneself' (Kant 1997: 390). For Kant, the successors of Epicurus lost sight of the morality of the system 'and pursued an ethic that was coupled only with a new enjoyment of pleasure' (Kant 1997: 387). He adds, '...they heaped up their needs, but also drew upon themselves a misery that was all the greater, the greater the want of morality' (ibid.). Self-sufficiency has as

its basis what Kant calls 'good cheer' and 'the culture of our soul'. Morality means imposing a regimen of discipline and control over oneself, a mastery and care of self, so he writes about self-love:

Under the duty of love towards oneself, we cannot understand, as is commonly supposed, the duty of well-wishing, or self-love (*philautia* in relation to others), but rather the duty to act, that one may cherish, in virtue of one's actions, a moral satisfaction towards oneself. It is then that we fulfil the duty of love towards ourselves (Kant 1997: 389).

Kant then enumerates what he takes to be the requirements of self-sufficiency in existence. I do not propose to follow the details of his argument here. I am not, of course, claiming that Kant is a straightforward Epicurean, but I am arguing that in his writings is to be found a nuanced and enlightened appreciation of Epicurus. If, Kant proposes, we construe Epicurus as a deeply moral thinker then we find that he cannot be subject to the censure visited upon him by the Stoics (Kant 1997: 386). Indeed, Kant is keen to supplement the Stoic way of life with the Epicurean mode of living. In a consideration of the ethical ascetics Kant notes the sturdy and vigorous character of the Stoic exercise of virtue, involving bearing the misfortunes of life and renouncing its superfluous enjoyments, and describes it as a kind of dietetics designed to keep the human being morally healthy. Then he adds: 'But health is only a negative kind of well-being; health itself cannot be felt. Something must be added which affords life agreeable enjoyment and is still simply moral'. He concludes by suggesting that this 'something is the virtuous Epicurus' ideal of an ever joyful heart' (Kant 1983: 154). Kant contrasts this ethical asceticism with what he calls 'monkish ascetics' in which the ethical regimen remains one of 'superstitious fear' and 'hypocritical loathing of oneself' that works with

self-torture and mortification of the flesh (Kant 1983: 155). Here the aim of ethical practice is not, in fact, virtue but ‘fanatical purgation of sin’ through the inflicting of punishment on the self. Such practice conceals a secret hatred of the commands of virtue and only serves us to make us sullen, joyless, and gloomy. Kant insists, following an Epicurean lead, that: ‘The discipline which man practises on himself can therefore become meritorious and exemplary only through the cheer which accompanies it...(ethical) gymnastics makes us hardy and cheerful in the consciousness of freedom regained’ (Kant 1983: 155).

Kant brings out better than Nietzsche the fact that the Epicurean way of life entails the practice of a moral freedom. He writes:

...if we bear in mind that Epicurus promised to give the disciples who wanted to visit him, in his garden at Athens, nothing else but pure water and a share of his *polenta*, we can certainly see that he limited the needs of nature to the smallest and most easily satisfiable necessities... (Kant 1997: 385)

This is an ethics of self-care since it teaches us strive for an independence from natural things and natural necessity. The aim is not for Kant, let me stress, to achieve a complete deprivation of natural necessities since we require them for our own conservation: given our physical nature, human beings are not capable of total self-sufficiency. However, the task is an ethical one of attaining a self-contentment through self-care, and this for Kant means achieving a level of independence from natural compulsion. This is what he admires the true Epicurean for and explains how he is able to locate in Epicurus a genuine ethical teaching and practice. *Voluptas* means the enjoyment of life and well-being, but the enjoyment at stake is not merely sensual

enjoyment since, according to Kant, Epicurus thought it a duty to sacrifice such enjoyment to the performance of virtuous actions (Kant 1997: 254). To attain the highest good requires for the Epicurean what Kant calls ‘an adequacy of conduct’. With regards to the wisdom of this practice Kant argues that it enjoins moral practice with a pleasure of existence: ‘The foundation of it,’ he writes, ‘was thus a great enlargement of the knowledge of all means of pleasure, and the end could be attained only by employing them, so it was a positive principle, and coupled with activity’ (Kant 1997: 254).

### **Conclusion**

In *Dawn* Nietzsche shows an interest in how duty can, after years of practice, be transformed into a pleasurable inclination and in which the rights of others – to whom our duties and inclinations refer – turn into occasions for pleasant feelings for us. His worry with respect to Kant is that he has so construed the moral law that duty must always assume a burdensome form for us and can never become custom and practice – it is on account of this that he specifically locates a ‘tiny remnant of ascetic cruelty’ in Kant’s ethical thinking (Nietzsche 2011: 339). However, Kant shows himself to be an incisive interpreter of Epicurus and closer to Nietzsche’s appreciation of the great sage than might be supposed. Nietzsche is so occupied with attacking the presumptions of morality in *Dawn* and other texts that he neglects to sufficiently point out the ethical character of the Epicurean teaching and the extent to which it informs his own conception of ethical practice. Nietzsche locates, then, the residues of ascetic cruelty in Kant’s moral philosophy, but I’d like to suggest that this is an over-statement and that it is Kant’s



appreciation of true Epicureanism that indicates a different ethical practice to what Nietzsche supposes. Let me conclude by citing these lines from Kant's lectures on ethics:

Conscience should not be a tyrant within us. We can always be cheerful in our actions, without offending it. Those who have a tormenting conscience equally weary of it entirely, and finally send it on vacation (Kant 1997: 135).

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<sup>1</sup> This essay utilizes material on Epicurus and on Nietzsche published in 'Nietzsche and Epicurus: In Search of the Heroic-Idyllic,' in Mark T. Conard (ed.), *Nietzsche and the Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 121-145. The material on Kant is completely new to this essay.

<sup>2</sup> References to Nietzsche's texts are to section and aphorism numbers unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Epicurus writes: 'The study of nature does not make men practice boastful speech or display a learning highly coveted by the rabble; rather, it makes men modest and self-sufficient, taking pride in the good that lies in themselves, not in their estate', *The Essential Epicurus*, trans. O'Connor, 1993, 81. On the need to avoid public opinion and accolades of the crowd see also *Vatican Sayings* 29 (79).

<sup>4</sup> For further insight into how Foucault deploys the contrast between *savoir* and *connaissance* see Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know. Lectures at the Collège de France 1970-1971* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), including the opening lecture of 9 December 1970, and the translator's note.

<sup>5</sup> See Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 27 (*Essential Epicurus*, 79): 'In other occupations, reward comes with difficulty after their completion, but in philosophy delight coincides with knowledge. For enjoyment does not come after learning, but learning and enjoyment come together'.

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<sup>6</sup> Young incisively describes the asceticism advocated by Epicurus as a ‘eudaemonic asceticism’, which is clearly very different to ascetic practices of world denial and self-denial. Young 2010: 279.