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MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF EPICUREANISM

This may sound at least paradoxically, if not completely absurd. Usually, we tend to identify or associate mysticism with irrationality, ascetism, contempt for *this world* and the body. Mystics appear to be utterly *otherworldly*¹, with their eyes fixed on higher reality but not paying attention to this world, unless to label it *illusion* or something evil to the core. At the same time, Epicureanism seems to be essentially *thisworldly*. In the field of ethics, Epicurus maintained that the supreme good is pleasure and, in the field of physics, that all that exists is nothing more than atoms and void. Can we imagine something less *mystical* than such vision of reality?

Even ancient philosophers sometimes did not hide their contempt towards Epicureanism or their confusion about it. Ancient philosophy as a whole tried to find *arche*, which is the essence of reality, being beyond it. Plato established a sort of philosophical attitude which embraced a division into the eternal domain of Forms, souls or God and the passing domain of *shadows*, that is, sensual or material world. In ethics, philosophers generally tend to seek the supreme good (*summum bonum*) in the *arete*, that is virtue, morality, temperance and so forth. The Epicurean doctrine was somehow different. That is the reason why Platonists and Pythagoreans were sometimes outraged by the materialist physics of Epicurus² and by the denying of invisible, spiritual reality as well as by ethics which proclaimed pleasure the end of life. Even Stoics, such as Seneca or Marcus Aurelius³, who appreciated Epicurus very much and emphasised values of his philosophy, had to admit that they can agree with him only partially.

Christianity found in Epicurus a real devil. He was being called an atheist (whom he was not), a hedonist, a materialist and his philosophy was regarded as very dangerous for Christian faith. This excommunication did not lose its power until the Enlightenment. Due to this historical heritage we have difficulties to think about Epicurus in a different way. The traditional approach to him made it almost impossible to discover any mystical aspects of

¹ I refer here to Arthur Lovejoy's differentiations made in: A. Lovejoy, *The great chain of being. A study of the history of an idea*, University Press, Harvard 1936.

² A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura* [1929], Aletheia, Warszawa 2000, p. 278.

³ A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 279.

his philosophy.

Not only owing to our vision of Epicureanism have we such prejudices, but also because of our vision of mysticism as well. The modern paradigm envisaged mysticism as a part of the religious worldview, which meant a mythic and unscientific (therefore false!) vision of reality. Even nowadays *mystical* very often means *strange, mysterious, occult, irrational* and we juxtapose it with the rational and scientific (which of course means something positive, as 19th century positivists claimed). However, recent studies on mysticism show that such a notion is utterly false, at least one-sided and incomplete. For instance, mysticism is not only a religious phenomenon. There were mystics who did not accept any religious dogmas or who lived out of institutionalised religions. To enumerate only the most renowned ones, Blake, Rimbaud, Whitman or Krishnamurti were certainly mystics but they could not find their place in any established religion of their time.

When we talk about Epicurus we should bear in mind that in ancient Greece such a notion of religion as we have did not exist, therefore the greatest Greek sages and mystics from Empedocles, Pythagoras, Heraclitus to Plato and Plotinus were not confined to a simple religious creed. Admittedly, their mysticism and philosophy are, at the same time, *religious* in a broader sense while Epicurus might not appear to be religious in any way.

As we see, mysticism does not have to be a religious phenomenon. The second false statement about mysticism is that it always denies the sensual world and bodily needs. Plotinus, who was accused of rejecting body and the material world, argued with the Gnostics to defend the beauty of this world¹. He asserted, with great zeal and passion, that this world is not evil but beautiful and good. It is only less good than the invisible world. The greatest mystics of Christian tradition followed him, even if, at the beginning, they denied sensual world, it was for a certain purpose and eventually they always treated it as a manifestation of God's power and goodness. In the East there is a similar situation. In the 8th century in tantra we meet a pure mysticism which appreciates the body and senses. Also in Zen or Dzogchen Buddhism this world is not evil (as it tends to be in Theravada) but it is a form of the divine reality (Emptiness). Granted, for mystics such as Blake, Emerson or Whitman, nature was the symbol of Spirit and the body was something good, never bad.

As we see, mysticism does not necessarily accord with our visions of religiosity or spirituality, which are often misleading. I will attempt to show that what at the beginning seems to be absurd, that is, the mystical character of Epicureanism, is not strange at all. Mysticism and materialist hedonism of Epicurus can be closer to each other than we think. Moreover, my aim is to prove that Epicureanism cannot be fully understood and cannot be regarded as cohesive unless we see its mystical aspects.

Before we try to analyse the teachings of Epicurus, we have to make clear what we mean by mysticism to avoid misunderstandings which are not rare in such an intricate and complex matter. Mysticism, in a very broad sense, means

¹ Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* II, 9, 13, transl. by A. H. Armstrong, University Press, Harvard 1966.

transrational knowledge of reality¹. Such knowledge transcends sensual perception as well as rational, discursive thinking and is based on a deep, intuitive insight into the nature of being. Such insight creates a state of mind which is often called *wisdom* (for example, in ancient philosophy, which was *the love of wisdom*). It means that one sees things such as they really are². The result of the mystical, transrational insight is usually freedom from suffering, genuinely moral life, compassion for living beings and great happiness which cannot be disturbed by external conditions. Mysticism, therefore, involves transcending human nature and going beyond limitations of personality or average, daily consciousness³.

Experience

Epicurus commences by a statement that a human being is unhappy due to the fact that he or she does not see things such as they are. In the *Letter to Menoeceus* Epicurus refers to this state of affairs in terms of disease and health of soul. *For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul.*⁴ The illness is triggered by illusions of our minds which cover the true nature of things. Epicurus, at the beginning, tries to point out four main illusions or false beliefs that disable us from being happy. He says that we are afraid of the gods and death and we also dread evil as well as we think that good is difficult to achieve. This is a very general image of a human being and it does not mean that every person suffers from incessant dread of death, god, evil etc. But Epicurus wants to show in a clear way the main sources of suffering in order to find a cure.

The cure is called in Greek *tetrapharmakon*⁵ because it consists of four elements, which correspond to the four sources of suffering. It says that (1) god is absolutely good, (2) death is not to be afraid of, (3) evil is easy to bear and (4) good is easy to achieve. As we see, unhappiness is caused by false beliefs. If someone knows that death or god is not a reason for dread, evil is easy to bear and good easy to obtain, he should be completely happy and free from sorrows.

It seems slightly too simple. If someone really accepted these statements as true and believed in them firmly, would it really bring him or her genuine happiness? Probably not. And what Epicurus aims to teach is neither simple acceptance of these truths nor even religious faith in them. What he wants is transformation of consciousness, transformation of the whole human being.

¹ I refer to the notion *transrationality* as it is used by K. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, Shambala Press, Boston 2000, p. 635: *We use the term mysticism in a very general sense to mean any form of awareness beyond the conventional space-time centered on the individual ego/body-mind.*

² P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life: spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, transl. M. Chase, Blackwell, Malden 1995, p. 268.

³ Ken Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, Quest, Wheaton 1977 whose conception of mystical awareness I employ most of the time in this essay, describes it in his own terms of *personal* and *transpersonal* consciousness.

⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 122 in: Epicurus, *The Extant Remains*.

⁵ A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 37; P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life ...*, p. 26.

His teachings are based on the difference between the knowledge which is only an intellectual acceptance of statements and the knowledge which is the deep awareness of fact. In daily life we base on a merely intellectual knowledge most of the time. For instance, we know that something is right but we do the opposite or we know that something is wrong but – which is strange indeed – we follow this. This problem is put very clearly in a Latin saying: *Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor* (I see what is good and I approve it, but I follow the worse things). It means that the intellectual knowledge, being merely *information* in the mind, cannot influence our life effectively, cannot mould our character and behaviour.

But there is knowledge which involves whole our being, whole our consciousness, in which the truth is apprehended directly. We do not *think* that jumping into a precipice is something wrong, we *know* it directly and nobody has to convince us or provide any arguments, because this knowledge is rooted in our body and mind. And such awareness is exactly what Epicurus attempted to teach his disciples.

Each of the *tetrapharmakon*'s statements was rather simple and easy to prove. The gods are good by nature¹ and they are not concerned about our affairs so we do not have to be afraid that they could punish us or demand any sacrifices from us. Death is not something frightening for there is no death at all. Epicurus says: *Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.*² Evil is pain and when it is very intense, it lasts a short period of time unless it kills us. When the pain lasts for a long time, we can always bear it easily. The only good is pleasure and it is a very easy thing to achieve, because it is something natural to us.

The first step to the insight into these truths was learning them by heart as quasi-religious dogmas³. Epicureanism was a sort of faith as Hadot points out. A disciple had to accept dogmas in order to become a member of the school and then he could proceed in spiritual growth by meditating on them. *Tetrapharmakon* owes its extraordinary simplicity mainly to this purpose. It was easy to learn by heart and bear in mind all the time. Epicurus himself writes in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: *Exercise yourself in these and related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with one who is like-minded; then never, either in waking or in dream, will you be disturbed, but will live as a god among men. And in the same letter: exercise yourself in them [dogmas], holding them to be the elements of right life*⁴.

Meditation on *tetrapharmakon* could be a practice of attentive repeating

¹ Cf. *A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.* Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 1 in: Epicurus, *The Extant Remains*, ed. and transl. C. Bailey, Hyperion Press, Westport 1980.

² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 125–126.

³ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life ...*, p. 271.

⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 135.

the statements and making them permeate the whole human being. There is a picture of *hetaera* Leontion¹ sitting with her eyes closed, seemingly during the meditation. A disciple in Epicurus' Garden had to keep in mind the dogmas constantly, to repeat them and to try to understand them on a deeper than only intellectual level. Of course, reason or discursive thinking played a crucial role in such spiritual practice but it will not be an exaggeration to say that it was only a tool and had no intrinsic value. What Epicureans aimed at was the moment in which the truth was to become something obvious² to the disciple. For example, the belief that death is something dreadful had to be replaced by the analogically strong belief that it is something utterly indifferent, totally absent in our life.

But Epicurus was said to be a very prolific writer, according to Diogenes Laertius³. We have to be wary, for, at the same time, Epicurus says that theory as such does not have any value at all⁴. What is important is happiness, transformation⁵ of consciousness, not merely thinking on philosophical issues. Treatises of Epicurus did not aim to present his opinions concerning nature or to prove them. As the *tetrapharmakon* itself, the whole Epicurean physics was intended to transform a human being, to change his or her consciousness and to release him or her from suffering.

Probably, the *tetrapharmakon* was either available for less ambitious students, because of its simplicity, or was a subject of spiritual exercise alternative to the discursive meditation on physical intricacies. Epicureanism as well as Stoicism wanted to be a sort of *egalitarian philosophy*, even a sort of religious faith, available not only for scholars but also for the simple people who did not want to argue on complex philosophical questions. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the end of every philosophical exercise was transrational intuition⁶. It could be obtained by remembering and intensive, constant meditating on four simple Epicurean dogmas as well as by deeper study on Epicurus' treatises concerning physics.

If we conceive the whole Epicurean speculation as merely an instrument for inner transformation, for philosophical *metanoia*, we can see Epicurean materialism in a different light. Epicurus could be anachronistically called a *pragmatist*, because he did not develop his philosophical discourse in order to

¹ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, transl. M. Chase, University Press, Harvard 2002, p. 168.

² Epicurus uses the term *enargeia* to describe the self-evident truth. Cf. J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, University Press, Cambridge 1972.

³ Cf. *Epicurus was a most prolific author and eclipsed all before him in the number of his writings: for they amount to about three hundred rolls, and contain not a single citation from other authors; it is Epicurus himself who speaks throughout. Chrysippus [the Stoic] tried to outdo him in authorship.* Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X, 26–27, ed. and transl. R. D. Hicks, University Press, Harvard 1925.

⁴ Cf. *If we had never been troubled by celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by fears about death, nor by our ignorance of the limits of pains and desires, we should have had no need of natural science.* Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 11.

⁵ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life ...*, p. 60 often uses the word *transformation* to describe this phenomenon of awareness and I think it is very accurate.

⁶ Cf. K. Albert, *Einführung in die philosophische Mystik*, WBG, Darmstadt 1996, p. 9; P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 230.

prove that it is true but to achieve a concrete goal which is health of the soul. He was convinced that his materialist physics enables humans to attain happiness, therefore he defended his physical statements so firmly. But his attitude towards speculation was very specific. It was a tool and this tool was virtually rational, but the insight itself was essentially transrational, wisdom was intuitive. Thus materialism proves a paradoxical instrument for mystical awakening.

Pleasure

One of the *tetrapharmakon's* statements is that the good, which is pleasure, is easy to attain. It seems to be quite a controversial question. If pleasure is so easy to gain, why are people so unhappy, as Epicurus himself asserted at the beginning? People could rather say that pleasure is difficult to achieve, especially, owing to the fact that it depends on such conditions as power, wealth and so forth. Epicurus would agree with that, because when he said that pleasure is something natural and easy to attain, he meant something fairly different to what we think he meant.

He divided pleasure into two kinds. One is *kinetic* pleasure, which comes from delicate movement of atoms. Pleasures of sex and eating are of this kind. This is a pleasure which most of the people are familiar with. But it has a serious disadvantage, that is, it easily becomes its opposite, pain. Seeking such pleasure is difficult and often causes more pain than it brings pleasure. Therefore, in general, it is better not to search for such pleasure. The second kind of pleasure is called *katastematic* pleasure because it involves an orderly movement of atoms in the soul. It could be called the true good. Whereas kinetic pleasures are uncertain and intrinsically have an element of pain in them, the katastematic pleasure is pure and does not have anything to do with pain. Moreover, it begins when pain and disease of the soul are removed. It is also considerably easier to achieve, because one virtually does not have to *do* anything to attain such pleasure. It is already there by nature.

The teaching on katastematic pleasure is one of the more mysterious elements of Epicureanism. While ordinary pleasures come and go, the katastematic pleasure, which is an absence of suffering, is always present in us. We have only to throw away our illusions, desires and fears and this inner bliss will manifest itself. It is absolutely independent of external conditions. If someone attains this kind of pleasure, he will be always happy, no matter what will happen.

Because of the nature of the true good, of the true pleasure, recommended by Epicurus to his disciples, Epicureanism does not prove a mere hedonism, though many people in antiquity and later thought so. As I have already mentioned, philosophers such as Seneca or Marcus Aurelius knew that the Epicurean way of life was fairly similar to the life of Stoics or Platonists. They lived a simple life, ate very little, rejected sexual pleasure, they seemed to be as ascetical as other philosophers although they proclaimed pleasure the only

good and pain the only evil¹.

In fact, the Epicurean pleasure resembles a mystical experience of some kind, because it is absolute and it is the end of human life. Epicurus says that *the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled*². The katastematic pleasure is not just one of human experiences which is worth having. It is the ultimate experience of freedom from suffering and of utmost bliss which is incomparable to anything.

After reaching this state a human being does not need anything and does not want anything more: *The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together*. If we took Epicurus' saying that katastematic pleasure is the absence of pain literally, it would seem that this is merely a cold indifference or apathy, a simple state of not-feeling. But it is completely opposite. The katastematic pleasure is the most intense experience of being alive, the essence of bliss available for human beings.

The experience of such pleasure, the mystical experience of Epicurus must have been very special if he could have said that when one attains katastematic pleasure he seeks no more, he is completely happy, no matter what happened or will happen to him in the future. Epicurus uses the Greek word *galenizein* to describe this state of *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance), which is essentially connected with the ultimate pleasure. *Galene* means silence and stillness of the sea. As Rist put it³, the sage will be like a calm sea with no disturbing breezes. This beautiful image of inner silence and peace is a description of the experience which transcends ordinary consciousness and ordinary human condition. It is godlike. Seneca⁴ compares it to the image of completely bright sky which cannot be brighter for it has reached the perfection. The symbols of light and sky are often used in mystical context, for instance, by Plato and Neoplatonists as well as by Eastern philosophers⁵.

Epicurus says that the one and only difference between Zeus and the sage is that the life of the sage is limited in time. Happiness of god and happiness of a human is the same happiness, and the only difference is that the first is immortal, the latter mortal. That is why disciples of Epicurus, who believed that he was the true sage, called him *a god* and worshipped him. Not only was

¹ Diogenes Laertius X, 11 writes about Epicurus: *In his correspondence he himself mentions that he was content with plain bread and water. And again: 'Send me a little pot of cheese, that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously.'* Such was the man who laid down that pleasure was the end of life. The ascetical character of Epicureanism is what most of scholars agree with, though some of Epicurus' sayings seem to contradict it.

² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 127–128.

³ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 109.

⁴ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 157.

⁵ In Dzogchen *rigpa*, *the nature of the mind*, is compared to the clear sky. Notice also common Buddhist metaphor of the sky (the divine Self) and clouds (passing, temporal forms).

he a spiritual teacher for them, but also a kind of saint or prophet and even a kind of god to them (they wore rings with his face, for instance). Lucretius in his poem also calls Epicurus not a man, but a god¹.

Another aspect of this mysterious experience or state of mind is that it is apparently beyond time. Epicurus says that it does not grow with time as other pleasures and it is not dependent on time. *Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason.*² In the fragment quoted above he says that *never, either in waking or in dream, will you be disturbed, but will live as a god among men. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.*³ It seems that we cannot intellectually grasp the idea of this experience and this ineffability leads us exactly to the notion of mystical experience which is beyond time and impossible to be put in words⁴.

Pierre Hadot also points out that the ultimate pleasure is beyond time and that it is a kind of absolute for the Epicureans⁵. The non-temporal aspect of the katastematic pleasure appears also in a strange Epicurean saying: *Epicurus and Metrodorus are eternal*. It seems to be impossible. As Epicurus taught, everything consists of atoms and there is not a single *eternal* thing in reality. Even the gods are destroyable and their immortality is only due to the fact that they dwell in safe places (so called *intermundia*). Why then is Epicurus eternal? I think this riddle can be unravelled only by reference to the nature of pleasure.

The highest experience of Epicurean life is not placed in time. It simply does not last or its duration is impossible to express in temporal terms. That is why just one glimpse of pleasure was equal to the infinite ages of pleasure felt by the gods. Although pleasure is achieved *in* time, it just falls out of time and becomes something beyond it, something eternal. *Eternal* does not mean that it *lasts for a very long time* as it is used in common language, but that it has nothing to do with time. Epicurus, as the sage who experienced pleasure equal to the one experienced by immortal gods, is eternal for he went out of the boundaries of time.

In ancient philosophy the eternal was connected with the present in the sense that what is eternal is always *now*. Epicurus strongly emphasised that one can be happy only in the present. Our fears and desires always refer to the future or to the past but happiness and bliss are in the present. Therefore, the main Epicurean practice, as Hadot puts it, is to be *here and now*, in a deep

¹ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* III, 15 and V, 8, transl. H. A. J. Munro, University Press, Cambridge 1873.

² Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 19.

³ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 135.

⁴ What is interesting, Diano considers the Epicurean pleasure the experience of pure being which is mystical in his opinion. P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 157 links it with the fragment from Rousseau in which French philosopher describes his sudden experience of happiness and freedom. K. Albert, *Einführung in die philosophische Mystik*, p. 47 uses this Rousseau's experience as a main example of *intuitio mystica* in philosophy.

⁵ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 251.

relaxation in *this* moment. Living totally in the present was often described as a mystical experience¹. The experience of the pure present moment Karl Albert identifies with the mystical intuition². In a way, the Epicurean practice of living completely in the presence, of being here and now, was the experience of the ultimate bliss. Pleasure, the present and the eternal are three components of the Epicurean mystical experience which is beyond limitations of time. And only in this sense could Epicurus be called *eternal*, though he was a mortal man.

Nature

Although Epicurean physics is rather different from other ancient conceptions, mainly because of the absence of providence and an invisible principle of the world, there is one thing common. This is a belief which was shared by most of the philosophical schools. It is a conception of the transitory nature of everything. Heraclitus put it in his famous *panta rhei*. Plato developed this vision in the broader context of his own conception of reality. But he juxtaposed the domain of temporary, transient becoming with the domain of Being which is always the same, does not change at all and therefore is eternal. Other philosophical schools, such as Aristotle's or the Stoics', also maintained that everything in this world is ephemeral. Such was Epicurus' belief as well.

However, what is interesting in his physics is that, due to the totally materialist premises, he denies immortality of soul as well as the existence of some invisible and eternal world. Everything is built of atoms and atoms are in incessant movement, so nothing can be permanent or even stable. Human beings emerge and are destroyed as well as the whole worlds and there is no escape from this.

But though it seems like *bad news*, Epicurus asserts that these are essentially *good news*. We should be happy that everything is volatile and passing. We should be glad that we exist only for a moment in time. This appears to be another understandable point in Epicurus' teaching, at least as puzzling as the non-temporal nature of pleasure. If Epicurus really wanted to create physics that would give human beings freedom from suffering, he should rather choose a conception close to the Platonic one. Socrates in *Phaedo* can console himself that soul is apparently immortal, therefore life does not end here on earth. But Epicurus provides no consolation for his disciples.

I think that, according to the majority of premodern philosophical or religious systems, what makes the idea of impermanence so horrible is an attachment to the things that have to pass. Where there is no attachment, where there is no desire to stop the constant movement of things and possess them for ever, there could be no regret or sorrow. Epicurus' ethics is based on the experience of freedom from external things and it is rooted in the idea of

¹ For example, by William James or by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

² K. Albert, *Einführung in die philosophische Mystik*, p. 36.

timeless, unconditioned pleasure. The sage, due to his freedom, is not attached to things, does not want them and does not need them at all. Therefore, the passing of everything cannot horrify him.

But the crucial difficulty is that even if the sage is free from external things, he has to be *free from himself* as well in order to avoid fear. The problem is that the self is transient as well as other things and it is doomed to die and it seems at least absurd to be glad because of this. But such is the teaching of Epicurus. He says that even destruction of ourselves does not cause fear or sorrow in us, if we understand fully the volatile and impermanent nature of reality.

Simone Weil wrote that if a human identifies himself or herself with the universe, fear of change and death will disappear. We are afraid of impermanence due to our attachment to our life, to ourselves. But from the cosmic point of view we seem to be only small elements of the Whole, so our life and death is not so important. Also Hermann Broch writes about the universal present moment as the totality of being and says that in this experience of totality fear of nothingness disappears¹. Reaching such a *cosmic consciousness*² can free ourselves from fear of destruction.

I think that in Epicureanism freedom from the fear mentioned above can be connected with moments of cosmic consciousness. Such an experience certainly appears. Hadot points out certain spiritual exercises which base on discursive or imaginative contemplating of Nature as a whole. These exercises lead to the transrational glimpse of cosmic consciousness which involves looking on one's life from a cosmic, universal point of view. Lucretius describes this experience saying: *on he [Epicurus] passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe*³.

He also writes: *For soon as thy philosophy issuing from a godlike intellect has begun with loud voice to proclaim the nature of things, the terrors of the mind are dispelled, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things in operation throughout the whole void: the divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes (...)*⁴. This experience of perceiving the whole universe in one moment is described by this Roman poet as a supreme bliss: *At all this a kind of godlike delight mixed with shuddering awe comes over me to think that nature by thy power is laid thus visibly open, is thus unveiled on every side.*⁵

This experience to which Lucretius refers is apparently mystical⁶. Discursive contemplation of Nature does not have to end in this sort of identi-

¹ K. Albert, *Einführung in die philosophische Mystik*, pp. 69–71.

² The term introduced by R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, E. P. Dutton, New York 1969.

³ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* I, 72–74.

⁴ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* III, 14–18.

⁵ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* III, 28–30.

⁶ So thinks A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 61 as well as P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life ...*, p. 290, p. 317.

fictionation with the whole being, for even simple rational reflections on the wonders of reality can bring a change in human consciousness. If one still bore in mind that they are nothing more than small elements in vast Nature and their life is like a short while in comparison to the ages, they probably would change their attitude to life and liberate themselves from egocentrism.

On top of that, the experience of the cosmic consciousness is, again, connected with the experience of pure pleasure. The most pleasant occupation in life, according to Epicurus, is the contemplation of Nature and the gods. When a human being understands the nature of pleasure, life and the whole universe, this knowledge (i. e. the mystical insight) brings to them the greatest pleasure imaginable¹. This experience which transcends ordinary consciousness and passes beyond limitations of human personality is described by Metrodorus: *Remember that you are mortal and have a limited time to live and have devoted yourself to discussions on nature for all time and eternity and have seen 'things that are now and are to me come and have been.'*² It is a godlike consciousness, undoubtedly.

The gods

As we saw, the Epicurean approach to Nature is quite religious and its contemplation absolutely crucial. Conversely, the Epicurus' gods do not seem to be as important as Nature or even seem to be unimportant at all. Yet it is not true, though many times Epicurus was being accused of atheism. It is fairly ironic because in fact he was a very religious man³ and there is nothing unexpected even in the fact that his religiosity was different from the common one. Most philosophers were devoted to the gods in their own way, and sometimes they have been punished for that as Socrates or Anaxagoras.

In Epicureanism the gods are good and happy beings that dwell in *inter-mundia*, that is, between the worlds existing in void, where there is no harm and no destruction that could threaten them. They do not care about humans or other beings. They do not need anything to be happy because they are wise and, thus, free from suffering. Therefore it is not reasonable to pray to them in order to get something from them (the ancient formula *do, ut des*) or to be afraid of them. There is no hell or Tartarus where we could be punished after death (and, additionally, we are not immortal, so there is no *after death*). There is no punishment in this life as well. Epicurus rejects every aspect of religion which either tries to receive something from the gods or avoid their rage.

It does not mean that we should not care about the gods. On the one hand, they are archetypes or ideals which we should worship and imitate. Some scholars⁴ assert that the Epicurus' gods are merely projections of the ideal of a

¹ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 167.

² Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 18.

³ According to Diogenes Laertius X, 10: *His piety towards the gods and his affection for his country no words can describe.*

⁴ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 164.

sage: they are perfect men. I will return to this topic in a moment. We should remember that Epicurus was said to worship gods, to sacrifice to them, to pray and obey all forms of adoration which were established by the *polis*. It was not opportunism or hypocrisy. Epicurus knew that institutional Greek religion was false¹ and popular beliefs about gods ridiculous, nevertheless, he chose to worship gods by this established means, being convinced that they do not expect nor need this.

On the other hand, the gods are not only ideals or models to imitate. Epicurus says that their exquisite beauty and perfection lead us to religious adoration of them. There is an element of pure and unconditioned love towards the gods in Epicureanism². One should love the gods although they know that no reward for this love will be given. Admittedly, we could consider this piety or religiosity (which was indeed very ardent and zealous in Epicurus' case) merely another part of the philosophical system, invented to help people in their spiritual life, that is, in the process of transformation. And it might appear fairly reasonable, for Epicurus, as we showed, everything that he wrote or taught in his school treated very instrumentally. Yet I suggest that we should consider another possible interpretation of the Epicurean piety as well.

Epicurus maintains that the existence of the gods is something beyond doubt, it is absolutely certain. In the *Letter to Menoceus* he says: *For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest.*³ It seems a little bit unexpectedly in mouths of a rational, materialist philosopher, who tried to prove meticulously every physical statement. The problem is that the existence of the gods was not a subject of faith for Epicurus. It was his direct experience which he tried to prove and justify in terms of his physics.

According to Rist, *our concept of the gods does not depend on the evidence of our senses but on that of the mind, for the gods are seen [theoretōi] by reason. (...) We first experience their existence; this is certain in some way since we 'see' them in the mind.*⁴ Lucretius also mentions⁵ in his poem that faith in the gods originated because people actually saw them. I think that Epicurus had his own mystical experiences of the gods, which were probably some visions of their beauty and blissful existence in the *intermundia*.

The word *theoretōi*, appearing in the fragment which Rist refers to, could be understood in two ways. Rist inclines to the view that *seeing in the mind* involves somewhat rather rational activity or the use of imagination. We tend to understand the Greek *theoria* in association with our *theory* which is utterly

¹ Epicurus states in the *Letter to Menoceus* 123: *For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believes, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious.*

² P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 164.

³ Cf. n. 2 on p. 49: he uses the word *enarges* which means obvious and self-evident knowledge. I would associate it with transrational or intuitive apprehension of the truth.

⁴ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 141.

⁵ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* V, 1169–1171.

false. *Theory* is connected with discursive thinking, especially with scientific reasoning, but for the Greek philosophers it meant something completely opposite. *Theoria* meant *seeing* in terms of non-discursive contemplation as, for instance, Porphyry puts it very clearly¹. Therefore *seeing in the mind* can mean only a contemplative intuition of the gods which accords with other Epicurean texts and with the whole system as I will prove in a moment².

Epicurus describes the process of perception saying that *by the entrance into our eyes or minds, to whichever their size is suitable, of certain films coming from the things themselves, these films or outlines being of the same color and shape as the external things themselves*³. Due to these assumptions he has to agree that whatever we see must come directly from the real objects, although it sometimes can be misleading and the reason must evaluate the validity of perception. He writes: *Even the objects presented to madmen and to people in dreams are true, for they produce effects – i. e. movements in the mind – which that which is unreal never does.*⁴ If someone sees the gods, it has to mean that they exist and that these images come from them just as they come from other things we perceive in daily life.

I think Epicurus' visions of the gods were very clear and *real*, so he must have been convinced that they are images of the gods' bodies. Such mystical experiences may occur without preparations or spiritual exercises⁵, therefore it is not something strange that Epicurus had them. The power of this experience led him to deep love of the gods and to the passionate piety. Despite his materialism, Epicurus was a truly religious philosopher and his school resembled a religious sect where he was the highest prophet.

In this context we have to admit that Lucretius describes the mystical contemplation of the gods when he writes: *the terrors of the mind are dispelled, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things in operation throughout the whole void: the divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes (...)*. This contemplation or vision played a crucial role in the Epicurean spiritual life. Epicurus was said to participate in Athenian religious feasts, not only due to his piety but also because it gave him an occasion to contemplate the gods⁶. His disciples somewhat participated in their master's spiritual experiences, he was considered to *be able to grasp their [the gods'] strength and their nature*⁷. Admittedly, he did not *grasp* them only intellectually by merely *thinking* about the gods but experienced them directly in the act of *theoria*, con-

¹ Cf. P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 206.

² Also Schmid asserts that *theoretōi* refers to the mystical contemplation of the gods and even J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, pp. 158–159 has to admit that *seeing in the mind* involves contemplation of some kind.

³ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 49–50 in: Epicurus, *The Extant Remains*.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius X, 32.

⁵ Cf. W. James, *The varieties of religious experience*, Crowell – Collier, New York 1961. Wilber maintains that *the peak experience* is possible on every stage of consciousness.

⁶ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, pp. 158–159.

⁷ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 142.

templation¹.

One of Epicurus' disciples is said to have fallen on his knees and to have worshipped him as a god after listening to the *inspired* lecture². Apparently, the personality of Epicurus impressed his disciples very strongly and they must have seen that he was in a special state of consciousness from time to time³. Anyhow, it shows that contemplation was not something odd in the Epicurean community.

The experience of the gods in Epicureanism was considered to be one of the greatest pleasures. Krokiewicz⁴ regards it as the strongest and most important pleasure of all. Lucretius, as we saw, writes about *a kind of godlike delight mixed with shuddering awe*. Rist points out that, according to Cicero, *when our mind is concentrated on the images flowing from the gods (...) the greatest pleasures accrue as we understand their blessed and eternal natures*⁵. I think that contemplation and vision of the gods is, to a certain extent, connected with contemplation of Nature, which we described previously. Hadot thinks that the nature of this contemplation is somewhat participation in the perfect happiness of the gods⁶. Maybe that is why Epicurus says that the sage is a friend of the gods. He must have experienced his visions as a kind of friendly communion with the gods. The communion of the Garden probably was to be the imitation of this divine archetype.

In this light Epicurus' adoration and worship of the gods cannot be a mere construction of his rational mind but comes directly from his religious experience. It is a kind of irony that such religious and devoted man as Epicurus, who even accepted the established and institutionalised form of the Greek religion, was considered to be an atheist. His early Christian adversaries, as Lactantius, were not able to differentiate between the critic of a bad religion (which in a case of Epicurus and Lucretius was really zealous) and the critic of religion as such.

Death

The motif of death has already appeared in this essay, but I would like to study it more carefully at the end. It is perhaps the most mysterious of all Epicurean philosophical issues and maybe the most important. The fear of death is probably the strongest fear of man. As Martin Heidegger pointed out in *Sein*

¹ What is interesting, Lucretius, *On the nature of things* V, 1203 refers to the prayer as the ability *to look on all things with a mind at peace*. It seems that Epicurus' considered the true prayer simply a state of mind, which was described above by metaphors of the calm sea or the bright sky. Maybe this is an allusion to the non-verbal, mystical prayer. Cf. K. Banek, *Miśtacy i bezbożnicy*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2003. In this light the katastematic pleasure could be conceive as the supreme religious activity in life.

² A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 61.

³ This anecdote resembles the words in which Porphyry describes Plotinus' lectures in *Porphyrii De vita Plotini et ordine librorum eius* 13, ed. G. Leopardi, Leo S. Olschki Editore, Firenze 1982. Plotinus was also *inspired* when teaching. Porphyry emphasises the great impact it had on people who listened to him.

⁴ A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 61.

⁵ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 157.

⁶ P. Hadot, *What is ancient philosophy?*, p. 164.

und Zeit, man is afraid of nothingness. In the antiquity people dreaded something appalling which apparently lurked in the darkness after death and this phenomenon appears in Homer's poems as well as in Plato's dialogues. Religion often claimed that soul is immortal and death is not an end. It was a typical consolation and thus it ends Plato's *Phaedo*. But Epicurus deals with this problem in a completely different way.

The second statement of *tetrapharmakon* is that death is not dreadful. Why? When we are alive, there is no death, and when death comes, we are already dead. Life and death are totally separated and they never meet each other. Death has nothing to do with us, says Epicurus, therefore the problem itself seems to be irrelevant. When we hear such an argumentation it may seem ridiculous and we might even think for what purpose it was formulated. Probably, nobody can rid himself or herself of the fear of death by accepting such an argumentation, it would be too simple. Even if it is absolutely correct from a point of view of logic, it does not do anything with my fear. It cannot convince anyone and I do not think that it convinced any of Epicurus' contemporaries.

As I said before, the aim of the Epicurean philosophy was not an intellectual acceptance of statements but their absorption and, through this, transformation of the whole being. To put it in another way, what Epicurus taught was not a theoretical refutation of death but a direct apprehension of the fact that death has nothing to do with us. The aim was the transrational insight into the fact that death does not exist, which is indeed an utterly absurd and counterfactual statement. Especially, for a philosopher, who has to be rational *ex definitione*.

This philosophical and, in fact, mystical intuition may have occurred through deep meditations on this subject and through life in the Epicurean community. Maybe through personal contact with Epicurus himself too. It was not the matter of few days to understand this crucial truth. It was probably the matter of the whole life and was not always successful. But it was perhaps worth making efforts, because the fear of death always was the most dangerous threat and obstacle to human happiness. Therefore, as Epicurus said, *exercise yourself in these and related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with one who is like-minded*, this is the only way to attain this type of awareness which liberates from fear. Seneca puts it in a famous saying *Meditare mortem*¹ which means not only intellectual reflections from time to time but incessant *askesis*, spiritual exercise.

What is more, the question of death in Epicureanism is not as simple as it seems. Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*² points out that death is not an event in our life and we cannot experience it in any way. As we are not able to see something which is beyond the reach of our sight, we cannot experience our own death. The space we can see is boundless and thus our life is boundless and infinite. I totally agree with Hadot that Epicurus

¹ Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucylum*, 26, 8, ed. Fickert, Weidmann, Leipzig 1842.

² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, transl. D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1988, 6.4311.

had in mind the same idea as Wittgenstein and that liberation from death involves the experience of living in the present which was an obsession of Wittgenstein during the First World War as we see in his diary.

Wittgenstein refers to the notion of eternity which we discussed in this essay. Eternity is not a very long time but reality *outside* time. Therefore, as Wittgenstein puts it, the one who lives in the present, lives eternally. The Epicurean sage always lives in this very moment and his consciousness is fully concentrated on the present. In this state of consciousness, the future does not exist as well as the past. The sage, who is present *here and now*, will never experience his own death and his life is boundless. If in this present moment he is alive and infinitely happy, it does not matter that in the next moment he will not feel anything, neither pleasure nor pain.

The fear of death is an illusion because we cannot experience our own death. If death is a state in which there is no experiencing and there is no consciousness, how can we experience that or how can we be aware of our own death. It is only a childish fear that death is something horrible. According to Lucretius: *For even as children are flurried and dread all things in the thick darkness, thus we in the daylight fear at times things not a whit more to be dreaded than those which children shudder at in the dark and fancy sure to be.*¹ Once our consciousness is transformed, we do not have an intellectual but a true knowledge that in a dark room there is nothing to fear. The same is with death. If we *grew up* and saw that in death there is nothing to dread, we would easily shed our fear of this.

What is interesting is that almost the same vision of death appears in the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a famous contemporary philosopher and spiritual teacher. His teachings have nothing to do with Epicureanism, but the approach to death is almost identical. For Krishnamurti says: *Are we afraid of the fact of death or of the idea of death? The fact is one thing and the idea about the fact is another. Am I afraid of the word death or of the fact itself? Because I am afraid of the word, of the idea, I never understand the fact, I never look at the fact, I am never in direct relation with the fact. It is only when I am in complete communion with the fact that there is no fear.*² For Epicurus death is an illusion created by our mind, it is only our false idea of death which frightens us. Therefore we can liberate ourselves through understanding and knowledge. I think that this approach to death is essentially mystical, not only because of the similarity to Krishnamurti, but because of its transrational character. The second statement of *tetrapharmakon* is almost impossible to understand on the rational level, it has to become a direct experience on the transrational level of consciousness.

¹ Lucretius, *On the nature of things* II, 55–58.

² J. Krishnamurti, *The book of life*, Harper, San Francisco 1995 (note on 26th of March). In other place Krishnamurti develops a discourse which is also quite similar to ancient thinking and Epicureanism as well: *You cannot be frightened of the unknown because you do not know what the unknown is and so there is nothing to be afraid of. Death is a word, and it is the word, the image, that creates fear. So can you look at death without the image of death? As long as the image exists from which springs thought, thought must always create fear.* J. Krishnamurti, *Freedom from the known*, Harper, San Francisco 1969.

The triumph over death is always a mystery. Religion tries to give us faith in life after death and to remove fear through that faith. But most of the religious people fear death anyway. On the other hand, mystics are said to be free from this dread, because in the direct experience they saw or understood that there is no death or that death cannot touch them. For Christian or Neoplatonist mystics the experience of divine reality (God and immortal Soul) was what made them free from death. But for Epicurus it was his own experience that death is not a part of life, because it is beyond life.

We could suppose that the Epicurean view on death was only an intellectual construction created to calm down the mind. Is it possible to attain this type of intuitive knowledge Epicurus was talking about? We cannot be sure, although many of his contemporary philosophers attempted to reach this godlike state of mind, called *wisdom*. But I think that we can end our reflections by referring to Epicurus' death which is an interesting case.

As it seems, Epicurus was a kind of saint for his disciples and they considered him a god. There are certain elements of hagiography in writing about his life as well as in the case of Socrates. But it does not mean that Socrates was not such as philosophers described him or that Epicurus did not have the wisdom he taught. Seneca mentions with respect the last day of Epicurus' life and quotes his own letter as well. This letter, written to Idomeneus, is included also in Diogenes Laertius' biography of Epicurus. In this biography we read that he *died of renal calculus after an illness which lasted a fortnight; so Hermarchus tells us in his letters. Hermippus relates that he entered a bronze bath of lukewarm water and asked for unmixed wine, which he swallowed, and then, having bidden his friends remember his doctrines, breathed his last*¹.

Dying Epicurus writes to Idomeneus: *On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus.*² Apparently, though he suffered bodily from disease, he was perfectly happy and he experienced a kind of inner bliss which helped him fight the horrible pain³.

I think that the death of Epicurus was a metaphorical essence of his teachings and life as in the case of Socrates' death. He really showed power of his consciousness, because despite the fact that his body suffered, his mind experienced the katastematic pleasure which is not comparable to anything. Rist

¹ Diogenes Laertius X, 15–16.

² Diogenes Laertius X, 22.

³ A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 61 suggests that Epicurus was able to bear the pain by contemplating beautiful visions of the gods and by thinking on the happy past. According to the philosopher's own words *the wise man can experience great happiness even at a time of great physical pain*. J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 120. Rist, pp. 111–113, provides more arguments to prove the Epicurean statement that even the greatest pain cannot disturb the katastematic pleasure felt by the sage. He also thinks that past memories could have been helpful whereas Hadot emphasises the role of the present which seems to be more reasonable in the context of the whole Epicurean philosophical system.

writes somewhat negatively of his death¹, suggesting that he wrote the letter to Idomeneus deliberately to show his wisdom, but neither ancient writers, nor, for instance, Krokiewicz or Hadot agree with him on this matter². This suffering and dying man could have written *In this blissful day ...* without any regret that his life has come to an end. It resembles somehow the deaths of Christian saints and martyrs who were also indifferent to pain thanks to their state of mind, mystical or not.

On top of that, Epicurus also shows his victory over death because its nearness does not disturb his utmost pleasure or happiness. He himself wrote in the *Letter to Menoeceus* that *whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation*³. The sage lives *now*, so he is not afraid of what will come. Epicurus also mentions remembrance of the discussions with friends and says that they helped him bear the agony. Happy recollections might have brought him some pleasure and this could have been a spiritual exercise used in his school. Maybe, as Hadot suggests, what was helping him was actually the content of the discussions, that is, philosophical dogmas.

I think that the death of Epicurus shows in a way that the spiritual insight was not only a projection or ideal but a true and direct experience, at least for the founder of the school. Maybe he managed to share his own experience with some of his disciples, maybe he did not. We could not know it for sure. But certainly, as it seems to me, Epicurus was a mystic who was able to bear the horrible pain as well as rid himself of the fear of death.

In the Indian mystical tradition the death of a famous sage or yogi plays a crucial role for his disciples. Peace of mind of such dying yogi is an example for his followers and the peak of his whole life. When Ramana Maharishi, who is considered to be the greatest sage of contemporary India, was dying he said: *They say I am dying. But where could I go? I am here.*⁴ This was a summary of his own mystical experience and teaching that our true Self is eternal and always present in this very moment. For him also existed only *here and now* and due to that he was not afraid of death. I think that the death of Epicurus and the death of Socrates can be thought of as such types of a sage's death, both an example and a moment that crowns the whole philosophical life.

Epicureanism is not a mystical system as the philosophy of Plotinus or other Neoplatonist systems. My purpose was not to prove that Epicureanism is a mysticism but simply to point to the fact that it has certain mystical aspects and cannot be fully understood without them. Contradictions in the Epicurean philosophy, such as the timeless status of katastematic pleasure, the experience of the gods or the discourse of death can be fully explained only by

¹ J. M. Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 12–13.

² A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 28.

³ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 125.

⁴ A. Bancroft, *Twentieth century mystics & sages*, Heinemann, London 1976, p. 120.

referring to these mystical aspects of Epicurus' teaching which could be partially reconstructed via spiritual exercises of this philosophical school.

There are more philosophical statements in this *rational* philosophy, based on materialism, empiricism and logical reasoning. Most of the scholars writing about Epicurus mention mysticism¹ though they do not know what to do with this problem. Giovanni Reale², for example, who generally inclines to reserve *true* mystical experience for Christianity, suggests that for Epicurus life was the absolute and refers to it as to the *mysticism of life*. I think that, according to Ken Wilber's view on mysticism, there are certain *transpersonal* aspects of Epicureanism, which can be described in terms of *psychic* stage of mystical consciousness.

Epicurus was an extraordinary personality and even philosophers from other schools had to acknowledge his greatness. His Garden was a true enclave of happiness and wisdom. I think that this school could have never be so attractive and its influence so powerful if it had not been rooted in direct spiritual experience of Epicurus. The Epicurean ethics is mystical whereas physics is materialist. This is somewhat paradox. Nevertheless, Epicurus undoubtedly was a mystic and his *tetrapharmakon* was not a result of theoretical speculation. At least for him, it was a fact.

¹ A. Krokiewicz, *Nauka Epikura*, p. 17 and p. 61; P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life ...*, p. 57 (on the other hand, Krokiewicz sometimes juxtaposes Epicureanism to mysticism in general, so he is not consistent in the using of this term).

² G. Reale, *A history of ancient philosophy*, transl. J. R. Catan, State University Press, New York, 1985–1990, t. 3, pp. 276–277.