

Epicurus: A Case Study of Nietzsche's Conception of a "Typical Decadent"

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ABSTRACT: Nietzsche's portrayal of Epicurus in his middle period of 1878–1882 is one of an inspiring figure and kindred spirit, which is then generally considered by commentators to change to a more ambivalent one in his later writings, particularly those from 1886 to 1888. In this article, I argue that this change in Nietzsche's opinion of Epicurus can be explained by his gradual realization that Epicurus advocates a particular form of Greek decadence, that neither Nietzsche nor the secondary literature on him ever actually formally name. As a consequence of this promotion of a life-inhibiting value that potentially undermines the flourishing of humanity, Nietzsche thinks Epicurus should be construed not just as a "decadent" but, in fact, a "typical" one, which I will argue is a distinct opprobrium that the secondary literature to date often cites, but does not fully expound.

KEYWORDS: Epicurus, decadence, nihilism, ideals, *ataraxia*, hedonism

Introduction

After Socrates and Plato, there are more references to Epicurus in Nietzsche's *oeuvre* than to any other ancient philosopher. Nietzsche envisaged Epicurus to be someone like himself, in that he was bent on toppling the pernicious effects of the ideals of Platonism and sought to cure humanity of its "*spirit of revenge*" (Z II: "On Redemption").¹ In particular, Nietzsche endorses Epicurus' worldliness, which strove to redirect attention from the prevailing abstract metaphysical considerations of immortality toward the concerns of mortal life. Hence, in view of the burgeoning contemporary scientific endeavor that also allayed people's fear of death and hell, he exclaims, "Epicurus triumphs anew!" (D 72). Yet when taken overall, Nietzsche's various comments paint an evolving picture.² His portrayal of Epicurus begins with admiration for an inspiring figure in his middle period of 1878 to 1882,³ where he describes Epicurus as

“one of the greatest of men, the inventor of a heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing” (WS 295). Yet Nietzsche’s opinion of Epicurus is generally considered to change to a far more ambivalent one in his later writings (particularly those of 1886 to 1888),⁴ branding his philosophy as a form of Greek decadence (KSA 13:14[99])⁵ and Epicurus himself as “a *typical* decadent.” The latter remark is made—in spite of a prior one that acknowledges Epicurus’ “strong dose of Greek vitality and nerves”—due to his zealous promotion of a hedonism that fears pain, which Nietzsche regards as essentially “a *religion of love*” (A 30).

I will argue in this article that the change in Nietzsche’s estimation of Epicurus can be explained primarily by his growing awareness that Epicurus advocates a *particular* variant of Greek decadence, one that neither Nietzsche nor the secondary literature on him ever choose to *formally* name. Once one comprehends just what this instance of decadence is, it becomes clear why Nietzsche thinks Epicurus should be construed not just as a “decadent” but, in fact, as a “typical” one, which I will further argue is a distinct opprobrium that the secondary literature often cites but does not fully expound. I believe these texts—particularly where decadence is not even their primary theme—at worst ignore, or at best misconstrue, what Nietzsche’s distinct terminology characterizes.

I will begin by identifying the particular form of Greek decadence that Nietzsche associates with Epicurus, and then demonstrate that Nietzsche’s evolving depiction of him develops into a critique formulated in the distinctive traits of a decadent.⁶ I will expand my analysis by clarifying what exactly Nietzsche means by regarding some decadents and not others as “typical”—and why he applies this archetypal distinction to Epicurus—before concluding with some general remarks on the veracity of Nietzsche’s later portrayal of him as a decadent.

Epicurus' Greek Decadent Ideal

If, as I believe, decadence is the key to understanding Nietzsche's evolving picture of Epicurus, the first hurdle we face is that Nietzsche makes no sustained and systematic attempt to explain the condition or how he came to discern its presence. Decadence is referred to in his later published writings as if the reader is already fully aware of its actuality and possesses an understanding of its meaning and associated behaviors.⁷ Nietzsche therefore makes few concessions to the reader with regard to this conception, and he does not clearly and comprehensively elucidate what exactly he means by it or how the phenomenon functions in any specific detail. He does, however, do this to a greater degree—but in a highly fragmented manner—in his notebooks, where one can discern his attempts to construct a theory and methodology pertaining to it.⁸ For example, Nietzsche states in his notebooks that Greek philosophy by the time of Socrates is supposed already to have been in thrall to decadence (*KSA* 13:11[375]),⁹ and he goes so far as to pick Pyrrho as its highpoint (*KSA* 13:14[87]). Nietzsche evidently views Pyrrho to be such an exemplar of decadence that, in another entry, he puts him on par with Socrates in a proposed exposition of philosophy as a decadent phenomenon (*KSA* 13:15[5]), while in a further entry Epicurus is also cited as a specific example along with Pyrrho: “Philosophy as decadence of the wise fatigued one. Pyrrho [. . .] Comparison with Epicurus” (*KSA* 13:14[99], p. 276).¹⁰

Nietzsche, who was originally a trained classicist, does not say why he makes the comparison, but he repeats it in the same entry and gives us a clue: “Pyrrho, like Epicurus, two forms of Greek decadence” (*KSA* 13:14[99], p. 277).¹¹ Nietzsche seems to say that there are (at least) two different types of Greek decadence; a few lines later he tells us both represent “a state in which one is neither sick nor well, neither alive nor dead.” Although some commentators cite

this notebook entry as evidence of Nietzsche's depiction of both Pyrrho and Epicurus as contemporary but divergent exemplars of Greek decadence, it would appear that none make a formal identification of the quality that their decadence apparently shares.¹² Since both philosophers believed that philosophy was a way of life—effectively a practice seeking to attain a certain state referred to in the second part of the last quote¹³—I therefore believe this passage makes a cryptic reference to a state of *ataraxia*,¹⁴ which is normally simply translated as “tranquility,” though the true meaning is perhaps better captured by “freedom from disturbance.”¹⁵ If my interpretation is correct, both philosophers would be classified as decadents according to Nietzsche because they aspire by different means to attaining the ideal of a state of serenity. For Pyrrho, this freedom from disturbance is accomplished through a skeptical withholding of judgment, and for Epicurus by following advocating a variety of ethical hedonism.

In conjunction to the escapist pursuit of *ataraxia*, there is perhaps another reason for the comparison, which will also frame the following discussion. According to Nietzsche, decadence can manifest itself as skepticism along with nihilism (*KSA* 13:14[86]),¹⁶ and Nietzsche explicitly associates Pyrrho with these two viewpoints (*KSA* 13:14[99], 13:15[58]).¹⁷ In his comparison of Pyrrho with Epicurus, Nietzsche regards the former as more nihilistic (*KSA* 13:14[99]),¹⁸ thereby implying the latter is too, and regards both as practitioners of a skeptical attitude on the value of the world. For Nietzsche, Pyrrho is a closet Greek Buddhist (*KSA* 13:14[99]),¹⁹ and Epicurus is a proto-crypto Christian (*GS* 370; *NCW* “We Antipodes”), and their different philosophies reflect tenets of their distinctive underlying religious beliefs, which have at least one thing in common: “The two belong together as nihilistic religions—they are religions of decadence” (*A* 20).²⁰

As one might expect then, the later Nietzsche's developing interest in decadence—and in particular the growing realization that his own judgment had been clouded by the malady²¹—seems to change his earlier positive perception of Epicurus and the ideal of *ataraxia*. The approximate juncture of Nietzsche's change of heart is well documented in general terms in the secondary literature.²² For example, Julian Young, states that *WS* (1880) is so “impregnated by Epicurean philosophy [that . . .] Nietzsche's concept of happiness at least includes Epicurean *ataraxia* as a crucial ingredient,”²³ and furthermore, “[t]he spirit of Epicurus presides over *Dawn* as it did over its predecessor.”²⁴ Michael Ure concurs with Young's (and others') assessment,²⁵ and argues that with the publication of *GS* in 1882, “Nietzsche reverses his judgment of Epicureanism: he no longer interprets it as a means of or signpost to an affirmative philosophy, but as a philosophical way of life that is symptomatic of life denial.”²⁶ For Ure, one passage in particular now portrays Epicurus' ideal of happiness as a solution to the problem of suffering, as a superficial invention by someone seeking to escape his own distress:

Only someone who is continually suffering could invent such happiness—the happiness of an eye before which the sea of existence has grown still and which now cannot get enough of seeing the surface and this colourful, tender, quivering skin of the sea: never before has voluptuousness been so modest. (*GS* 45)

More specifically—and perhaps less well documented—is that further doubts²⁷ can found in Nietzsche's notebooks of 1883,²⁸ although his regard for Epicurus was evidently still high at times.²⁹ He states in one entry: “Types, *how* the Overhuman must *live*; as an Epicurean god” (*KSA* 10:16[85], p. 529).³⁰ Yet in another entry written a few months earlier—which predates the explicitly stated interest in decadence that is found in his published works of 1888—Nietzsche

now disparagingly portrays Epicurus as advocating that life has a final purpose that consisted in the attainment of (a refashioned variant of) *ataraxia*:

For *Epicurus* everything depends on the *correct weighing* of pleasure against displeasure: consequently φρόνησις [*phronesis*]³¹ is the main virtue, the foundation: *prudence-morality*. The significance of sensual pleasure is to free us from desires and needs that disturb the soul's ἀταραξία [*ataraxia*]. Happiness as the *final purpose of the individual life*. Aristotle and All! So it is the domination of the *concept of purpose*, which has so far spoiled all moralists. “There must be a ‘why’ of life!” That even the *rational, conscious life belongs* to the development of *purposeless life*—ego. (*KSA* 10:7[209], p. 307).³²

From this point onward, Nietzsche’s opinion of Epicurus clearly appears to have changed. A notebook entry from early 1884 substantiates Ure’s arguably premature diagnosis: “And Epicurus: what did he enjoy when the pain stopped?—that is the happiness of a sufferer and also a sick person” (*KSA* 11:25[17], p. 16).³³ Hence, while Epicurus does indeed reject Platonism and dispenses with ideal forms and immortal souls, he nevertheless remains dependent, like “all moralists,” on finding some ultimate purpose for life—which in his case is happiness. Unlike Nietzsche, who states his own view in the final sentence, Epicurus allegedly cannot fathom that life does not have any such final end and meaning and is “purposeless”—a view here he later reiterates when discussing the error of free will (*TI* “Errors” 7-8). Nietzsche now comes to view Epicurus as evidently weak, a proponent of a world-weary ethical hedonism that reflects a desire to put an end to suffering (out of fear of pain), for “he who suffers most and is poorest in life would need mainly mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed” (*GS* 370; *NCW* “We Antipodes”). Nietzsche’s evolving depiction starts to develop into a critique of Epicurus couched in the characteristic predilections of a decadent, which is the theme I turn to now.

Epicurus' Decadent Traits

Nietzsche never explicitly lists the attributes of a decadent.³⁴ In general terms he considers them to be the “ill-constituted [Mißrathenen]” who cannot help but act out their constitutive contradictions that are part of the physiological constitution (*KSA* 13:11[371], 13:23[1]).³⁵ Their inherent physiological weakness leads the individual’s everyday life-governing drives and instincts—such as the drives for food or sex that direct behavior—astray, pointing them in the wrong direction.³⁶ This corrupted bodily configuration leads to a growing disparity between the cognitive and volitional resources that saps an individual’s affective energies, and results in a general exhaustion (*CW* 5). A corresponding set of psychological weaknesses develop that entails that the decadent wastes his ever-diminishing energy in pursuits of a harmful orientation, such as being driven by selfless motives that devalue the importance of the individual’s desires and needs. The decadent opts for what denies life over what promotes life, for he erroneously believes that it is life-enhancing (*TI* “Skirmishes” 35). Hence, in one passage from *EH* we are told that “complete decadents always choose the means that hurt themselves” (*EH* “Wise” 2).³⁷ In another, Nietzsche is somewhat more specific. The inherent weakness and inhibited agency of decadents is reflected in their knowledge claims and resulting choice of supporting ideals, which denote a specific preference in rejecting reality in favor of metaphysical abstractions:

Knowledge, saying yes to reality, is just as necessary for the strong as cowardice and *fleeing* in the face of reality—which is to say the “ideal”—is for the weak, who are inspired by weakness . . . They are not free to know: decadents *need* lies, it is one of the conditions for their preservation. (*EH* “Books: *BT*” 2)

The context of this passage is Nietzsche’s retrospective interpretation of his earlier portrayal of Socrates in *BT* as “the instrument of Greek disintegration,” and—just like Epicurus—he is

categorized “as a typical decadent.” Socrates’ advocating of rationality at any price is now construed by Nietzsche as promoting a “dangerous” emasculation of humanity’s instinct that ultimately “undermines life,” which is then followed by him contrasting a strong, life-affirming instinct to a degenerative, weak, and decadent one that turns the individual against life (*EH* “Books: *BT*” 1).

In Nietzsche’s notebooks we find other incarnations of such a weak instinct. One manifestation is an epistemological consideration, which is reflected in Epicurus’ “hatred for dialectics,” together with a skeptical but deficient manner of assessing knowledge claims that result in his life-inhibiting ideal (*KSA* 13:14[99]).³⁸ In an entry entitled “Moral values even in theory of knowledge,” Epicurus is named along with fellow decadents Socrates (*EH* “Books: *BT*” 1), Plato (*TI* “Ancients” 2), Pascal (*NCW* “We Antipodes”), and Kant (*A* 11; *TI* “Reason” 6), as someone who “denied the possibility of knowledge, in order to retain moral (or hedonistic) values as the highest values” (*KSA* 12:9[160]).³⁹ Nietzsche seems to be ascribing to all these decadents the specific trait of being a “moralistic skeptic.” According to Nietzsche, “moralistic skepticism [die moralistische Sceptis]” is a pivotal requirement in the emergence of nihilism, which, in an extreme form, supposes that there is no value in the world (*KSA* 12:9[3]).⁴⁰ This nihilism is, Nietzsche concludes, “a result of the moral interpretation of the world” (*KSA* 12:7[43], p. 309).⁴¹ Nietzsche therefore suspects that Epicurus—as with Socrates, Pyrrho, and others—is engaged in a struggle against knowledge that is being fought in favor of morality (*KSA* 13:14[141]).⁴²

In his analysis of the skeptics of antiquity, Nietzsche concludes that morality remained the highest value for them. Like all philosophies, skepticism has a moral origin or aim based on a questioning of the worth of this world, and eventually leads to the construction of ideal—

ultimately depraved *qua* revengeful—counter-worlds. Nietzsche concludes then that all philosophers are therefore decadents:

Morality as the supreme value, in all phases of philosophy (even among the skeptics).
Result: this world is good for nothing, there must be a “real world.” What really determines the supreme value here? What is morality really? The instinct of decadence; it is the exhausted and disinherited who in this way take their revenge and play the master—
(*KSA* 13:14[137])⁴³

As we saw from the passage above, Epicurus is seen as someone who partakes in a moral evaluation of the world that he eventually finds to be worthless. For Nietzsche, this is a kind of “weak” skepticism that is really a veiled repudiation of the skeptical denial of truth. By contrast a “strong” skepticism—the type he advocates—is a creative affirmation of this conception of the absence of truth that favors a perspectival orientation instead,⁴⁴ one he associates with greatness (*A* 54)⁴⁵ and intellectual honesty (*KSA* 13:15[28]).⁴⁶ For Nietzsche, “strong” skepticism advocates a sense of questioning and challenging of existing beliefs and values, and is a necessary tool to assist in unmasking the incarnations of decadence we find around us. This epistemological weakness then—which is also extended to encompass science as well as we shall see below—is implicit in a related characteristic of weakness pertaining to their choice of supporting ideals which reject reality in favor of the metaphysical.

Nietzsche’s contention that Epicurus also displays a weakness in his metaphysical commitments is somewhat ironic considering he lauds his apparent distaste for Platonism. Nevertheless, he construes Epicurus as advocating a flight from reality out of weakness in dealing with the uncertainty of a terrifying and perplexing world (*BGE* 7). Just as the fellow decadent Plato “is a coward in the face of reality” (*TI* “Ancients” 2), Nietzsche claims Epicurus

possesses “*the instinct of hatred for reality*” in his quest to avoid pain and suffering (A 30). He is driven by an “atomistic need” (BGE 12), a dominant will that craves the formation and maintenance of states of equilibrium that is akin to humanity’s inherent “metaphysical need [metaphysische Bedürfniss]” (HH 26, 153; GS 151).⁴⁷ This is the drive to seek existence’s ultimate meaning or purpose since the presumption of a “true world [wahre Welt]” offers the possibility of a superior existence that is far removed from the meaningless suffering of a finite existence (A 10, TI “Reasons” 1-2, 6, “World,” EH “Preface” 2, “Destiny” 8). The weak accordingly resort to the pretense of a fictitious “true world” that allows the attainment of a set of imaginary ideals (A 15, 30).

In the process, according to Nietzsche, Epicurus fails to affirm the questionable and tragic facets of this world and thereby stands in contrast to his own notion of the Dionysian, which advocates that we should acknowledge, embrace, and overcome the inherent suffering and tragic nature of existence as identified, for example, by pessimism (NCW “We Antipodes”).⁴⁸ One must affirm life by accepting one’s fate, transfiguring it through celebration and gratitude for having existed at all, to demonstrate a Dionysian pessimism of strength (BT “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” 1; GS 370) as personified by Nietzsche’s favorite, Goethe (TI “Skirmishes” 49). For Nietzsche then, Epicurus has more in common with a Christian, “who really is simply a kind of Epicurean who follows the principle of hedonism *as far as possible*” (NCW “We Antipodes”). Both evidently display a form of “romantic” or Schopenhauerian pessimism of weakness that Nietzsche interprets as a form of withdrawal from this world (GS 370).

Disparaging comments like the one above are linked to Nietzsche’s charge of Epicurus’ epistemological weakness. His accusation of being a “weak” and “moralistic” skeptic is itself centered upon the problem of the primacy of the hedonistic values of pleasure and displeasure

within Epicurus' philosophy. Nietzsche is suspicious of and disagrees with the centrality of these valuations, as he states that "[w]herever the *hedonistic* perspective takes the fore, one can conclude that there's suffering and a certain *malformation*" (KSA 12:10[127]).⁴⁹ This failure refers to his view that hedonism, too, is a symptom of decline (KSA 12:2[144])⁵⁰ and a typical form of decadence (KSA 13:14[94]).⁵¹ He goes even further and construes hedonism as indicative of an onset of nihilism:

The "predominance of suffering over pleasure" or the opposite (*hedonism*): these two doctrines are already signposts to nihilism. For in both of these cases no ultimate meaning is posited except the appearance of pleasure or displeasure. (KSA 12:9[107])⁵²

A difficult interpretive question arises here. As we have seen, often Nietzsche is critical of advocating some "ultimate meaning." Here he seems to hold the opposite view. I believe what he criticizes here is this: when the values of pleasure and displeasure are posited as those of the highest kind, such that they become the *raison d'être* of one's life, then for Nietzsche, doubts have been cast about life's worth or, at best, about a willingness to engage in and value the entirety of one's life including all the experiences—good and bad—which encompasses it.

This association by Nietzsche of hedonism and nihilism has yet another dimension. Since Epicurus and his school of disciples met in his garden, Nietzsche euphemistically portrays this assembly as the forerunner of the Christian ideal of Paradise: "As decadence: pendant to 'epicureanism'—Paradise, as conceived by the Greeks" (KSA 13:11[365]).⁵³ The garden is similar to Paradise in being a gathering place for those who view the highest good in the absence of suffering—hence an abode for the nihilistic (*BGE* 7). Epicurus' embrace of the ideal of *ataraxia* is a detachment from reality through self-sufficiency and is one of the two constituents of *eudaimonia*—happiness or flourishing.⁵⁴ The other constituent is an absence of pain and

avoidance of insufferable stimulation. For Nietzsche, together these integral aspirations express an inability to accept and engage with one's bodily drives and instincts and their embodiment in the world. Epicurean withdrawal in pursuit of tranquility, driven by weakness, shows the incapacity to own one's passions. This divests the Epicurean of the very internal influences required for creation and testing of new values. This explains why Nietzsche plainly asserts that he is against "Epicurean happiness and against all relaxation in contemplative states" (*KSA* 12:1[123]).⁵⁵

Finally, a further attribute of weakness follows from the decadent's knowledge claims and choice of supporting ideals. As the aforementioned quote from *EH* "Books: *BT*" 2 claims, decadents are "not free," which I interpret as a reference to their inhibited agency. Hence, Nietzsche claims, for example, that "Wagner was something *complete*, a typical decadent lacking any 'free will'" (*CW* 7). A weak and decadent individual is incapable of embracing this terrestrial life by forging his own "will" such that he can command his own destiny.⁵⁶ Instead, the need for an illusory alternative, as a form of escape or even redemption from it, leaves him at the mercy of the insidious power of interpretative delusions provided by others (*TI* "Skirmishes" 38). The decadent of modernity—for example a religious person who believes that God is responsible for some or all of her actions (*KSA* 13:14[127])⁵⁷—is determined by a "will" constructed and imposed externally that Nietzsche generally refers to as either an "unfree will [unfreier Wille]" or an "*alien* will [*fremden* Willen]"—or put another way—as coerced (*KSA* 12:1[44]).⁵⁸

In a notebook entry Nietzsche repeats his charge of a skeptical weakness concerning knowledge claims, which he then extends to encompass science as well. Here he reiterates that

such a stance belies the tyranny of an “unfree” or “alien” will—an inability and unwillingness to forge a will of one’s own and attain one’s freedom:

We find from the beginning of Greek philosophy onwards a struggle against science with the means of an epistemology or skepticism: and with what object? Always for the good of *morality* . . . Socrates, Aristippus, the Megarian school, the Cynics, Epicurus, Pyrrho—a general assault on knowledge for the good of morality . . . What were they really defending themselves against? Against obligation, against legality, against the compulsion to go hand in hand— I believe one calls this *freedom*—Decadence manifests itself in this: the instinct of solidarity is so degenerate that solidarity is felt as tyranny . . . (KSA 13:14[141]).⁵⁹

By contrast, the aspiration of the dwellers of “the garden” is a different kind of freedom—the ideal of freedom from disturbance—where the greatest good is to seek modest pleasures in order to attain *ataraxia* and put an end to fear of suffering. This longing for a serene calmness and absence of disturbance from body and mind is, according to Nietzsche, identical in form to the Christian Sabbath of ultimate rest (*GM* III:6).⁶⁰ Nietzsche states that the “*calm of strength*,” where the individual embraces stimulation because she has the ability to refrain from reacting, is often confounded for the sedative properties of the “*calm of exhaustion*.” Despite claims of attaining “a divine state” through the “calm of strength,” ascetic philosophical practices in fact actually aim for a “calm of exhaustion,” which is in Nietzsche’s view really a calm of weakness (KSA 13:14[65]).⁶¹

For Nietzsche, the common denominator of Epicureanism and Christianity is a propensity by the weary and exhausted to recoil from the suffering of this world for the want of tranquility. Both are an example of a specific type “who suffer from an *impoverishment of life* and seek

quiet, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and insight, or else intoxication, paroxysm, numbness, madness” (*GS* 370”). Such a pessimistic recoil away from life is indicative of a belief in the utter lack of value in living and willing as an individual (*TI* “Skirmishes” 24), and is the consequence of a lack of self-control by “giving in [Nachgeben]” to one’s crumbling drives and instincts which have been undermined by the morality of decadence (*KSA* 13:14[113], 13:14[157]).⁶² Nietzsche states in a notebook entry that the decadent has “the inability to resist: e.g., in suffering, — he gives in” (*KSA* 13:23[4], p. 606),⁶³ and also in *TI* that not letting oneself go is his “highest guiding principle” (*TI* “Skirmishes” 47). In this work Socrates is cited as an example of the former in the way he allows his rationality to tyrannize his soul. He clearly demonstrates that “any concession [Nachgeben] to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads downwards” (*TI* “Socrates” 10). In similar fashion, Nietzsche interprets the quest for *ataraxia* as effectively a means of minimizing or even annihilating resistance, and hence Epicurus posits the absence of resistance as a higher value. Epicurus’ quest for an “absence of suffering” via *ataraxia*—although not explicitly named in *GM* by Nietzsche—is equated with salvation as the supposed “highest good, the value of values,” just as all nihilistic religions identify nothingness with God (*GM* III:17). In *A*, “the psychological type of the redeemer” is identified by their desire for pleasure and an absence of suffering, for these characteristics are “the two *physiological realities* on which, out of which, the doctrine of redemption has grown” (*A* 29),⁶⁴ with Epicureanism cited as simply a pagan variant of this dogma (*A* 30). Indeed, as we shall next, it is Epicurus’ erroneous advocacy for the idea that life has a final purpose consisting of the attainment of a necessary and universal higher ideal—that of *ataraxia* through ethical hedonism—is crucial in explaining why Nietzsche classifies Epicurus as not just a mere decadent, but more specifically as a “typical” one.

Nietzsche's Categorization of Epicurus as a "Typical" Decadent

The significance of Nietzsche's specific categorization of a "typical" decadent is commonly passed over in the secondary literature on Epicurus and decadence in general.⁶⁵ One exception is an article by Daniel Conway, in which he argues that "Nietzsche forwards an unflattering profile of Epicurus, grouping him with Jesus and other 'typical *décadents*' under the umbrella designation of the 'Redeemer type'."⁶⁶ However, I believe such a "Redeemer type" does not necessarily make an individual a "typical" decadent in Nietzsche's eyes. In the first place, strictly speaking, Nietzsche never actually refers to Jesus in this way, but rather makes only an oblique reference to him as "this most interesting decadent" (A 31). Aside from Epicurus, Nietzsche formally bestows the distinct opprobrium of a "typical" decadent on only five other individuals: Richard Wagner (CW 5, 7), Socrates (EH "Books: BT," 1), Ferdinand Delacroix (EH "Clever" 5),⁶⁷ and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (KSA 13:15[88], p. 458). Although Nietzsche portrays Wagner (CW 5, 7, "Epilogue") and the Goncourt brothers (KSA 13:14[210], p. 389) as believing in redemption—and probably Delacroix as well through his romanticism⁶⁸—crucially, the same cannot be said for Socrates, who is referred to as a "typical" decadent because of his overt yet emasculating rationality. Since there is a need to explain Socrates' inclusion, there must be broader basis for Nietzsche's use of this distinct classification than a connection with redemption *per se*. I believe this defining characteristic is to pursue and then subsequently promote *any* soothing yet life-inhibiting *ideal* as a necessary and universally binding principle for everyone.

The evidence for such a claim is founded upon a distinction Nietzsche makes between two contrasting types of decadent, a differentiation few commentators appear to appreciate.⁶⁹ This common oversight is probably because the distinction is not that obviously stated in his published works, but it is clearly expressed in the following overlooked notebook entry:

The typical decadents, who feel *necessary* in their corruption of style, who want to claim a higher taste and impose a law on the *others*, the Goncourts, the Richard Wagners, are to be distinguished from the decadents with a bad conscience, the *unruly* decadents— (*KSA* 13:15[88], p. 458).⁷⁰

In this quote Nietzsche makes his own distinction between an “unruly [widerspänstigen]”—as opposed to—a “typical [typische]” kind of decadent.⁷¹ One possible interpretation of this contrast of decadents is that the “unruly” type is referred to as such because their particular physiological ill-constitution is comprised of drives and instincts in a state of anarchic disorder (*CW* 7; *KSA* 11:43[2]). This anarchy is indicative of a person either ceasing to be someone or failing to become someone, for lack of an organizing idea to guide his self-development and forge a “will” of his own (*EH* “Clever” 9).⁷² So any substantive psychological expression of his underlying decadence is yet to emerge, as illustrated by the case of the Athenians in the era of Socrates:

degeneration was quietly gaining ground everywhere: old Athens was coming to an end.— [. . .] Everywhere, instincts were in anarchy; everywhere, people were five steps away from excess: the monstrum in animo [monster in soul] was a universal danger. “The drives want to act like tyrants; an even stronger counter-tyrant needs to be invented” . . . [. . .] people had stopped being masters of themselves and the instincts had turned *against* each other. [. . .] Socrates was fascinating [. . .] mainly in the fact that he was an answer, a solution, the manifestation of a *cure* for this case. (*TI* “Socrates” 9)

“Unruly” decadents are confined by a sense of inhibition that characterizes their “bad conscience,” to a mere form of bewildered anguish that just reacts to external events instead of any form of directed agency.⁷³ Although they recognize a need, they have not yet channeled their

internalized and divided energy into *embracing* a supportive yet life-inhibiting ideal, one that can account for and give meaning to their suffering as well as a semblance of direction to their lives, such as Socrates' proposed cure of “*absurdly*” overt rationality in the above case (*TI* “Socrates, 10), or Epicurus' ideal of attaining *ataraxia* through ethical hedonism. The adoption of any such ideal restores or creates some order within their drive configuration—if only to be tyrannized by it—but with the consequence that the unconscious anguish of their bad conscience will develop into entrenched expressions of decadence.

Such a scenario occurs because the physical and mental weakness associated with anarchic instinctual disarray, and the consequent meaningless suffering of a bad conscience, is more than most individuals can bear. The physiological disorder brought about by vacillating bad conscience results in exhausted and weak-willed individuals seeking a “solution” for their condition. This “unruly” type with no “will” to speak of can therefore be looked upon as a *transitory* state of decadence for many people. For the majority of individuals still ultimately strive to endow their life and world with some sort of meaning. This occurs even, if in the process, they fail to fully relate to this world and possibly even negate it and their own life. Their need is a single tranquillizing and pacifying panacea of one type or another, that will bring them rest, peace and happiness, and so are now susceptible to proselytizing and indoctrination by others who offer such remedial prescriptions. This is because in their ill-constituted state of physiological corruption and resulting psychological weakness, they lack the energy and motivation to resist their condition or evaluate the proposed “cures.” Hence, by contrast to the anarchic instincts of the “unruly,” a tyrannized yet still corrupted configuration is more “typical”—the decadent norm.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the latter falls short of the paradigm of a well-ordered instinctual arrangement brought about by the presence of their own idiosyncratic deep-

seated organizing “idea”, and that provides the individual with the vitality to pursue a life worth living and flourish (*EH* “Clever” 9). The end product is Nietzsche’s ideal “*higher type*” (*A* 4), a “well constituted [wohlgerathen]” individual (*EH* “Destiny” 8)⁷⁵ who, because of his resolute capacity to accept reality for what it is, faces life head-on in a rational manner and exhibits the highest, grandest style (*KSA* 13:11[138]).⁷⁶

For Nietzsche then, style can be said to be an emergent property that gives us insight into the inner workings of the body,⁷⁷ and so he defines style as the ability to communicate (*EH* “Books” 4) a state of mind (*WS* 88). However, unlike the typical decadent’s corrupted style that compels him to impose his own allegedly superior views and tastes on everyone, there is no one law of style for Nietzsche. This is why he tells us that “the sort of religious people the church *wants* are typical decadents” (*A* 51). This other type of decadent, then, is someone who is willing to embrace and succumb to a life-inhibiting decadent ideal, and moreover, will probably become an evangelical proponent for it. Such a person may be so convinced of the merit and direction that this imposed will has given to his life, that he then goes on to try to foist the same will on others, as is the case with Epicurus according to Nietzsche. This proclivity to embrace and endorse an alien, unfree form of willing, on the pretext that it one is merely following a “true” or conventionally agreed upon law, is the defining characteristic that distinguishes the more common “typical” decadent from the rarer “unruly” type: “A typical decadent, who has a sense of necessity in his corrupted taste, who uses it to lay claim to a higher taste, who knows how to enforce his corruption as a law, as progress, as fulfilment” (*CW* 5). This is why then Nietzsche interprets Epicurus’ advocacy of ethical hedonism (*A* 30) in the same way as Socrates’ rationality and Richard Wagner’s Christian redemption (*CW* 5, 7, “Epilogue”), and hence why these

individuals all earn Nietzsche's opprobrium as "typical decadents,"⁷⁸ as adhering in their own way to the following historical trend:

philosophers and moralists [. . .] were among the most powerful promoters of decadence [. . .] the philosophers of Greece, e.g., Plato [. . .] represent one after the other the typical forms of decadence: the moral-religious idiosyncrasy, anarchism, nihilism (*adiaphora*) [indifference], cynicism, obduracy, hedonism, reaction. (*KSA* 13:14[94])⁷⁹

I will conclude the discussion of Epicurus as a typical rather than an unruly decadent, by mentioning that when Nietzsche declares in *EH* that "I am a decadent, I am the opposite as well", he essentially characterizes an *unspecified* third type of decadent. Unlike a typical decadent like Epicurus—and potentially an unruly one too—this is someone whose decadence is not fundamentally constitutive, but is instead intermittent. This "*basically healthy*" and hence stronger type can therefore resist and adapt to decadence, and attempt to independently forge their "will to health, to *life* [Willen zur Gesundheit, zum *Leben*]" (*EH* "Wise" 2). By utilising an alternative viewpoint that undertakes a "revaluation of values [Umwerthung der Werthe]", such an individual can thereby seek new and healthier values that are not universally binding, but are instead more conducive to their own particular needs and circumstances (*EH* "Wise" 1). This more resilient and superior type of decadent then can be regarded as rather atypical—especially as the only example Nietzsche discusses is himself.⁸⁰

An Appraisal of Nietzsche's Portrayal of the Decadent Epicurus

While one commentator, Marcin Milkowski, claims that the "Nietzschean interpretation of Epicurus does not differ strongly from what we know about that Greek philosopher,"⁸¹ I am more inclined to agree with another of Daniel Conway's remarks, in that Nietzsche presents a "controversial diagnosis of Epicurus as a '*typical decadent*'."⁸² Aside from the interpretative

issues of the specific meaning of Nietzsche's diagnosis as discussed above, I believe Nietzsche's interpretation is contentious and undermines his depiction of Epicurus as a decadent in three ways.

The first problem is that Nietzsche's portrayal appears to be inconsistent. He makes a connection between Epicurus and Christianity (*GS* 370; *NCW* "We Antipodes"), but at the same time he claims that Epicurus is the original detractor of an underlying, pre-existing form of Christianity (*A* 58) that accompanied the rise of the "[m]oral fanaticism" of Platonism (*KSA* 13:16[15]).⁸³ The latter assertion is founded upon Epicurus' dismissal of the immortality of the soul, all notions of guilt before a divinity, along with any punishment in a hereafter.

The second problem is Nietzsche's depiction of Epicurus' quest for *ataraxia*. Joseph Vincenzo, for example, persuasively argues that the attainment of *ataraxia* is the feeling of freedom from any mental or physical disturbances, and a state where maximum pleasure is experienced.⁸⁴ According to Vincenzo, for Epicurus the state of *ataraxia* is one of pleasure, when the active forces of a life are freed from the reactive force of desire that arises automatically once the necessary and natural desires are met. So, whereas Nietzsche portrays the attainment of a balanced state as through an anesthetic that reflects weakness, Vincenzo argues that it can be conceived as one of strength. The result is a state of composure, untroubled by stimuli and desire in which one becomes like the gods, such that *ataraxia* could be seen as closer to Nietzsche's demands for a deliverance from the "spirit of revenge." Despite Nietzsche's assertion that Epicurean delight "is out of the question" due to the tragic and absurd nature of the world, it may be comparable to the "Dionysian joy" that acknowledges and rejoices over this fact, since it entails a form of the "will to power"⁸⁵ that has mastered reactivity (*KSA* 11:25[95]).⁸⁶

I find a third problem in charging Epicurus with any form of skepticism. This rather flies in the face of the established scholarly understanding of Epicurean epistemology.⁸⁷ The latter is normally interpreted as supporting the truth of all sense impressions and displaying a concern and ultimately a dismissal of skeptical claims about knowledge. Unfortunately, I cannot give this contentious issue a full treatment here. However, at least one recent commentator gives Nietzsche's view some credence. Wilson H. Shearin suggests that underlying moral concerns are associated with the Epicurean goal of freedom from disturbance linked to concerns over the potential actions of enraged Greek divinities, which would affect any search for truth and knowledge.⁸⁸ However, even if we grant that Epicurus displays "weak" skeptical tendencies, a passage from book five of *GS*—written around the time his explicit interest in decadence begins—Nietzsche also seems to associate Epicurus with his preferred strong version:

Why we seem to be Epicureans [. . .] an almost Epicurean bent of knowledge develops that will not easily let go of the questionable character of things; also an aversion to big moral words and gestures; a taste that rejects all crude, four-square oppositions and is proudly aware of its practice in entertaining doubts. (*GS* 375)

Therefore, although we note that Nietzsche has indeed cast the aspersions of "moralistic skepticism" upon Epicurus, one may worry that he attempts to confirm (rather than disconfirm) his hypothesis of decadence and does so by making Epicurus fit his decadent paradigm. As I have tried to show—albeit briefly—there are some serious questions about whether his assessment really holds water.

In Nietzsche's evaluation, Epicurus' ethical hedonism is primarily an expression of a moral psychological need, which reflects an internal weakness. This is what is really indicative of his underlying instincts for decadence; that this world, as ordinarily experienced by him is of

no value. Nietzsche associates such a view with the ascetic ideal in general and Christianity in particular. Epicurus' escapist pursuit of *ataraxia* then is thus symptomatic of his underlying decadence and, he goes even further, an expression of nihilism. Furthermore, Nietzsche does not concur with the Epicurean association of *ataraxia* with the good life, nor with the belief that it constitutes psychological health.

Regarding the way of life advocated by Epicurus, it is in fact presented as very different from Nietzsche's own views. Epicurus endorses ethical hedonism, whereas for Nietzsche the avoidance of trouble and strife is unimportant, since strife is a fact of life and is seen as a challenge for extraordinary self-discipline and mastery (*NCW* "Epilogue"). In particular, there is a contrast to be drawn between hedonism, on the one hand, and Nietzsche's alternative to hedonism, on the other: for he privileges resistance and the experience of effectiveness or power over any simpler type of pleasure.⁸⁹ Those who fail to seek power or dwell in an on-going skepticism will not be able to envisage a better life, and therefore will be consigned to live a worse one. Nietzsche sees the pursuit of power as a pre-requisite for the possibility of creating new forms of knowledge and values (*BGE* 211). This necessitates that each individual makes personal, contextual, and perspectival decisions in shaping his life and world, unlike Epicurus and his followers. The undertaking of creating values warrants a psychological attitude of imposing oneself on the world that is the very opposite of an avoidance of pain in the pursuit of tranquility. While one negative interpretation suggests that the aim of *ataraxia* is indeed apathy or insensibility [*apatheia*] or gentleness [*praotēs*]⁹⁰—which in Nietzsche's view are both detrimental qualities that he also attributes to the decadent Pyrrho (*KSA* 13:14[99])⁹¹—another suggests the origins of the conception means it conveys more positive overtones of strength and cheerfulness.⁹² Nevertheless, Nietzsche's concerns over *ataraxia* then are probably due to the

fact that it is simply incompatible with his favored conception of health and well-being that requires creative, personal growth and the experience of one's effective agency and power.

¹ I use the following published translations of Nietzsche's works: *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); *Daybreak*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² One enduring influence on Nietzsche's view of Epicurus—the extent of which awaits further scrutiny—is Friedrich A. Lange's discussion in his *History of Materialism and Critique of Its Present Importance*, which Nietzsche read a number of times between 1866 and 1888. Lange probably used the testimony of Lucretius to develop his account of Epicurus, and Nietzsche appears to have done so, too: "You should read Lucretius to see *what* Epicurus had fought, *not* paganism but 'Christianity'" (A 58). See Friedrich A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Iserlohn: J. Baedeker, 1866); Thomas H. Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 32–36, 249; Keith Ansell-Pearson, "True to the Earth: Nietzsche's Epicurean Care of Self and World," in *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching: For Individuals and Culture*, ed. Horst Hutter and Eli Friedland (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 97–116, 99–100; and Wilson H. Shearin "Misunderstanding Epicurus?: A Nietzschean Identification," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 45.1 (2014): 68–83, 75–76.

³ For example, Keith Ansell-Pearson argues that: "An ethos of Epicurean enlightenment pervades Nietzsche's middle-period texts" (*Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy* [London: Bloomsbury, 2018], 37). See also Richard Roos, "Nietzsche et Épicure: l'idylle héroïque" in *Lectures de Nietzsche*, ed. Jean-François Balaudé and Patrick Wotling (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000), 283–350.

⁴ See Fritz Bornmann, "Nietzsches Epikur," *Nietzsche-Studien* 13.1 (1984): 177–188; Ansell-Pearson, "True to the Earth," 97; and Daniel Conway, "Why Nietzsche is a Destiny: Epicurean Themes in *Ecce Homo*," *The Agonist* X.II (2017): 75–93, 86.

⁵ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437.

⁶ My approach and categorization can be compared and contrasted with that of Philippe Choulet, "'L'épicure' de Nietzsche: Une figure de la décadence," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 188.3 (1998): 311–30.

⁷ Richard Schacht succinctly characterizes decadence when discussing Nietzsche's portrayal of a predilection by some philosophers "to develop various metaphysical schemes involving a distinction between 'this world,' construed as a merely 'apparent world,' and another realm to which all honors are

accorded. ‘The latter has hitherto been called the “real world,” “truth,” “God.”’ For Nietzsche, however, it is a ‘world invented by a lie,’ which ‘we have to abolish’—a ‘lie’ born of a lamentable disposition he seeks to diagnose. [. . .] He often links the prevalence of this disposition to the general condition he calls ‘decadence’; and he diagnoses the phenomenon of ‘decadence’ ultimately as a consequence of certain physiological deficiencies and psychological defects” (*Nietzsche* [New York: Routledge, 1983], 27). While focusing on art, Chiara Piazzesi also offers a physiologically-grounded interpretation, portraying decadence as a disharmony of forces in the individual resulting in a pathological condition reflected in their judgment and values (*Nietzsche: Fisiologia dell’arte e decadence* [Lecce: Conte, 2003]). Andrew Huddleston discusses the relationship Nietzsche sees between the decadence of individuals and the decadence of whole cultures (*Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], 77-96).

⁸ Caution is required, however, when referring to Nietzsche’s “theory of decadence,” as the only time he uses such terminology is in an early 1888 notebook entry referring to a chapter heading for the second part of an abortive book: “*Theory of decadence. Second Part. [Theorie der décadence. Zweiter Theil.]*” (KSA 13:14[77], p. 256, my translation).

⁹ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 237–38.

¹⁰ “Philosophie als décadence Die weise Müdigkeit. Pyrrho [. . .] Vergleich mit Epikur” (translated as *The Will to Power* §437, translation altered).

¹¹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437.

¹² For example, Andrea Christian Bertino, in the course of discussing the differences between Pyrrho’s and Epicurus’ displays of nihilism, prefixes the use of this passage only with the comment that “Epicurus represents a second form of Greek decadence, one more sophisticated, more delicate [Epikur eine zweite Form der griechischen Dekadenz dar, eine raffiniertere, delikaterere]” (“Nietzsche und die hellenistische Philosophie: Der Übermensch und der Weise,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 36.1 (2007): 108–143, 125, my translation). See also Bornmann, “Nietzsches Epikur,” 187; Michael Ure, *Nietzsche’s The Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 56, fn. 11; and Richard Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus),” *Philosophical Topics* 33.2 (2005): 45–70, 59.

¹³ “Of course, Pyrrhonism like Epicureanism advocated tranquility, *ataraxia*, as the goal of life, *telos*” (James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 1).

¹⁴ Nietzsche makes only three direct references to *ataraxia*—all of which are in Greek [ἀταραξία]—and these appear only in his notebooks (KSA 9:10[A5], p. 414, 9:15[1], p. 633, 10:7[209], p. 307). However, he regularly uses the two obvious synonyms of “tranquility [*Ruhe*]” and “tranquil [*beruhigend*]”, and on one occasion even combines them as the oblique “rest and satisfaction [zur Ruhe, zur Befriedigung]” (GS 373). Nietzsche also uses less obvious alternative phrases such as “repose of [the] soul [Seelenruhe]” (HH 141; WS 212; and KSA 12:7[6], p. 274, translated as *The Will to Power* §343).

¹⁵ See Jessica N. Berry, “Nietzsche and the Ancient Greeks” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83-107, 102; Joseph P. Vincenzo, “Nietzsche and Epicurus,” *Man and World* 27 (1994): 383–97, 392; and Gisela Striker, “Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquillity,” *The Monist* 73.1 (1990): 97-110, 100, who states, “Actually, Stoic and Epicurean conceptions of this [tranquility] differ considerably, since they had very different ways of explaining how it comes about. Here we should perhaps take note of an ambiguity in the word *ataraxia*. It

may mean just freedom from trouble, unperturbedness; but it may also have the stronger sense of imperturbability, when it seems to designate more than just a state of mind—a character trait, one might perhaps say, which renders the person that has it immune to influences that might interfere with his peace of mind. While Epicurus held that the happy person will be unperturbed, the Stoics made the more ambitious claim that the sage will be imperturbable: nothing that happens can possibly bring him any trouble.”

¹⁶ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 248–49.

¹⁷ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437, §455, respectively.

¹⁸ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437.

¹⁹ Translated as *The Will to Power* § 437. See also *KSA* 13:14[85], 13:14[87], 13:14[162], 14[191].

²⁰ Bruce Ellis Benson argues that that nihilism should be considered a subcategory of decadence since for him, nihilism is the recognition of the meaningless of life, and decadence is a turning against life (*Pious Nietzsche* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008], 133). However, presumably one can be a decadent by turning against life but without finding life to be meaningless—perhaps too painful rather than too pointless. Benson’s general point follows Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche’s Dangerous Game* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 109: “All nihilists are also decadents, but not all decadents are nihilists.”

²¹ See Conway, “Why Nietzsche is a Destiny” and, “‘The milieu in which he moved as a foreign figure’: Nietzsche’s Revaluation of Epicurus,” in *Nietzsche and Epicurus*, ed. Vinod Acharya and Ryan J. Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 205–220.

²² Julian Young claims that around 1879 Nietzsche developed “an ever-increasing affection for, and sense of affinity with [. . .] Epicurus” just as his own health or decadence reached its nadir, and this may partially explain Nietzsche’s subsequent volte-face (*Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 278).

²³ Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 281. Matthew Meyers agrees, stating that “*ataraxia* or the understanding of happiness as lack of disturbance [is] the psychic or spiritual ideal that Nietzsche erects in *The Wanderer*,” although we should note that the specific term is never used by Nietzsche in this text (*Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Works* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 145, see also 153, 209).

²⁴ Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 298.

²⁵ Ure, *Nietzsche’s The Gay Science*, 48.

²⁶ Ure, *Nietzsche’s The Gay Science*, 49, but alternative interpretations are discussed by Ansell-Pearson, “True to the Earth,” 99-101.

²⁷ Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 285, already interprets *WS* 53 as a criticism of Epicurus since Nietzsche believes that Epicurus “fails to see that happiness requires a ‘goal’ other than itself. Happiness has to be more than Epicurean *ataraxia*; it demands a life-defining task.” The notebook entry *KSA* 9:10[A5] from 1880 appears to question the merit of *ataraxia*. Moreover, in another from 1881 that is rather obtuse, Nietzsche remarks: “and *ataraxia* is this evil element [und *ἀταραξία* ist dieses böse Element]” (*KSA* 9:15[1], p. 633, my translation).

²⁸ For example, in a notebook entry from autumn 1883 sketching out a plan for Z, the latter meets “a fool (Epicur?) [auch ein Narr (Epicur?)]” (*KSA* 10:21[3], p. 599, my translation).

²⁹ Even so, Nietzsche’s admiration still lingers. For example, in a notebook entry from late 1887 he still praises Epicurus and his followers’ belief that philosophy is a practice whose primary function is to heal

the soul and that “they rejected the search for truth with irony; ‘Philosophy as an art of *living*’” (KSA 12:9[57], translated as *The Will to Power* § 449).

³⁰ “Typus, *wie* der Übermensch *leben* muß, wie ein Epicurischer Gott” (my translation).

³¹ A kind of wisdom relevant to practical matters that requires an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously, to encourage practical virtue and excellence of character in others.

³² “Bei *Epicur* kommt alles auf das *richtige Abwägen* von Lust gegen Unlust an: folglich ist φρόνησις die Haupttugend, das Fundament: *Klugheits-Moral*. Die Bedeutung der sinnlichen Lust ist, uns von Begierden und Bedürfnissen zu befreien, welche die ἀταραξία der Seele stören. Glückseligkeit als *Endzweck des Einzellebens*. Aristoteles und Alle! Also es ist die *Herrschaft des Zweckbegriffs*, die alle Moralisten bisher verdorben hat. „Es muß doch ein ‚Wozu?‘ des Lebens geben!“ Daß auch das *vernünftige bewußte Leben hinein gehört* in die Entwicklung des *zwecklosen Lebens* — ego” (my translation).

³³ “Und Epikur: was genoß er denn, als daß der Schmerz aufhörte? — das ist das Glück eines Leidenden und auch wohl Kranken” (my translation).

³⁴ Although a notebook entry lists the traits of the “Psychology of the good: a *decadent* [Psychologie des Guten: ein *decadent*]” and “The *decadence-instinct* in the good [Der *décadence-Instinkt* im Guten]” that includes and expands upon the smaller criteria I mention, (KSA 13:23[4], p. 604, 606, my translation). See also KSA 13:16[77].

³⁵ Translated as *The Will to Power* §153, §734, respectively.

³⁶ “[. . .] one fails to understand decadence as a physiological condition [. . .]” (KSA 13:17[6], translated as *The Will to Power* §44).

³⁷ The conception of a “complete” decadent is a useful one, but the original German is literally: “the decadent *per se* [*der décadent an sich*]” (my translation).

³⁸ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437.

³⁹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §578.

⁴⁰ Translated as *The Will to Power* §101. Here Nietzsche also associates moralistic skepticism with the argument for faith of Pascal’s wager.

⁴¹ “Nihilismus als Folge der moralischen Welt-Auslegung” (my translation).

⁴² Translated as *The Will to Power* §442.

⁴³ Translated as *The Will to Power* §401.

⁴⁴ See Paul J. M. Van Tongeren, “Nietzsche’s Symptomatology of Skepticism,” in *Nietzsche, Epistemology, and Philosophy of Science: Nietzsche and the Sciences II*, ed. Babich, Babette and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1999), 61–72; and Katrina Mitcheson, “Scepticism and self-transformation in Nietzsche—on the uses and disadvantages of a comparison to Pyrrhonian scepticism,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25.1 (2017): 63–83. The distinction can probably be traced to the 1883/1884 notebook entry that distinguishes between skepticism of weakness and one of courage, and Nietzsche’s own revision of skepticism that aims to associate it with heroic feelings (KSA 10:24[30], p. 662). Another slightly later entry talks of “overcoming the skeptic of weakness [Überwindung des Sceptikers der Schwäche]” (KSA 11:26[241], p. 211, my translation).

⁴⁵ See also KSA 12:9[157] and 13:11[48], translated as *The Will to Power* §380 and §963, respectively.

⁴⁶ Translated as *The Will to Power* §414.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche takes the phrase from Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York, NY: Dover, 1958), Vol. II, Ch. XVII.

⁴⁸ Meyer, *Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works*, 96, employs the useful terminology of “evaluative” and “factual” pessimism. The former viewpoint is regarded as potentially tragic since it promotes life as something not worth living, whereas the latter perspective is regarded as tragic since life is acknowledged as being characterized by meaningless suffering.

⁴⁹ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 196.

⁵⁰ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 89-90.

⁵¹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §435.

⁵² Translated as *The Will to Power* §35.

⁵³ Translated as *The Will to Power* §225.

⁵⁴ However, whereas I believe Nietzsche's later rejection of Epicurus is primarily due to decadence in general, and a re-evaluation of *ataraxia* as a decadent ideal in particular, Young argues, “What has happened, of course, between 1882 and 1886, is the will to power: if the human essence is the will to power, happiness, Nietzsche thinks, has to be conceived as increasing one's power over the world rather than withdrawing from it into ‘Epicurus's garden’” (*Friedrich Nietzsche*, 446).

⁵⁵ Translated as *The Will to Power* §911.

⁵⁶ The word “will” is for Nietzsche one of the prime examples of language metaphysics (*BGE* 19), for it does not, he thinks, correspond to anything found in reality (*KSA* 11:27[1], 13:11[73], translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 212-213), and has no metaphysical essence, some ultimately power of *causa sui* [cause of itself] (*BGE* 19). Rather “will” denotes the self-conscious experience of power an individual attributes himself as agent. It is, Nietzsche argues, a combination of feelings, thought, and “the affect of the command” (*BGE* 19).

⁵⁷ Translated as *The Will to Power* §137.

⁵⁸ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 57. See also *HH* 139–40; *GS* 380; and *KSA* 13:11[228], 13:14[113], 13:14[115], 13:14[125] (translated as *The Will to Power* §1020, §334, §428, §136, respectively). Also, “unfreedom of the will [Unfreiheit des Willens]” (*WS* 61; *GS* 99); “un-freedom” (*BGE* 21); “lack of freedom of the will” (*GM* II:4); and “the will in bondage” (*GM* II:21).

⁵⁹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §442. I take Nietzsche to be sarcastic here when he criticizes the connection people commonly make between obligation, legality, solidarity, and “freedom.”

⁶⁰ See *BGE* 200, where Nietzsche makes an allusion to a quest for *ataraxia* by the contemporary European weakened by instinctual disarray: “His notion of happiness corresponds to that of a medicine and mentality of pacification (for instance the Epicurean or Christian); it is a notion of happiness as primarily rest, lack of disturbance, repletion, unity at last and the ‘Sabbath of Sabbaths’ [. . .].”

⁶¹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §47.

⁶² Translated as *The Will to Power* §334 and in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 261–62, respectively.

⁶³ “Die Widerstands-Unfähigkeit: z.B. im Mitleiden,—er giebt nach [. . .]” (my translation).

⁶⁴ For a full exposition, see Conway, “The milieu in which he moved as a foreign figure’.”

⁶⁵ Numerous commentators cite Nietzsche's comment that “Epicurus is a *typical* decadent” (*A* 30), but they all fail to elucidate what this implied “standard” means exactly and what it could be contrasted with. See, for example, Ansell-Pearson, “True to the Earth,” 97, 148; Bertino, “Nietzsche und die hellenistische Philosophie,” 107; Bornmann, “Nietzsches Epikur,” 186; Howard Caygill, “The Consolation of Philosophy or ‘Neither Dionysus Nor The Crucified’,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 7 (1994): 131–50, 146; Daniel Conway, “Epicurus Avenged?,” *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 1.2 (2016): 3–24, 5; Peter S. Groff, “Leaving the Garden: Al-Rāzī and Nietzsche as Wayward Epicureans,” *Philosophy*

East and West 64.4 (2014): 983–1017, 955; Wilson H. Shearin, “Misunderstanding Epicurus?,” 72; Vincenzo, “Nietzsche and Epicurus,” 386; and Federico Testa, “Nietzsche and Guyau on the Temporality of Epicurean Pleasure” (96–109, 99), Paul Bishop, “Nietzsche, Hobbes, and the Tradition of Political Epicureanism” (110–124, 111), Michael J. McNeal, “Nietzsche con/tra Epicurus” (189–204, 198), and Patrick Wotling, “Enjoying Riddles: Epicurus as a forerunner of the idea of gay science?” (159–171, 160, 169) in *Nietzsche and Epicurus*, ed. Acharya and Johnson.

⁶⁶ Conway, “The milieu in which he moved as a foreign figure,” 212.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche may be referring to Charles Baudelaire; see *KSA* 11:25[141].

⁶⁸ In *GS* 370, Nietzsche presents the early nineteenth-century intellectual and artistic movement of Romanticism as a form of decadence in all but name. This is because Nietzsche perceives Romanticism to be reliant on religious ideals expressing a reactive rejection of the world, and thereby he associates it with redemption. In his view this negative portrayal of the world has culminated in the prevailing trend for modern pessimism as inspired by Schopenhauer and replicated by the likes of Edward von Hartmann and Philipp Mainländer (see also *GS* 357). The association of Romanticism with decadence is later explicitly confirmed in a number of notebook entries, including one from late 1887 where Romanticism is listed as a type of decadence (*KSA* 13:11[10], p. 12; see also *KSA* 13:14[25]), and in another from early 1888, in which he states, “In fact, the Romantics present a morbid form of decadence [Thatsächlich stellen die Romantiker eine krankhafte *décadence*-Form vor]” (*KSA* 13:15[97], p. 463, my translation).

⁶⁹ Two partial exceptions are Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 128–45, where the categorization is discernible but not formally stated in his discussion of “The Decadent Failures to Will Freely: Two Types of Sickness,” and Huddleston, *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*, 82–87, who alludes to the distinction in his discussion of “Individual *Décadence*,” by using the example of Socrates as presented in *TI*. However, neither commentator uses Nietzsche’s notebook terminology.

⁷⁰ “Die typischen *décadents*, die sich *nothwendig* fühlen in ihrer Verderbniß des Stils, die damit einen höheren Geschmack in Anspruch nehmen und den *Anderen* ein Gesetz auflegen möchten, die Goncourts, die Richard Wagner, sind zu unterscheiden von den *décadents* mit schlechtem Gewissen, die *widerspänstigen* *décadents*—” (my translation).

⁷¹ See also *EH* “Clever” 5, “Books: *BT*” 1; *CW* 5, 7; A 30, 51; *KSA* 13:15[88].

⁷² Akin to “unruly [widerspänstig],” Nietzsche uses the conception of “conflicting instincts [Instinkt-Widersprüchlichkeit]” for those who lack a center of gravity and hence a purpose, which he claims ultimately results in selfless pursuits of “depersonalization” (*EH* “Destiny” 7), and “contradictoriness of instincts” (*CW* “Epilogue”; *KSA* 13:23[3], 13:25[1]). A similar conception is “the expression of physiological contradictoriness [der Ausdruck der physiologischen Widersprüchlichkeit]” that accounts for individuals who seek “answers” to questions concerning happiness, virtue, and salvation of their soul (*KSA* 13:14[94], translated as *The Will to Power* §435).

⁷³ Nietzsche’s own particular interpretation of the phenomenon of “bad conscience [schlechte Gewissen]” is depicted in *GM* and other published writings as an untreatable sickness akin to a form of unconscious anguish. For Nietzsche, a “bad conscience” is the expression of a higher humanity suffering from itself, as a result of the oppressive demands of civil society that provides no external outlet for its remaining animalistic instincts. The suppression of the human animal through the forces of civilization has led to a transformation that may be viewed as a naturalistic variant of the Christian doctrine of original sin, whereby the previously healthy animal organism metamorphoses into one of an enslaved soul. The

artificial internal regulation of these animal instincts by consciousness means that a lot of intrinsic vitality is consumed by a struggle within the individual who fights to suppress the natural inclinations—a contest between the body’s natural configuration of amoral drives and instincts, and those acculturated or developed by observing prescribed laws and customs. This struggle puts undue pressure on the soul, which then becomes divided and at odds with itself and is forced into taking sides, promoting one part and rejecting the other, in a form of partial self-condemnation (*GM* II:1, 4, 14, 16-19, 22-23, III:23).

⁷⁴ See *BGE* 188.

⁷⁵ Literally “well-turned-out.” See also *GM* III:14, 16; *TI* “Reasons” 2, “Skirmishes” 33, *EH* “Wise” 2; and *KSA* 11:41[6], translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 48–49.

⁷⁶ Translated in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 226–227.

⁷⁷ For example, *SE* 2 describes the writing style of two of Nietzsche’s favorite philosophers—Schopenhauer and Montaigne—as projecting both honesty and cheerfulness.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche emphatically labels Herbert Spencer a decadent (*TI* “Skirmishes” 37, *KSA* 13:14[40], translated as *The Will to Power* §53), due his fervent promotion of the ideal of a “scientific” certitude concerning humanity’s moral progression. This surely means Spencer possesses the key characteristic of the “typical” decadent, yet he is not referred to as one. This apparent discrepancy may be due in part to Spencer’s agnostic stance and his “scientific” credentials that made the ascetic, altruistic Christian ideal his thought entailed less obvious. Another highly likely factor might simply be inconsistency on Nietzsche’s part. However, the traits of altruism and objectivity that are essential to his depiction of Spencer are both due to a disgregation of the will, by which he means a separation of components or “atoms” from a cohesive whole resulting in anarchy or disunity (*TI* “Skirmishes” 35; see also *KSA* 13:17[6], 13:14[83], translated as *The Will to Power* §44, §444, respectively). This is a condition he usually associates more with an “unruly” than a “typical” decadent, so the possibility remains that disgregation is part of the overall process of decadence, as one progresses from one type of decadent to the other.

⁷⁹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §435.

⁸⁰ See Jacqueline Scott, “Nietzsche and decadence: The revaluation of morality”, *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 59–78, 63-66, who argues that Nietzsche characterises himself as a “strong” decadent in comparison with the vast majority of “weak” decadents.

⁸¹ Marcin Milkowski, “Idyllic Heroism: Nietzsche’s View of Epicurus,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 15 (1998): 70-79, 77.

⁸² Conway, “Epicurus Avenged?,” 5.

⁸³ Translated as *The Will to Power* §438.

⁸⁴ Vincenzo, “Nietzsche and Epicurus,” 391–92.

⁸⁵ Briefly put, for the later Nietzsche, life is fundamentally about the accumulation of power—this “will to power”—and when it is absent or lacking, decline results (*A* 6, 17). Hence, Nietzsche’s notion of will to power is perhaps best understood as essentially the activity of continuously striving to overcome resistance in the pursuit of one’s ends (Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 127).

⁸⁶ Translated as *The Will to Power* §1029.

⁸⁷ See Richard Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus),” *Philosophical Topics* 33.2 (2005): 45–70, 61; Ansell-Pearson, “True to the Earth,” 98; and Shearin, “Misunderstanding Epicurus?,” 73–76.

⁸⁸ “Thus, with regard to knowledge and science in Epicureanism, Nietzsche does seem to have fastened upon something broadly correct, even if his point does not fully amount to the denial of the possibility of knowledge” (Shearin, “Misunderstanding Epicurus?,” 74).

⁸⁹ Nietzsche’s doubts about Epicureanism using the feeling of power as an evaluative criterion can probably be traced to an 1880 Notebook entry (*KSA* 9:4[204]). See Oscar Rocha Santos, “Critique and Transformation in Nietzsche’s Assessment of Epicurus,” in *Nietzsche als Kritiker und Denker der Transformation*, ed. Helmut Heit and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 62–72.

⁹⁰ See Berry, “Nietzsche and the Greeks,” 102, and *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 139.

⁹¹ Translated as *The Will to Power* §437.

⁹² Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*, 141–42, argues that: “the roots of both the Epicurean and late Pyrrhonian senses of this concept [of *ataraxia*] make more than enough room for thinking of it not negatively, as the avoidance of suffering, but in a wholly positive way, as a state of psychophysical balance and an indication of strength, life, and health—and in fact, *as a state of cheerfulness*.... Democritus’ *euthumia*, translated more often and perhaps more accurately as ‘cheerfulness’, is a conceptual forerunner of *ataraxia*, the term employed widely in the Hellenistic era to designate the aim of philosophical activity.”