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Sin and Divine Pleasure
in the Atomistic Tradition:
from Epicurus' Theology to Gassendi's
*Syntagma philosophicum**

The word ἁμαρτία is ambiguous: it can have both a religious and a non-religious connotation. Two examples are found in a fragment of Empedocles and an extract from book III of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

ἔστιν Ἀνάγκης χρῆμα, θεῶν ψήφισμα παλαιόν, / ἀίδιον, πλατέεσσι κατεσφρηγισμένον ὅρκοις· / εὖτε τις ἀμπλακίηισι φόνωι φίλα γυῖα μιήνηι, / [...] ὅς κ(ε) ἐπίορκον ἁμαρτήσας ἐπομόσσηι, / δαίμονες οἵτε μακραίωνος λελάχασι βίοιο, / τρίς μιν μυρίας ὥρας ἀπὸ μακάρων ἀλάλησθαι, / φυομένους παντοῖα διὰ χρόνου εἴδεα θνητῶν / ἀργαλέας βιότοιο μεταλλάσσοντα κελεύθους

There is an oracle of necessity, an ancient decree of the gods, eternal, sealed by broad oaths: whenever by sin someone pollutes his limbs, by murder [...] whoever commits a fault by perjuring himself on oath, the demons who have received a long life as their lot must wander thrice ten thousand seasons far from the blessed ones, growing during this time in the different forms of mortal beings, exchanging the painful paths of life[1].

ὅταν μὲν οὖν παραλόγως ἡ βλάβη γένηται, ἀτύχημα· ὅταν δὲ μὴ παραλόγως, ἄνευ δὲ κακίας, ἁμάρτημα (ἁμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ᾖ τῆς αἰτίας, ἀτυχεῖ δ' ὅταν ἔξωθεν)· ὅταν δὲ εἰδὼς μὲν μὴ προβουλεύσας δέ, ἀδίκημα

When the injury occurs contrary to reasonable calculation, it [*scil.* the action] is a misadventure. When, however, it is contrary to reasonable calculation, but is without malice, it is an error (someone errs when the first principle of the cause is in him, but when it is external he is unfortunate). When the agent acts knowingly, but without previous deliberation, it is an injustice[2].

[1] Fr. 31 B 115.1-8 DK = 22 D10-11 of LAKS, André/MOST, Glenn (eds.): *Early Greek Philosophy*. Transl. by Laks/Most. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2016, 367–369, modified.

[2] ARIST.: *EN* III 1135b16-20. Transl. by CRISP, Roger (ed.): *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, 95, modified.

Empedocles here calls ἁμαρτία the demon's killing of one of his kindred, which goes against divine law. Aristotle instead distinguishes moral error (ἁμάρτημα) from misfortune (ἀτύχημα) and injustice (ἀδίκημα). The first is an action of which one is partly responsible. After all, its origin lies in the individual and not in the external circumstances that escape the agent's control, as happens when a misfortune occurs. At the same time, however, a wrong action is not completely voluntary like an injustice, for a person that errs has no complete knowledge of the consequences of its action. It follows that Aristotle may provide three distinct interpretations of the same immoral act, for instance Oedipus' patricide. If he kills his father Laius for a reason beyond his control, he falls into a misfortune. If Oedipus does the same based on a voluntary decision, yet without knowing that the man he is killing is his father, his patricide is a moral error. Finally, if Oedipus kills Laius with full knowledge of his immoral act, he is committing an injustice.

It is possible that Aristotle's definition of ἁμαρτία may reflect common Greek usage. It follows that a "moral error" is a mistake made by an agent who transgresses a rule or law in a way that is only partially voluntary. As regards the religious connotation of ἁμαρτία, it has also been suggested that the word can be translated as "sin". A recent attempt in this direction has been made by David Konstan, who in the forthcoming book *The Origin of Sin* tries to trace this notion back to ancient philosophy and literature[3].

The same ambiguity can also be detected in the Latin term *peccatum*, which by large corresponds to the Greek ἁμαρτία. One may think of Cato's speech in Cicero's *On Ends*. The word *peccatum* is referred here to sacred or venerable things, like the fatherland, one's parents or the temples of the gods, as well as to non-sacred things, like evil fears, mourning and desires (*Fin.* III 9.32: *nam ut peccatum est patriam prodere, parentes violare, fana depeculari, quae sunt in effectu, sic timere, sic maerere, sic in libidine esse peccatum est etiam sine effectu*).

If we keep this broad historical and conceptual context in mind and move on to the ancient atomistic philosophical tradition, an interesting problem arises. Did the atomists Democritus, Epicurus and his followers develop the notion of "sin", or ἁμαρτία in the religious sense? Apparently, the question seems out of place. The ancient atomists did not believe in providential gods that establish rules or laws; therefore, they could not have believed that an agent could "sin" against the restriction/commands of a deity. At the same time, however, these philosophers did indeed have a theory of moral error, for which they explicitly used the term ἁμαρτία. More importantly, the Epicureans at least may have believed that an error consists in departing from a divine status that human beings can achieve, or which is fulfilled by the wise. Based on this perspective, it is possible to

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[3] KONSTAN, David: *The Origin of Sin. Greece and Rome, Early Judaism and Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury 2022, 1–32.

suppose that even atomistic philosophers acknowledged the concept of religious ἁμαρτία: a sin against the divinity we can become and which will bring us divine pleasure.

The aim of the paper is to defend this claim. I will first concentrate on Democritus, whose moral theory provides some key ideas that will remain constant throughout the atomistic tradition. I then move on the development in Epicurus and his followers. Finally, I outline how ancient atomism was transformed by the Christian philosopher Pierre Gassendi, who embraced many Epicurean physical and ethical doctrines, while recovering the notion of divine rules/laws that Democritus and Epicurus had rejected.

Before continuing, an important clarification is required. Although in this paper I am trying—like Konstan—to identify an ancient theological notion of ἁμαρτία, I do not intend to push this point to the extreme and to claim that, in antiquity, we find antecedents of the idea of "sin" that will become common in Christianity. I am only speaking here of a general precedent of religious ἁμαρτία as a form of active wrongdoing against the divine. Bearing this point in mind, even the attribution of a notion of theological sin to the Epicureans will not sound as weird as it might initially seem.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF DEMOCRITUS[4]

Democritus is the first thinker to have identified the cause of error with ignorance of the better (B 83 DK: ἁμαρτίης αἰτίη ἡ ἀμαθίη τοῦ κρέσσονος). A concrete example of this general claim is the conduct of the children of the thrifty (B 228 DK = D332 LM). If they are left ignorant (ἀμαθέες) by their fathers, they will make mistakes (ἁμάρτωσι) in the use of their wealth.

The source of moral integrity is identified not with mere knowledge, which does not enhance intelligence (cf. the attacks on πολυμαθίη and the praise of πολυνοΐη in B 64–65, 169 DK = D307, D309 LM), nor with external influences. Indeed, Democritus is convinced that one must abstain from errors not out of fear of punishment coming from the transgression of laws, since the agent may still err against the legal system in secret. It is instead the knowledge of virtue and of the moral duties that one must respect that gives access to the best course of action for a human being (B 41 and 181 DK = D385 and D387 LM). These two forms of moral excellence/ intelligence cannot be reached without μάθησις (B 59, 179, 182 DK = D405, D407, D412 LM) and the wisdom or φρόνησις that Democritus defines as the capacity to do three things (cf. B 2 DK = D293a-b LM): to deliberate soundly, to speak without error (ἀναμαρτήτως), to do what one should do.

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[4] I quote Democritus' texts from chapter 68 of DIELS, Hermann/KRANZ, Walter (Hgg.): *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker.* Berlin: Weidmann 1956 (= DK). Whenever possible, I also add the parallels to chapter 27 of LAKS/MOST: *Early Greek Philosophy* (= LM).

Even if this is never stated explicitly, it is probable that the "better course" that one may take consists in the path to the moral end of εὐθυμία, namely Democritean happiness. After all, B 174, 181 and 258 DK (= D320, D385, D382 LM) show that the εὔθυμος agent respects laws because he enjoys justice[5].

Moral error is therefore a voluntary mistake that stems from ignorance of the good of εὐθυμία. However, the reference to the secret transgression of laws as a moral error might lead one to infer that Democritus does not distinguish ἁμαρτία from ἀδικία (68 B 265 DK = D370 LM). This point is contradicted by fr. B 253 DK (= D369 LM). Here, Democritus affirms that just agents that commit no injustice nonetheless err (ἁμαρτάνειν) when they do not contribute to the common affairs of the city. One may add that εὐθυμία cannot be reached without a contribution to the common good of the city[6]. Those who are detached from politics, therefore, err without injustice. They ignore that the happiness of others is necessary for achieving their own. By keeping this in mind, it can be said that ἁμαρτία differs from ἀδικία even for Democritus, although the latter could imply the former. The unjust agent errs, while the agent who errs is not necessarily unjust.

Fragment B 60 DK (= D337 LM) adds two important aspects of Democritus' theory of moral errors, by reporting that it is better to refute one's own errors, rather than those of others (κρέσσον τὰ οἰκήϊα ἐλέγχειν ἁμαρτήματα ἢ τὰ ὀθνεῖα). This maxim alludes to an idea that is expressed more clearly elsewhere: a moral error must be corrected through repentance, that in turn is a fundamental prerequisite of virtue and of the knowledge of the better[7]. This practice marks the introduction of a technique to refrain from evil deeds: creating a mental picture of ourselves as feeling guilty of the evils that we are going to commit (B 264 DK = D386 LM). It seems, then, as though Democritus believes that no one becomes good all of a sudden. An agent will err a lot in his quest for εὐθυμία, but he will gradually become a better person, as he corrects past mistakes and refrains from future ones.

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[5] Cf. B 256 DK = D319 LM: δίκη ἐστιν ἔρδειν τὰ χρὴ ἐόντα. Cf. here VOROS, Fanurios: *The Ethical Theory of Democritus. On Duty*, in: Platon 26 (1974), 113–122, and PROCOPÉ, John: *Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul*, in: CQ 39.2 (1989), 307–331, ibid. 317–320. On the link between εὐθυμία and moral life, see also NILL, Michael: *Morality and Self-Interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus*. Leiden: Brill 1985, 75–91, and WARREN, James: *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics. An Archaeology of Ataraxia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 35–68.

[6] Cf. here especially PROCOPÉ: *Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul*, 329–331, and CIRIACI, Ascanio: *Il pensiero politico di Democrito*, in: Philosophia 43 (2013), 43–59, but with the right caveats by ROSKAM, Geert: *Live Unnoticed (Λάθε βιώσας). On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine*. Leiden: Brill University Press 2007, 18–21.

[7] Cf. B 43 and 244 DK (= D336 LM) with CANCRINI, Antonia: *Syneidesis. Il tema semantico della «con-scientia» nella grecia antica*. Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo 1970, 106–107; PROCOPÉ: *Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul*, 320–325; KAHN, Charles: *Democritus and the Origins of Moral Psychology*, in: AJA 106.1 (1985), 1–31; ibid. 28–29. By contrast, the forgetfulness of errors or evils generates arrogance (B 196 DK = D272 LM).

Although ἁμαρτία never appears in this context, Democritus may also have distinguished errors that can be corrected from ones that cannot. And he may have believed that the latter coincide with the faults of agents, like pirates or criminals (B 257-260 DK = D381-384 LM), who cannot be corrected by teaching, which transforms the atomic nature of a person into a better moral constitution[8]. Reasoning and repentance, then, also have their limits.

Now, could this moral error be interpreted as a "sin"? If we trust our direct sources, the question finds a negative answer. Nowhere does Democritus express a religious justification that ἁμαρτία must be avoided, because otherwise the gods will punish us. Indeed, the evils that we suffer after wrongdoing occur because of our faults, our blindness of mind and lack of judgment. Therefore, Democritus believes that gods do not punish us for our moral errors. At most, they can reward agents who do not err with their esteem and love, which however are a sort of indirect by-product of a righteousness that wise man search independently from divine approval. Like the Socrates of Plato's *Euthyphro* (9d1-11b5), Democritus may believe that those agents are not just since they are loved by the gods, but they are loved by the gods since they are just[9]. What is more, since Democritus believes that the soul is mortal, he also attacks the superstitious belief that wrongdoers who know their errors will meet a bad fate in the afterlife[10]. So there cannot be any "sin" because, even though the gods exist, they seem not to be actively involved in the creation of moral rules/laws in nature, or in the meting out of providential punishments for immoral individuals who already damage themselves by not following the better course of action. Indeed, these people bring unhappiness upon themselves by renouncing the kind of virtue and wisdom that leads to εὐθυμία.

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[8] B 33 DK (= D403 LM), with TORTORA, Giuseppe: *ΦΥΣΙΣ and ΔΙΔΑΚΗ in Democritus' Ethical Conception (B 33 D-K)*, in: BENAKIS, Linos: *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*. Volume I. Xanthi: International Democritus Foundation 1984, 387–397; VLASTOS, Gregory. *Ethics and Physics in Democritus*, in: VLASTOS, Gregory: *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1: *The Presocratics*, edited by Daniel Graham. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995, 328–350, and HOURCADE, Annie: *Transformation de l'âme et moralité chez Démocrite et Épicure*, in: PhilosAnt 7 (2007), 151–178, ibid. 155–165. On the impossibility of changing someone's nature, cf. B 52 DK (= D308 LM) and PROCOPÉ: *Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul*, 310–313.

[9] B 175 and 217 DK (= D303 and D322 LM), with PIERGIACOMI, Enrico: *Storia delle antiche teologie atomiste*. Roma: *Sapienza* University Press 2017, 11–47.

[10] B 297 DK (= D289 LM). I accept the interpretation of CANCRINI: *Syneidesis*, 104–106, and PROCOPÉ: *Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul*, 320. Another possibility is that B 297 might be describing human beings' fear of experiencing in the afterlife the same miseries they experience in their present life. Cf. KONSTAN, David: *Lucretius and the Conscience of an Epicurean*, in: Politeia 1.2 (2019), 68–80, ibid. 76–77.

2. THE EPICUREAN CONCEPTION OF MORAL ERROR

My analysis of Democritean ethical theory has highlighted five key ideas with regard to the notion of ἁμαρτία. Democritus believed that:

(1) moral error depends on ignorance of the true good;
(2) guilt and the correction of past errors open the path to happiness;
(3) not all moral errors are identical;
(4) ἁμαρτία differs from injustice, although injustice implies ἁμαρτία;
(5) the gods do not establish moral rules/laws, nor do they punish sinners.

Mutatis mutandis, the Epicureans may be seen to follow in the footsteps of these Democritean tenets[11]. In this respect, therefore, their moral theory is a development or revision of Democritus' one. The following sections will try to defend this perspective and to show what major differences the Epicureans introduced compared to their predecessor.

2.1. Error as ignorance of the good

Epicurus' *Epistle to Herodotus* and book XXVIII of *On Nature* provide a description of theoretical errors, namely mistaken knowledge of reality, as opposed to moral errors. An ἁμαρτία of the former sort is conceived as a movement of the mind that builds an opinion or a linguistic expression that contradicts the criteria of truth (Diog. Laert. X 33), which must be used to distinguish what is evident/real from what is obscure/false[12]. However, the apparent silence regarding moral error may be due to the fact that Epicurus considers it a special kind of theoretical error. Again in book XXVIII of *On Nature*[13], he incidentally claims that a theoretical ἁμαρτία can be revealed when the agent sees its negative practical consequences. In other words, a bad behavior is also the outcome of wrong knowledge and of the misuse of criteria of truth. Each time we morally err, we also err theoretically.

This link between theoretical knowledge and practical action without errors will be maintained by successive Epicureans, who will also explicitly formulate an important doctrinal point that was only implicit in Epicurus. We first find Polystratus, who in *De contemptu* claims that a scientific (= theoretical) investigation on nature, the gods and our desires leads to a rational way of life that brings pleasure. Contrariwise, those who do not have

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11 Cf. already CANCRINI: *Syneidesis*, 158.

12 *Ep.* 1.51–52, *Nat.* XXVIII fr. 12 col. 3; fr. 13 coll. 8 sup.–9 inf. and col. 12 sup.–13 sup., SEDLEY, David (ed.): *Epicurus, On Nature, Book XXVIII*, in: BCPE 3 (1973), 5–83. Cf. here SEDLEY: *Book XXVIII*, 22–25, and VERDE, Francesco: *Epicuro nella testimonianza di Cicerone: la dottrina del criterio*, in: TULLI, Mauro (ed.): *Testo e forme del testo. Ricerche di filologia filosofica*. Pisa-Roma: Serra 2016, 335–368.

13 Fr. 13, col. 9 inf., ll. 5–9.

this knowledge fall into many superstitions, useless actions, and many different errors[14]. The same claim is made by Torquatus (*ap.* Cic. *De fin.* I 17.55). His perspective is that no one is in error (*nullius in ipsis error*) about the limits of good and evil, or of pleasure and pain, probably because sensation is enough to show that the former should be pursued and the latter avoided (cf. above I 9.29-31). People instead err (*peccant*) when they are ignorant of the causes of both affections (*cum e quibus haec efficiantur ignorant*). The subsequent part of Torquatus' speech (17.56-57) makes it clear that, once again, it is a form of theoretical error that determines this wrong practical attitude. People expect many great and perennial evils, or only remember their misfortunes, or prefer to take care of the body, while the right attitude would be to have expectations about the good, to recall happy memories of the past and to focus one's attention more on the soul[15]. It is ignorance that the latter kind of behavior is better that leads to error.

Finally, we find a similar perspective in Philodemus' ethical works. Like Polystratus, in *De electionibus* he affirms that ignorance of the distinctions between desires and the true nature of gods leads to erroneous choices or avoidances, as well as to the wrong belief that everything is fated by divine will and that free-will is an illusion[16]. In frr. 1 and 55 of *De liberalitate dicendi*, he says that lack of perception of our errors and lack of discernment of advantages form a pair[17]. Within the Epicurean school, then, there seems to be a general consensus that irrational agents err for the lack of rationality and of knowledge of the best course they should rationally take.

2.2. *The correction of errors through teaching and images*

If moral errors arise from ignorance, then the best cure for past mistakes and the best prevention against committing future ones consists in teaching, *i.e.* in learning to be rational and in understanding what is good/advantageous. Diogenes Laertius also reports that some Epicureans considered correction to be a source of rejoicing for the wise man (cf. X 120a: ἐπιχαρήσεσθαί τινι ἐπὶ τῷ διορθώματι). The phrase might mean that the latter has a pleasurable feeling when he is corrected by someone, or sees

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[14] INDELLI, Giovanni (ed.): *Polistrato: Sul disprezzo irrazionale delle opinioni popolari.* Napoli: Bibliopolis 1978, coll. 18.21-20.9.

[15] This is probably an anti-Cyrenaic doctrine. Cf. MITSIS, Phillip/PIERGIACOMI, Enrico: *Edonismi. Epicurei e Cirenaici a confronto*, in: MITSIS, Phillip: *Libertà, piacere, morte. Studi sull'Epicureismo e la sua influenza*. Roma: Carocci 2018, 107–152, and MITSIS, Phillip: *La teoria etica di Epicuro. I piaceri dell'invulnerabilità*, ed. by E. Piergiacomi. Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider 2019, 88–93.

[16] Coll. 5.14-21 and 14.1-14, = INDELLI, Giovanni/TSOUNA, Voula (eds.): *Philodemus. On Choices and Avoidances*. Napoli: Bibliopolis 1995, with TSOUNA, Voula: *The Ethics of Philodemus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, 21–27.

[17] OLIVIERI, Alessandro (ed.): *Philodemi De liberalitate dicendi libellus*. Lipsiae: Teubner 1914. Subsequent quotations of the fragments and columns come from this edition.

someone making amends for his/her errors, or for both. In order to solve this and other problems, it is worth taking a look at the most detailed extant Epicurean text on the topic: the above-mentioned *De liberalitate dicendi*.

Philodemus describes frank criticism (παρρησία). It is a therapeutic method through which Epicurean teachers recognize the moral errors of others and correct them, thus inviting pupils to practice dialogue and self-improvement[18]. Among the various therapeutic means that are described in the treatise, including the confession of faults (fr. 42), repetition (fr. 64) and admonition (fr. 66), Voula Tsouna has emphasized the technique of putting errors before one's eyes (πρὸ ὀμμάτων). This consists both in the negative procedure of exposing the vices of a base person, which warns recipients not to fall into the same evils, and in its positive counterpart: the gaze of the wise man who looks with simulated anger or deprecation at his students' faults in order to lead them to behave better[19].

Moreover, παρρησία has different corrective styles, some harsher (= blame for one's faults) and some milder (= praise for making progress in the process of correction), as well as different addressees. Young school-partners represent the most common recipients[20]. But Philodemus also adds friends[21], enemies of the Epicurean school (fr. 20, col. 5b), parents (col. 11b), women (coll. 22a-b), old men (fr. 29 and col. 24b), monarchs (coll. 7a, 22b-24a) and—curiously enough—wise men, who are as capable of erring as anyone else[22] and rejoice / are grateful for friendly admonition (col. 8a-b). This last detail shows that Diog. Laert. X 120a can be read as a reference to the pleasure of the σοφός, which is caused both when he is corrected by others and when he corrects others.

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[18] Cf. GIGANTE, Marcello: *Filodemo sulla libertà di parola*, in: GIGANTE, Marcello: *Ricerche filodemee*. Napoli: Macchiaroli 1969, 41–61, ibid. 58-61, and GLAD, Clarence: *Paul and Philodemus. Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*. Leiden: Brill 1995, 53–181, ibid. 154–160. Both scholars challenge the interpretation of the Epicurean school of Philodemus as a hierarchical and authoritarian institution defended by DE WITT, Norman: *Organization and Procedure in Epicurean Groups*, in: CPh 31.3 (1936), 205–211, and NUSSBAUM, Martha: *The Therapy of Desires*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994, 117–135.

[19] Frr. 19, 26, 42, 55, 77 and col. 17a, with TSOUNA, Voula: «*Portare davanti agli occhi*»: *una tecnica retorica nelle opere «morali» di Filodemo*, in: BCPE 33 (2003), 243–247, and TSOUNA: *The Ethics of Philodemus*, 204–213. Cf. also Phld. *Ir.* coll. 34.16–36 = ARMSTRONG, David (ed.): *Philodemus: On Anger*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2020.

[20] Cf. *i.a.* frr. 7-8, 26, 40, 51, 59–60, 63–64, coll. 1, 3b-4b, 15b 17a. For a more detailed analysis, cf. GIGANTE: *Filodemo sulla libertà di parola*, 41–61; GLAD: *Paul and Philodemus*, 53–181; GABAUDE, Jean-Marc: *L'originalité de l'éducation selon l'épicurisme*, in: Diotima 11 (1983) 53–66; TSOUNA: *The Ethics of Philodemus*, 52–141; DE SANCTIS, Dino: *La salvezza nelle parole: l'immagine del σωτήρ nel* Περὶ παρρησίας *di Filodemo*, in: BCPE 43 (2013), 63–71, ibid. 67–71.

[21] Frr. 15 and 50, with GLAD: *Paul and Philodemus*, 161–181.

[22] Frr. 9, 46, 62, 81, col. 9b, GLAD: *Paul and Philodemus*, 131–132, and apparently the Epicurean Antonius in GALEN.: *De propr. pass.* I, 2–3.

This seems contradicted by the fragment of the *De liberalitate dicendi* according to which the wise man exercises praise pleasurably and endures blame "pleasurelessly and as though [he were drinking] wormwood"[23], so he does not take joy in correction of the latter form of παρρησία. However, on the one hand, the text does not mention the σοφός. On the other hand, even assuming that the wise man is the subject of the column, it is still possible to make this text consistent with Diog. Laert. X 120a. It could be claimed that the σοφός suffers as he blames the pupil, but that he feels pleasure *after* the process of correction is over. Therefore, the reference to wormwood may be similar to the one found in Lucretius: the practice of healing the addressee of the poem, which is to say of correcting him and leading him to pleasure, by getting him to drink the bitter medicine of hemlock, covered with the honey of poetry (*DRN* 1.935-950). Although the analogy is not perfect, for the text describes the emotional response of the patient and not that of the doctor, it can be supposed that the latter experiences a pleasurable feeling. After all, since Lucretius struggles with *sperata voluptas* (*DRN* 1.140) for the support of Memmius (the main addressee of the poem), one may argue that even he derives some pleasure from his teaching activity.

We do not know if Philodemus' *De liberalitate dicendi* and the passage from Diog. Laert. X 120a represent a later development of Epicurean pedagogy, or a faithful exposition of the views endorsed by Epicurus and his first followers. Fortunately, the treatise *De liberalitate dicendi* contains some references to the ancient Epicureans that might help us to distinguish old ideas from new ones. In any case, Philodemus also affirms that all his considerations conform to the teachings of Epicurus, under whose guidance he and his friends have decided to live (fr. 25).

A close reading of *De liberalitate dicendi* shows at least five ideas that can be traced back to ancient Epicureanism. Firstly, it is reported that one day Epicurus sent Pythocles and Leonteus the so-called bright letter (λαμπρὰ ἐπιστολή): an epistle through which he moderately reproached his pupils for their mistaken disbelief about the existence of the gods[24]. A fiercer reproach was reserved for Apollonides[25], a milder one for Polyaenus (col. 6b). These different attitudes toward addressees may correspond to the distinction between mild and harsh forms of frank criticism drawn in the treatise *De liberalitate dicendi*. Secondly, Philodemus attributes to Epicurus the method to correct the mistakes of young school-partners by

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[23] Col. 2b, trans. of KONSTAN, David/CLAY, Diskin/GLAD, Clarence/THOM, Johan/WARE, James (eds.): *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 1998. Cf. also PHLD.: *Ir.* col. 44. On praise and blame as forms of frank criticism, cf. GLAD: *Paul and Philodemus*, 71–98 and 120–121.

[24] Fr. 6, on which see PIERGIACOMI: *Storia delle antiche teologie atomiste*, 139–141.

[25] Fr. 118 = fr. 118 of USENER, Hermann (ed.): *Epicurea*. Stuttgart: Teubner 1887 (henceforth, "Us.").

saying that even he—the wisest person in the world—had erred in his youth. This encourages youngsters to continue with confidence on path toward wisdom (fr. 9; cf. here also Epicur. *Ep.* 3.122 and 3.126, *Sent.Vat.* 17). Thirdly, Philodemus claims that the practice of correcting friends was already advocated by Epicurus and Metrodorus (fr. 15). Fourthly, he informs us that Epicurus reflected on the practice of reproaching pupils with moderate words and of forgiving their errors in two (lost) writings against Democritus and Heraclides of Pontus[26]. Finally, pupils like Polyaenus and Heracleides voluntarily confessed their errors to Epicurus (fr. 49). Although we cannot completely trust these anecdotes, because it is always possible that Philodemus quoted them precisely in order to demonstrate that his "new" doctrine was actually a true expression of the "old" school[27], there are no reasons to dismiss them in principle as inaccurate.

We can also quote some texts by Epicurus himself that apparently show that he was a philosopher who developed at least the fundamental point of the doctrine preserved in *De liberalitate dicendi*. The notion of παρρησία and its connection with the search for useful things (τὰ συμφέροντα) is found in *Sent.Vat.* 29. However, he does not mention here the recognition and correction of errors. This gap can be filled by quoting two interesting Latin translations by Seneca of two Greek sentences by Epicurus. The first mentions *peccatum* (*Initium salutis est notitia peccati*) and, as has been convincingly argued by De Sanctis, implies that the pupil should first accuse and judge himself, and only then defend or condemn his own behavior[28]. The other describes a precedent for Philodemus' technique of putting something before one's eyes (*Ad Luc.* 11.8-9 = fr. 210 Us.). Seneca first (§ 8) reports Epicurus' maxim: "we should develop a fondness for some good man and keep him always before our eyes, to live as though he were watching and act in all things as though he could see"[29]. He then adds to Lu-

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[26] Fr. 20 = Epicur. fr. 11 of ARRIGHETTI, Graziano (ed.): *Epicuro: Opere*. Torino: Einaudi 1973 (om. DK) and fr. 14 of SCHÜTRUMPF, Eckart (ed.): *Heraclides of Pontus. Texts and Translation*, translated by Peter Stork, Jan van Ophuijsen, Susan Prince. New Brunschwig-London: Transaction Publishers 2008.

[27] But cf. CLAY, Diskin: *Paradosis and Survival. Three Chapters in the History of Epicurean Philosophy*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1998, 55–74.

[28] Sen. *Ad Luc.* 28.9 (= fr. 522 Us.): "Awareness of error is the starting point for healing". Transl. by GRAVER, Margareth/LONG, Anthony (eds.): *Seneca: Letters on Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015, 98, modified. DE SANCTIS: *La salvezza nelle parole*, 66, builds his case by arguing that Seneca still follows Epicurus, when at the end of this letter he invites Lucilius to accuse/judge himself (§ 10). GRILLI, Alberto: *Seneca ed Epicuro, fr. 522 Us.*, in: Paideia 12 (1957), 337–338, suggests that Seneca may be translating Epicurus' sentence ἀρχὴ σωτηρίας ἡ ἑαυτοῦ κατάγνωσις, which is quoted with no mention of the philosopher's name in the *Capita paraenetica* by Nilus of Sinai = MIGNE, Jacques–Paul (ed.): *Patrologia graeca*: Vol. 79. Paris: Garnier 1865, 1249.

[29] *Aliquis vir bonus nobis diligendus est ac semper ante oculos habendus, ut sic tamquam illo spectante vivamus et omnia tamquam illo vidente faciamus*, transl. of GRAVER/LONG:

cilius that the sense of the message is that, if he puts such a witness before his eyes, he will avoid commiting most errors (§ 9: *magna pars peccatorum tollitur, si peccaturis testis adsistit*).

Philodemus shows that the practice of putting the image of a wise man like Epicurus before one's eyes is a form of frank criticism: of recognition, prevention and correction of errors (fr. 55). It is possible to conclude, then, that in this respect the technique of putting something before one's eyes is a therapeutic means developed in the first generation of the Epicurean school. Moreover, we can also recognize here an important difference compared to Democritus. While the latter affirmed that we must contemplate the image of *ourselves* feeling guilty of evil deeds, the Epicureans project the image of an individual different from ourselves: the wise man. The result is identical in both cases, namely the prevention of error, but the means used to attain it is different. We could say that, at least in this sense, Democritus believed that human beings could gain moral strength just by themselves, whereas the Epicureans think that they must learn to be moral from the superior category of the Epicurean teacher.

2.3. Not all errors are the same

The Epicurean belief that there are some differences of degree in errors is once again reported by Diogenes Laertius (X 120b). It is not clear whether this claim can be interpreted as an agreement with Democritus' idea that one can distinguish ἁμαρτίαι that are curable errors from incurable ones, as well as that the former are better than the latter. Lucretius appears to disprove it, when he claims that the defects of human nature are only immutable to a small degree and that one is always in time to change one's behavior in better (*DRN* 3.314-322)[30]. Philodemus seems instead to approve it in some passages of *De liberalitate dicendi*[31]. The disagreement between these two Epicurean philosophers may show that there was not a firm position on the topic in the Epicurean school and that opinions may have varied. Given that Epicurus claimed that all are able to achieve happiness (*Ep.* 3.122), and therefore to correct and cure defects that keep them from it, it however seems that Lucretius defends the more ancient and maybe orthodox position.

Moreover, there is some continuity between Democritus' conception that a wrongdoer corrects his errors under the passion of guilt and Epicurus' saying *Initium salutis est notitia peccati*. Both can be interpreted as

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Letters on Ethics, 47. Cf. Sen. *Ad Luc.* 25.5 (= fr. 211 Us.), which replaces the general reference to the virtuous individual with the name of Epicurus himself.

[30] MITSIS: *La teoria etica di Epicuro*, 178–185.

[31] Cf. frr. 59, 77, 79, together with *Ir.* coll. 19-20 and GLAD: *Paul and Philodemus*, 119–120 and 144–146; TSOUNA: *The Ethics of Philodemus*, 95–98.

the claim that a person who has erred, but is aware of his mistakes, is better than one who is unaware, for the former can try to heal himself.

The Epicureans may also have added two more criteria to distinguish between moral errors. On the one hand, a hint as to the distinction between different ἁμαρτίαι can be recognized in a brief reference by Diogenes Laertius to the wise man's behavior toward his servants (X 118). The passage says that he will never punish them, but will rather pity them. However, if a servant proves to have a good character, the wise man will forgive him (συγγνώμην τινὶ ἕξειν τῶν σπουδαίων). With some caution, we may suppose that the two emotional responses are triggered by an awareness of different degrees of error. The servant that is pitied has erred more than the one who has been forgiven, for the latter has sought to be corrected.

On the other hand, by highlighting the differences between his various addressees, Philodemus may be implicitly acknowledging that their errors are not identical. Here, another focus on the wise man can help. Even if this agent errs, surely his errors are not comparable to those of young school-partners, women, or old men. Otherwise, he would not be a wise man. If this supposition is plausible, then the doctrine reported in Diog. Laert. X 120b maybe an anti-Stoic claim. The Stoics believed that wise men never err or, better, that they cannot commit errors; and they also believed that all mistakes are equally serious[32]. By contrast, an Epicurean wise man can err, but will not lose his blessedness and wisdom.

The Epicurean theory of error admits more criteria for distinguishing between ἁμαρτίαι than Democritus' theory. It also introduces a polemic against the idea of the absolute perfection of the wise man that had gained new strength through the Stoics. Apart from this difference, there is a basic continuity between Democritus and the Epicureans.

2.4. Injustice and error

Finally, we come to the relation between injustice and error. Seneca (*Ad Luc.* 97.12-13 = fr. 532 Us.) favors the identification of the two forms of wrongdoing, when he adds to his translation of Epicurus' sentence on the torments of the unjust individual ("A wrongdoer may happen to remain concealed, but he cannot be confident of concealment"[33]) a comment that is supposed to explain its meaning (*si hoc modo melius hunc explicari posse iudicas sensum*). He believes that the maxim means that those who err (cf.

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[32] Cf. *SVF* II 131.3 and III 28, 110, 363, 499, 519, 527–529, 548, 550, 556–558, 640. It is hard to place the beginning of this polemic. According to KECHAGIA, Eleni: *Rethinking a Professional Rivalry: Early Epicureans against the Stoa*, in: CQ 60.1 (2010), 132–155, it began with the followers of Epicurus.

[33] Cf. the Latin (*potest nocenti contingere ut lateat, latendi fides non potest*; transl. of GRAVER/LONG: *Letters on Ethics*, 385) with the original Greek of *Sent. Vat.* 7 (Ἀδικοῦντα λαθεῖν μὲν δύσκολον, πίστιν δὲ λαβεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαθεῖν ἀδύνατον).

peccantibus) gain nothing from concealing their actions, because they will never have full confidence of remaining undetected, even if at present their fault happens to remain hidden. Seneca, then, interprets injustice as a *peccatum*, or moral error. A similar idea is also defended by Torquatus (Cic. *De fin.* I 16.52) and Lucretius (*DRN* 5.1156-1160). The former says that just agents will have no reason to err (*causa peccandi*) against the community. The latter claims that unjust and violent people happen to reveal their errors (*peccata*) by speaking aloud during sleep.

One might be tempted to ignore this identification and to claim that it just depends on a wrong interpretation or translation of Seneca/Cicero/Lucretius, if Hermarchus' genealogy of morals did not exist[34]. Just like Epicurus and his disciples, this Epicurean identifies the source of error in ignorance of what is advantageous or important. However, Hermarchus this time also connects ἁμαρτία with the violation of laws/justice. He describes error as a killing due to neglect or the failure to perceive personal and common advantages, and claims that the cure identified by ancient lawgivers was fear of punishment. By this legal sanction, these politicians hoped to prevent manslaughter from spreading across society.

But I think that this evidence is not sufficient to identify injustice and error, for we can recognize the same difference between the two forms of wrongdoing identified by Democritus and Aristotle. Hermarchus reports that ἁμαρτία is not completely voluntary, while ἀδικία is entirely voluntary[35]. After all, it consists in the transgression of the pact not to damage or be damaged by others (*Sent.* XXXI). Its infraction necessarily implies the *ante factum* awareness that I am doing something wrong. As far as ἁμαρτίαι are concerned, consciousness instead probably appears *post factum*: the very moment I become aware that my killing has violated laws and justice. Moreover, moral errors seem to occur also outside legal system. We have seen that *De liberalitate dicendi* describes the ἁμαρτίαι that occur in the Epicurean school, which is to say—as we know from many sources—a place where justice would be respected even if there were no laws[36]. So we may conclude, once again, that according to the Epicureans injustice implies moral error, but moral error does not necessarily entail injustice.

[34] Cf. PORPH.: *Abst.* I 7.1–12.7, 26.4 = fr. 34 of LONGO AURICCHIO, Francesca: *Ermarco: frammenti.* Napoli: Bibliopolis 1988. In what follows, I concentrate on §§ 9.1–2 and 12.1–2. On this text, see at least GOLDSCHMIDT, Victor: *La doctrine d'Épicure et le droit.* Paris: Vrin 1977, 166–170, and VANDER WAERDT, Paul: *Hermarchus and the Epicurean Genealogy of Morals,* in: TAPhA 118 (1988), 87–106.

[35] GOLDSCHMIDT, Victor: *La doctrine d'Épicure et le droit,* 37–39 and 291, n. 1.

[36] Stob. IV 1.143 (= fr. 530 Us); KONSTAN, David: *A Life Worthy of the Gods. The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus.* Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing 2008, 121–125, and MITSIS: *La teoria etica di Epicuro,* 118–126.

3. An indirect theological sin? Epicurean divine pleasure

The preceding arguments have shown that moral error is not connected with theology. More precisely, Epicureans never claim that ἁμαρτίαι disgust the gods, or that rituals and prayers are needed to correct one's faults. So when Hermarchus says that legal punishments cause purification (καθαρμός) from unintentional killing, the term must be interpreted in a non-religious sense, as may also be seen in a passage from book XXV of Epicurus' *On Nature* that refers to the correction of the nature of certain animals[37].

The reason for this lack of connection is that Epicurean theology denies the existence of divine rules/laws. Its justification is even more extreme than that provided by Democritean theory. While Democritus argued that gods are only interested in agents who are already good, Epicurus and his followers claim that they are completely detached from us. A divinity would be damaged in its blessedness and immortality—which are known by πρόληψις / preconception—if it provided love and assistance to anyone, even to wise agents. After all, a god that helps a human being would have a need to satisfy, or would experience the pain and fatigue that necessarily accompany the providential governing of the world. Since this implies that a divinity feels something that deprives it of blessedness and that might expose it to mortal damage, which is absurd and contradicts the πρόληψις or preconception of the gods, the very premises of the argument must be rejected. An immortal and blessed divine being has no needs, nor will it ever choose to endure pain and fatigue for the benefit of another[38].

Further confirmation that there are no divine laws whose violation would qualify a moral error as a "sin" is found in §§ 86-87 of Epicurus' *Epistle to Pythocles*, even though this passage refers to physics. The philosopher declares here that a scientific investigation must not search for some empty legislations (κενὰ νομοθεσίας) that are supposed to govern nature. This behavior would amount not to science, but to myth, for mythical reasoning is characterized by the assumption that phenomena occur owing to a divine cause or regulation[39]. Nothing rules out that Epicurus also denied that one must search for "empty legislations" that govern the moral sphere.

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[37] PORPH.: *Abst.* I 9.3–4 = fr. 34 of LONGO AURICCHIO: *Frammenti*, and HAMMERSTAEDT, Jürgen: *Atomismo e libertà nel XXV libro* Περὶ φύσεως *di Epicuro*, in: BCPE 33 (2003), 151–158.

[38] *Ep.* 1.76–77 and 3.123–124. On Epicurean theology, see at least FESTUGIERE, André-Jean: *Épicure et ses dieux*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1946; KOCH, Renée: *Comment peut-on être Dieu? La secte d'Épicure*. Paris: Éditions Belin 2005; ESSLER, Holger: *Glückselig und unsterblich. Epikureische Theologie bei Cicero und Philodem*. Basel: Schwabe 2011; PIERGIACOMI: *Storia delle antiche teologie atomiste*, 49–115.

[39] See DE SANCTIS, Dino/VERDE, Francesco (eds.): *Epicuro: Epistola a Pitocle*, introduzione di Mauro Tulli e postfazione di Francesca Masi. Pisa: Nomos Verlag 2022, 29–40 and 53–60, with bibliography.

Finally, like Democritus, Epicureans criticize the superstitious belief in the everlasting misery that wrongdoers will experience after death (*Ep.* 1.81). They go even further than their predecessor in this respect. Proof is provided by Lucretius (*DRN* 3.819-827). The Epicurean poet demonstrates that the soul is mortal also because it experiences the remorse or painful awareness of some *peccata*[40]. Upon closer scrutiny, therefore, the myth of eternal punishment for human errors is revealed to be self-confuting. If our soul were immortal, we would not feel the pain of having erred. Conversely, the painful awareness of errors shows that we are mortal. The immortality of souls and the experience of *peccata* are mutually exclusive.

It is clear that there could not exist a *direct* sin, namely an error against some established divine rules/laws. However, the sources leave open the possibility that the Epicureans may have acknowledged the possibility of *indirect* sin. Another key doctrine of Epicurean theology is that, even if the gods do not directly assist humankind, they do so indirectly as objects of emulation. A divinity represents a "living model" of blessedness that the Epicurean wise men embody in the human sphere. The latter then attract a similar sacred reverence and feel a divine pleasure that assimilate them to a godlike status[41]. Now, since errors depend on ignorance of the good and create painful reactions, it follows that they separate us from this blessed condition. Errors could thus be regarded as indirect "sins" against divinity and the venerable status of the wise man, insofar as they hinder the realization of the living model of blessedness. Moreover, Lucretius shows that to correct past errors is a means to divine pleasure. In the already cited *DRN* 3.314-322, after all, he claims that Epicurean reason that corrects our defects allow us to live a life worthy of the gods (*dignam dis degere vitam*).

This last insight seems to entail another key difference between the Epicurean perspective and that of Democritus. The older atomist also says that one could achieve a divine status (B 129 DK = D218 LM) and that good agents should be emulated (B 38, 79 DK). Since the gods are just/good, it could follow that Democritus already anticipated the Epicurean idea that one could indirectly sin against the godlike status that human beings can achieve by imitation of the divine. But in the absence of any textual proof,

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[40] On this passage, see especially KONSTAN: *Lucretius and the Conscience of an Epicurean*, 69–76, who focuses on a parallel with *DRN* 4.1135: *cum conscius ipse animus se forte remordet.* See also CANCRINI: *Syneidesis*, 157–158.

[41] Epic. *Ep.* 3.135 and *GV* 65; Clem. Alex. *Strom.* II 21.127.1 (= fr. 602 Us.); Colotes *ap.* Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1117B4-C9 (= fr. 65 Arr.); CLAY, Diskin: *Paradosis and Survival*, 63–65 and 75–102; ERLER, Michael: *Epicurus as* deus mortalis*: homoiosis theoi and Epicurean self-cultivation*, in: FREDE, Dorothea/LAKS, André (eds.): *Traditions of Theology. Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath.* Leiden: Brill 2002, 159–181; KONSTAN, David: *A Life Worthy of the Gods. The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus.* Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing 2008, 128–143; SALEM: *Tel un dieu parmi les homes*, 185–186; DE SANCTIS, Dino: *La salvezza nelle parole*, 68.

it seems more cautious to conclude that Epicureans explicitly addressed a thesis that was only virtually contained in the theory of their predecessor.

4. GASSENDI AND THE "BAPTISM" OF EPICURUS

The study of Epicurean theory has shown that its conception of moral error is almost identical to the one of Democritus and Aristotle: an immoral act caused by ignorance that differs from injustice, has many degrees of gravity and must be corrected through teaching/frank criticism. At the same time, it has been shown that an ἁμαρτία does not consist in a direct religious sin, for there are no providential gods that establish moral laws and no *post mortem* punishments that await immortal souls who have erred. The Epicureans, however, may have added that there could be an indirect sin against the gods and wise men, regarded as living objects of emulation whose blessedness can be realized by conducting a faultless life.

In its reception by Christian philosopher Pierre Gassendi, or better by his annotations on book X of the *Lives of the philosophers* of Diogenes Laertius (1649) and his *opus maius Syntagma philosophicum* (1655)[42], the core of the non-religious component of Epicurean theory remains intact. He accepts the definition of error as ignorance of the good (*Synt.* II 826b-827a). Moreover, Gassendi believes that leading an Epicurean life, *i.e.* cultivating justice and living without moral errors, brings a katastematic pleasure that represents the ultimate goal of mortal life[43]. Finally, he not only agrees with Epicurus' teaching that errors must be recognized and corrected (cf. again the sentence *Initium salutis est notitia peccati* preserved by Seneca), but also tries to show that this perspective can agree with Christian ethics. To prove this, he quotes in *Animad.* 1234 a passage of a similar tone from John Chrysostom's *To Stagirius Troubled by a Demon* (I 5): "It is no petty thing to recognize and become aware immediately that one has erred, but it is a path and the beginning of a journey toward correction and change for the better"[44]. The remaining points of the theory were instead unknown to Gassendi, who did not have access to Philodemus' *De liberalitate dicendi*.

Things change when it comes to theology. Indeed, Gassendi believes in providence and in the immortality of the soul. Hence, he attacks Epicurus

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[42] The former is abbreviated as *Animad.* (in: GASSENDI, Pierre: *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii.* London: Garland 1987), the latter as *Synt.* (in: GASSENDI, Pierre: *Opera omnia.* Bände I–II. Stuttgart-Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann 1964).

[43] *Synt.* II 661a-820b, *Animad.* III 1756. On the reception of Epicurean ethics and politics, see especially SARASOHN, Lisa: *Gassendi's Ethics. Freedom in a Mechanistic Universe.* Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press 1996, and PAGANINI, Gianenrico: *Early Modern Epicureanism: Gassendi and Hobbes in Dialogue on Psychology, Ethics, and Politics,* in: MITSIS, Phillip (ed.): *The Oxford Companion of Epicureanism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020, 671–710.

[44] Transl. mine: ἐπιγινώσκειν ταχέως καὶ συνορᾶν τὸ πλημμεληθὲν, οὐκ ἔστι μικρὸν, ἀλλ' ὁδός τις καὶ ἀρχὴ πρὸς διόρθωσιν ἄγουσα καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ τὸ κρεῖττον μεταβολήν.

and Lucretius, while also claiming that God perceives the Epicurean good of pleasure, when He takes providential care of the world[45]. But, most importantly for the purpose of this essay, he accepts the notion of an original sin that has degraded human nature from the divine/spiritual Paradise to our material condition and that can only be healed with divine assistance. Although this theological problem is never openly discussed, hints that Gassendi was interested in it are provided by his letters[46] and philosophical works. More precisely, we find a reference to this theology in the passages where Gassendi claims that God has forgiven our sins with the blood of his holy son (= Christ), that He will reward pious/just Christians with the pleasures of Paradise, that He has gifted human beings with the freedom to err or to abstain from error (*Synt.* I 521a, 529b; II 710a-b, 843a-844a, 852b).

It is worth highlighting that these problems are only mentioned and never discussed by Gassendi, because his *opus maius* is intended to provide to his reader a physical-ethical *philosophy*, not a *theology*—its name after all is *Syntagma philosophicum*. These theological references to sin are then used to show the limits of the Epicurean philosophical theory that do not agree with this important Christian belief. Even in the section of the *Syntagma* dedicated on the defense of human freedom, Gassendi just focuses on the demonstration of how our choices were predestined by divine providence. His philosophical aim is here to find a virtuous middle between Luther, who only recognizes that salvation from sins depends on the mysterious grace of God, and Epicurus or Lucretius, who instead claim that individuals have the full power to save themselves. Gassendi's doctrine is that we choose one of the many "possible futures" that are opened to us and that divinity already knows what our decision will be[47].

Although this theory sounds unsatisfactory, it nonetheless acknowledges the existence of some divine laws or rules that can be directly transgressed, as well as the fact that wrongdoers ignorant of the good do not simply commit errors. They sin against the God that governs the universe and wants to lead Christians to experience katastematic pleasure also in the afterlife. Gassendi's perspective also differs in one important respect

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[45] I 309b, 318a-b, 322b-323a, 329b-330a; II 635a-660a, 664b-665a. See GREGORY, Tullio: *Scetticismo ed empirismo. Studio su Gassendi.* Roma: Laterza 1961, 179–227; BLOCH, Olivier René: *La philosophie de Gassendi. Nominalisme, matérialisme et métaphysique.* La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff 1971, 60–66, 288–302, 411–429; OSLER, Margaret: *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy. Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994; LOLORDO, Antonia: *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 227–252.

[46] Cf. epistles 16, 19, 288, 495 of TAUSSIG, Sylvie (éd.): *Pierre Gassendi: Lettres latines (1592–1655),* vol. 1. Turnhout: Brepols 2004, with BLOCH: *La philosophie de Gassendi,* 45, 460, 466–472; OSLER: *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy,* 85–86. Pace GREGORY: *Scetticismo ed empirismo,* 241–242, who writes that "il peccato originale è dimenticato".

[47] *Synt.* II 840a-860b. For clarifications, cf. SARASOHN: *Gassendi's Ethics,* 90–97, 118–136; OSLER: *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy,* 80–101.

from the Epicurean doctrine that not all errors are identical. While follow-
ing those Epicureans who claim this in order to demonstrate that wise men
will commit some minor errors and to confute the Stoics, who affirmed the
opposite (*Synt.* II 741a-742a), by also quoting an extract of Horace's *Satires*
as further confirmation[48], he adds that *peccata* differ for their *post mortem*
effects. Some sins lead souls to Hell, others to a Purgatory where sins are
purified, to enable the soul's blessed transmigration to Paradise (*Synt.* II
652a-655a).

A final, brief note can also be made about the reception of Epicurean
pietas and the notion of emulating the gods. Gassendi here adopts a dialec-
tical approach. On the one hand, he appreciates this Epicurean perspec-
tive, since it shows that Epicurus was not an atheist and felt sincere rever-
ence toward the perfection of the divine. On the other hand, Gassendi con-
siders also this *pietas* a defective perspective. God cannot be emulated by
humankind and the wise men are said to be akin to the Divinity's perfec-
tion only in a metaphorical sense (= as agents that try to become as perfect
as they can). Human blessedness is strictly inferior to the divine one. Only
access to Paradise, then, can grant the kind of divine pleasure that Epicu-
reans attach to a life free from all sins[49]. It is possible to conclude, there-
fore, that Gassendi is a Christian Epicurean who acknowledges the possibi-
lity of *direct* religious sins against God, but not that of *indirect* sins against
Him and against wise men as objects of emulation.

This last observation confirms at the end Osler's idea that Gassendi
aimed to "baptize" Epicureanism with the water of Christianity[50]. Had Epi-
curus believed that God is a providential being that corrects/forgives our
sins and rewards our immortal souls with the pleasures of Paradise, his
theory of moral errors would have been a perfect pagan expression of the
truth of Christian faith.

Abstract
*This paper attempts to analyse the distinction between "error" and "sin" in the
atomistic tradition, from Democritus' and Epicurus' theologies, to the Christian
perspective of Pierre Gassendi. Two points will be highlighted. Firstly, it is ar-
gued that even Democritus and Epicurus—who affirmed that gods neglect hu-
manity—recognized an "indirect" form of sin: the sin against the state of
blessedness that human beings could achieve by imitating the perfection of divi-
nity. Secondly, the hedonistic aspect of this perspective is recognized. Mutatis
mutandis, Democritus, Epicurus and Gassendi agree that sin is avoided in order
to feel pure pleasure either in this life, or in the afterlife.*

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[48] I 3.96-98 and 115-124 (= fr. 521 Us.), in: *Animad.* 1219–1221.

[49] Cf. book IV of Gassendi's *De vita et moribus Epicuri*, in: TAUSSIG, Sylvie (éd.): *Pierre
Gassendi: Vie et mœurs d'Epicure*, 2 vol. Paris: Éditions Alive 2006, 2–45.

[50] OSLER: *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, 44–45, 48, 76.