

NB: This is a chapter in the 2012 edited volume, *Dynamic Reading*, edited by Brooke Holmes and Wilson Shearin (Oxford UP) on the reception history of Epicurean philosophy

From Heresy to Nature:
Leo Strauss's History of Modern Epicureanism

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Introduction

The political philosopher Leo Strauss is seldom associated with Epicurean thought, and for good reasons: he is usually thought of as a follower of Plato who advocated a return to “natural right” thinking in political philosophy, and who valorized the pursuit of human excellence over the pursuit of human happiness.¹ On the face of it, the Epicurean question of happiness or well-being seems not just distant from, but even inimical to, Strauss's concerns. Epicureanism is rather too *therapeutic*—too preoccupied with the relief of pain and insufficiently concerned with the aspiration toward virtue—to fit comfortably with Strauss's mature political philosophy. Furthermore, Epicureanism seems to counsel retreat from, rather than theoretically informed engagement with, the political community.² Indeed, when Strauss does mention Epicureanism explicitly in his writings, it is usually to criticize it as a baleful influence on modern political thought. While Strauss's attitude toward Epicureanism may seem dismissive, however, careful examination reveals that Strauss harbored a deep interest in that form of philosophy throughout his career. Furthermore, and as this essay seeks to demonstrate, investigating Strauss's meditations on Epicureanism can explain much about his views on religion, atheism, and modern political theory.³

Strauss called Epicureanism “the classical form of the critique of religion,” and his interest in it was natural, given his preoccupation with what he called, after Carl Schmitt, the “theologico-political” predicament of the modern subject.⁴ From his student days on, Strauss harbored a deep interest in the political and philosophical implications of religion, and despite his own atheism he frequently expressed admiration for those versions of monotheism that conceive of religion as a source of law guiding human life. Paradoxically, while Strauss was critical of Epicureanism understood as the atheistic critique of religion, there is reason to think that he also harbored a deep sympathy for the skepticism at the core of the Epicurean project. If there were real tensions and incompatibilities between a religious and a philosophical life—as Strauss thought there were—then all philosophers would have to take the Epicurean position seriously and could perhaps feel implicated in it themselves. Epicureanism, for Strauss, thus represented the “radicalization” of a potential all philosophies contain within them.

The Epicurean critique of religion thus became, in Strauss’s hands, one instance of what he saw as the eternal conflict between philosophy and society, a conflict driven by philosophy’s inherent skepticism. To Strauss, this skeptical attitude included a tendency to suspend judgment and maintain doubt about any theoretical or practical issue—including social and cultural institutions, and even when skepticism might shake them to their very foundations. In his volumes on the history of political philosophy, Strauss returned again and again to the theme of the essential difference between philosophers and their non-philosophical neighbors. Ever since the trial and death of Socrates, philosophers had understood that their skeptical critiques of religious, social, and political mores could incur the hostility of their fellow citizens. Indeed, because Strauss understood religion as a political phenomenon—viewing it, as he did, according to the model of traditional Jewish law—he suggested that philosophy and religion would always

come into conflict. Strauss's conviction that philosophy and society were naturally at odds would find its most famous articulation in the essay "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in which Strauss claimed that throughout Western history the philosophical elite had always had to mask their teachings whenever those teachings seemed to threaten the established political order. This led philosophers to produce polysemic texts with "exoteric" levels, available to a general reader, and "esoteric" levels that only a philosophically trained reader could assess.

Strauss began to write on Epicureanism in the 1920s, and it was among the central concepts treated in his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930), which staged a conflict between Spinoza and the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides in order to judge whether the Enlightenment critique of religion had been successful.⁵ Further developed in the 1935 *Philosophy and Law* and the 1936 *The Political Science of Thomas Hobbes*, as well as in the unpublished *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, Strauss's treatment of Epicureanism reached its fullest form in the 1949 *Natural Right and History*, in which he interpreted the Enlightenment philosophy of Hobbes and Rousseau as an adaptation of key Epicurean concepts.⁶ A review of these studies of Hobbes suggests, in fact, that we will never fully understand Strauss on Hobbes without attending to his view that Hobbes was himself an Epicurean of a sort. However, Strauss's use of the term "Epicurean" to describe Hobbes in *Natural Right and History* is strikingly different than his earlier uses of the term. Whereas the early Strauss focused on Epicureanism as the classic form of the critique of religion, in his later incarnation he interpreted Epicureanism as a version of materialism that Hobbes transformed to create what Strauss called "political hedonism": a mindset that made human comfort and pleasure (as opposed to virtue) the central goal of political progress. Political hedonism was, in fact, a code-term for bourgeois liberalism, which Strauss always saw as denigrating the pursuit of excellence in favor of material

comfort. Strauss's persistent but protean interest in Epicureanism and his critiques thereof are thus the subjects of this essay.

It seems curious that Epicureanism has remained one of the few terms in Strauss's thought that his assiduous readers—both loyal and critical—have not yet subjected to their full scrutiny.⁷ After all, Epicureanism directly relates to two themes that remained central for Strauss throughout his career: first, the conflict between skeptical philosophy and revealed religion; and second, the political meaning of the term “nature.” The conflict between philosophy and religion had an ultimately political significance for Strauss, representing a struggle to determine whether the authority regulating human life derives from the human subject itself or from an external and possibly divine force. The question of nature was essentially about the teleological or non-teleological connotations of the term “nature”: did that word mean a measure toward which “Man” aspires, or did it refer to mere matter in motion, without ultimate purpose? It was on Epicurean impulses, if not on Epicurus himself, that Strauss sometimes blamed the major missteps of modern thought: a misunderstanding of the role of religion in political life, an unhealthy optimism regarding reason's power to reshape the political world, and liberal democracy's tendency to water down the political virtues that it was intended to promote and defend.

The intellectual historians who have chronicled Strauss's career tend to divide his work into phases, each linked to a major “turn” in his meditations on philosophy and society. Each turn is then associated with Strauss's discovery of a particular key text or method of reading: his reading of the medieval Islamic philosopher Alfarabi in the late 1930s, for example; his exchange with Alexandre Kojève in the 1940s; or his late essays on Plato.⁸ Though this approach has its merits, there was no “Epicurean” or “anti-Epicurean turn.” Rather, I suggest that Strauss

developed his critique of Epicureanism gradually throughout his career. If we require a schematic model to understand Strauss's interest in Epicureanism, we might see it as an arc beginning with Strauss's early work on Spinoza, Hobbes, and the problem of heresy and concluding with his later work on Hobbes, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, and the idea of nature. Strauss's use of the term "Epicurean" would always carry the moral charge suggested by "heresy," but he gradually came to apply it just as readily to those modern thinkers who not only imagined studying the natural world but also dreamt of mastering it so as to improve "Man's" estate on earth. Strauss began by presenting Epicureanism as an affront against the idea of God, and ended by presenting it as an affront against the idea of nature. The problem of Epicureanism thus underwent a kind of "secularization" in the course of Strauss's career, while maintaining its associations with heresy, even when nature became its point of reference. Importantly, Strauss usually avoided writing directly on Epicurus or his disciples, and instead tended to treat Epicureanism in more abstract terms. Indeed, Epicureanism took on an abstract and symbolic function for Strauss early in his career, and it seems justifiable to say that it served him as a "screen" onto which he could project different heretical ideas.

Epicureanism and the Critique of Religion

In 1925, not long after finishing his doctorate, the young Leo Strauss was offered a research fellowship at the Berlin *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The *Akademie*, founded in 1917 by the Jewish philosophers Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen, was intended not only to foster research in Jewish studies but also to apply the skills of its researchers to projects in Jewish adult education, one of Rosenzweig's special interests.⁹ At the time Strauss entered the *Akademie*, it was directed by the rabbi, theologian, and philosopher Julius Guttman, who had

been strongly influenced both by Cohen's neo-Kantian philosophy and by Cohen's vision of Judaism's compatibility with the Western philosophical tradition. It was under Guttman's direction that Strauss completed his first brief treatment of Epicureanism, contained within *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, which he wrote between 1924 and 1928 and published in 1930. Guttman had charged Strauss with the task of writing on Spinoza's Bible science, a topic of great interest to many scholars in Jewish studies who, like Guttman himself, were interested in the genealogy of their own basically historicist treatment of Jewish texts.¹⁰ The central methodological assumption of their historicism was that one could understand a religious text by simply reconstructing its original chronological horizon—it need have no “timeless” significance. Strauss, who, unlike Guttman, was skeptical about the merits of Spinoza's Bible science, turned instead toward the larger and more controversial question of whether the Enlightenment critique of religion begun by Spinoza had successfully made its arguments against the authority of religious revelation. *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* stages a confrontation between two of the most important figures in Jewish intellectual history, Spinoza and the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides. This in turn staged a conflict between two different historical epochs—the premodern and the modern—as well as between two very different attitudes toward the compatibility of Judaism and philosophy.¹¹

At every point in the work, Strauss refrains from taking one side or the other, but expresses his doubts regarding whether the Enlightenment's critiques of religion had truly found their mark. More specifically, he doubts whether Spinoza's critique of miracles had defeated Maimonides' philosophically grounded defense of the belief in miracles. In 1930, the work was published, bearing Strauss's dedication to the recently departed Franz Rosenzweig, whose work had marked for Strauss, as for so many others, a return to Judaism within philosophy.¹² The irony

of this dedication is that while, for Strauss, Rosenzweig's work represented the possibility of a harmonious relationship between philosophy and Judaism, Strauss hoped to reopen the question of whether such harmony was possible.

As Strauss later reflected in a preface written for the 1962 English edition of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, in this work he identifies the heretical Spinoza—who was expelled from Amsterdam's Jewish community for his views—as a modern Epicurean and identifies Epicureanism as the “classic form” of the critique of religion:

For the understanding of [the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism] the Jewish designation of the unbeliever as Epicurean seemed to be helpful, especially since from every point of view Epicureanism may be said to be the classic form of the critique of religion and the basic stratum of the tradition of the critique of religion. Epicureanism is hedonism, and traditional Judaism always suspects that all theoretical and practical revolts against the Torah are inspired by the desire to throw off the yoke of the stern and exacting duties so that one can indulge in a life of pleasure. Epicureanism can lead only to a mercenary morality whereas traditional Jewish morality is not mercenary.¹³

“Mercenary” or self-serving morality would be no morality at all according to Strauss's interpretation of Judaism as holding standards for moral action beyond the mere satisfaction of human appetites. Strauss's later appreciation of the centrality of Epicureanism in a text he had authored decades earlier does not merely reflect the clarity of hindsight. The link between Epicureanism, the “classic” form of the critique of religion, and the modern Spinozist variant is established explicitly in the original 1930 text: “Epicurus's criticism of religion is one source, and the most important one, of seventeenth-century criticism of religion.”¹⁴ Strauss goes on to describe the Epicurean doctrine as he understands it. The aim of philosophy is to cultivate a

condition of *eudaimonia* (happiness or well-being), which provides all the justification necessary for the scientific enterprise. Insofar as *eudaimonia* can follow only from the elimination of the fear of the gods, the critique of religion is central to the Epicurean project.¹⁵ All superhuman standards are stripped away; “the only standard is pleasure.”¹⁶ The elimination of pain is a necessary part of the project because pain limits pleasure and, thus, “the security of pleasure is for Epicurus only the more general form of the achievement of pure pleasure.”¹⁷ Science has a crucial role to play in securing pleasure because the discoveries of science will “bring us tranquility of mind and not still greater anxiety.”¹⁸

Notably, Strauss offers a critique of the arbitrary relationship between Epicurus’s eudaimonic ends and his proposed means: skeptical scientific inquiry, writing that, “the connection between Epicurus’s motive and the science corresponding with that motive is . . . important for understanding the criticism of religion in the seventeenth century.”¹⁹ In other words, Strauss wishes to understand whether any necessary opposition exists between the scientific and the religious impulses and to determine if any opposition between the two inheres in a purified or “archetypal” form of the Epicurean impulse.²⁰ If there is no such necessary opposition, he believes, we might need to look to historically emergent factors in search of explanations. Strauss’s critique of Epicurus’s account of the relation between scientific means and eudaimonic ends is, quite simply, that no necessary relationship exists between the two. For evidence, he cites the report of Diogenes Laërtius, according to whom Epicurus himself thought that the belief in gods might not be inherently bad, provided that one believes in benign rather than malicious deities.²¹ However, Epicurus seemed unable to integrate his own opinion—namely, that religion is not fundamentally opposed to human happiness—with his philosophical practice. This failed integration, for Strauss, provides grounds for viewing Epicurus as the

expression of a “universal” human motive to oppose religion. It thus becomes possible to divide Epicurus’s critical analysis of religion from the motive underlying that criticism.

From this assessment of Epicurus’s writings, Strauss catapults his reader into the future. In the age of “revealed religion”—that is, the age in which Judaism and then Christianity flourished in the Near East—Epicureanism remained a force, even though the increasing social power wielded by religious institutions tended to drive religion’s critics underground. Strauss argues that in a world governed by the Law, the followers of *eudaimonia* would have to maintain their solidarity in secret against the believing multitude: “Special precautions are needed for the guidance of the ignorant many, for the sake of social law and order.”²² One important shift from the classical period to the period of revealed religion concerns the ultimate purpose of the critique of religion: whereas for Epicurus, the critique “by the means of theory” has the ultimate goal of human happiness, for the philosophers working under the prosecutorial eye of monotheism, the critique of religion is meant to defend philosophy itself. The import of that defense is simple: only philosophy can secure the state of *eudaimonia* itself, and even if that state is only available to a few, its possibility still has to be preserved.²³

Strauss then moves quickly from the age of revealed religion to Spinoza’s native seventeenth century, tracing Spinoza’s critique of religion back to three main sources. In addition to “Epicureanism,” the Averroist and Machiavellian critiques were also available to Spinoza. Strauss’s reason for viewing Epicureanism as the most important is based on a transparently anti-historicist premise: “We have preferred the name of Epicurus for the reason that of the three motives which brought forth that criticism—ataraxia, theory, virtue—the first is the least mediate, in the sense of not having been called forth under the pressure from a particular historical situation.”²⁴ Strauss wanted to understand the Epicurean motive as a universal human

impulse. For him, its move away from the religious fear of gods and toward the study of the natural world seemed part of human nature.

Strauss is also concerned in this brief history of Epicureanism with underscoring the major change between the doctrine of Epicurus himself and the “Epicureanism” of Spinoza. Whereas classical “hedonistic” Epicureanism understood its goal of human happiness in terms of serenity of mind—a goal located within the individual human subject—the “hedonistic” Epicureanism of the Enlightenment cast its gaze beyond the subject. The modern Epicurean tried to transform not only the individual but the entire social world as well in order to secure tranquility of mind for man: to accomplish that goal, the Epicurean endowed himself with activist initiatives and powers. Far from a “therapeutic” philosophy that heals the human from within, it healed through preventative measures, hoping to change the world until all threats from without (for example, all opportunities for a violent death) were eradicated. However, as I note later in this essay, Strauss associates Spinoza only with the beginnings of such an activist stance. It is Hobbes whom he associates with the full flowering of a modern philosophy that aspires not only to understand but also to shape both the natural and the social world.

Strauss then traces the universal impulse toward pleasure and away from pain that impelled Epicurus himself through several different incarnations. He deals first with Uriel da Costa (about 1585–1640), the Portuguese philosopher and Marrano whose critique of certain aspects of religion illustrates the malleable character of the Epicurean doctrine: in Strauss’s view, da Costa shows that Epicureanism can take on “a charge of moral content which is not to be accounted for by [the critique of religion in pursuit of human happiness] itself.”²⁵ Strauss makes similar remarks in the sections on Isaac de la Peyrère (1596–1676), another Marrano and a heretic against the Catholicism to which Peyrère himself converted, and Thomas Hobbes.

Although in the late 1920s, Strauss had not yet begun the Hobbes research that would supply one of the pillars of his later critique of modernity, he had already begun to view Hobbes as the agent who transformed the Epicurean critique of religion during the modern period. It was in Hobbes, in fact, that Strauss saw a return to “the archetypal originality, the integral breadth and depth, which characterized that critique in the case of Epicurus and Lucretius.”²⁶ However, Hobbes broke away from his classical forbearers by equating science with the critique of religion, and in the process, Strauss argued, he missed one subtle dimension of Epicurus’s critique. Whereas Epicurus saw science and religion as different means toward the same end—human happiness—and criticized religion as an *inadequate* means toward that end, Hobbes established a strict dichotomy between science and religion. For him, the former sought to end man’s misery by securing mastery over nature; the latter acted as a mere psychological salve that did nothing to improve the human condition.

In contrast to Hobbes, Spinoza’s view of philosophy or “science” was more in keeping with the Epicurean idea that a harmonious mind is achieved through internal transformation. If part of the project of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain is to reduce the mind’s anxieties, especially those that arise from the fear of death, part of Epicurean practice is for the philosopher to ease his own mind, and perhaps to help others to ease their minds. While the comparison around which most of Strauss’s work turned was the aforementioned juxtaposition of Spinoza (the critic of religion) and Maimonides (religion’s champion), and while that juxtaposition was crucial for Strauss’s central inquiry into the success of the Enlightenment’s critique of religion, when it came to the question of the ultimate *social implications* of the critique of religion, the most important comparison may have been between Spinoza and Hobbes. Whereas for Hobbes happiness could be secured via technological progress, Spinoza hoped for a perfection of “Man”

that would begin within the subject itself.²⁷ In this regard, Strauss seems justified in saying that Spinoza cleaved more closely to Epicurus's own philosophical project.²⁸ The meaning of the less developed but clearly important comparison between Spinoza and Hobbes becomes more apparent when we consider that the figure of Hobbes would loom large in Strauss's work for decades to come. A Hobbesian, rather than a Spinozist, version of the Epicurean motive would become central for Strauss, despite his greater *philosophical* respect for the Spinozist variant.²⁹

Part of Strauss's stake in invoking Epicureanism, however, had less to do with philosophy and more to do with the reputation that "Epicureanism" enjoyed in the other tradition to which he was heir, namely modern Jewish thought. The terms "Epicureanism" and "heresy" have a longstanding connection in Jewish thought, of which Strauss was well aware when he spoke of "the Jewish designation of the unbeliever as Epicurean."³⁰ While Strauss's depiction of the Jewish view of Epicureanism may seem strained—after all, it rests on a problematic depiction of Jewish culture as legalistic and an equally problematic depiction of Epicureanism as a one-dimensional form of hedonism—there were internal Jewish precedents for Strauss's characterizations. In the late eighteenth century, the Jewish philosopher Solomon Maimon remarked to Moses Mendelssohn "We are all Epicureans" (*Wir sind alle Epikuraer*) laying on the Hebrew term *apiqores*, or heretic. As Abraham Socher points out in his important intellectual biography of Maimon, both interlocutors would certainly have understood this pun.³¹ The two men were just then embroiled in a dispute over the compatibility of philosophy with Jewish religious belief, itself a recurring conflict in Jewish thought. By invoking heresy and implying a relation of equivalence between the *apiqores* and the Epicurean, Maimon attacked the religious Mendelssohn and pushed the point that doing philosophy made both of them—in fact, made all philosophical Jews—heretical before the Jewish Law. Maimon may have even been aware of the

tradition initiated by his namesake, Moses Maimonides, of giving a precise legal definition of *apikorsut*, or heresy.³² According to Maimonides, the fundamental types of heresy include the denial of the legitimacy of prophecy, the denial of the revelation made to Moses at Sinai, and the denial of God's knowledge of human deeds.³³ Benjamin Lazier has pointed out that Maimonides might not have applied the term *apigores* to apostates such as converts to Christianity, and by that reasoning, his use of "Epicurean" would have been intended to suggest a different type of unbeliever, someone who has left Judaism but not yet entered the fold of its monotheistic relative.³⁴ Thus, in associating Spinoza with Epicureanism, Strauss was effectively making the same rhetorical gesture Maimon had made—far more than a pun, in both cases. Strauss was suggesting that philosophizing opened up an alternative between the abandonment of the Jewish religion and the acceptance of other gods. The eighteenth-century Maimon thus stood as a worthy inheritor of Spinoza's lasting contribution to modern Jewish identity, namely, the idea that one could leave the Jewish fold without going to the Cross. It is important to note that neither in 1930 nor later in 1965 did Strauss *explicitly* endorse the Jewish demonization of Epicureanism as heresy. Such an endorsement would have meant breaking with his stated intention of simply investigating the validity of Spinoza's critique of religion.

However, Strauss's scholarly prevarications and stated goal of objectivity aside, an understanding of the broader context of his political and religious concerns in the late 1920s can help us understand why the tension between Epicureanism and Judaism was a pressing concern for him and why the category of the Jewish heretic was, to say the least, intellectually galvanizing. From the age of seventeen, when Strauss "converted" (as he put it) to Zionism, he was involved with a number of Zionist youth groups. During the 1920s, he wrote brief articles for several Zionist journals, including the mouthpiece of the influential organization *Blau-Weiss*,

which sponsored a wide range of activities for young Jewish people, from the intellectual to the social to the athletic.³⁵ It was during this period—approximately the same period in which he began his research on Spinoza’s Bible science—that Strauss became intensely aware of the conflicts between certain Zionists and certain members of the Orthodox and neo-Orthodox Jewish communities, whose variety of religious practice had attracted his intellectual curiosity.

In a 1925 essay entitled “Ecclesia Militans,” Strauss focuses on the tensions between Zionists and a community of neo-Orthodox Jews based in Frankfurt and investigated the views of that community’s intellectual leader Isaac Breuer. As David Myers has shown, Breuer and Strauss shared a number of concerns, including a resistance to historicism as applied to Judaism and Jewish thought.³⁶ However, the most influential aspect of Breuer’s work for Strauss was, undoubtedly, his insistence on the primacy of biblical law.³⁷ While the observant Breuer and the atheist Strauss would have been divided on the issue of actual belief, for both of them the simple existence of Orthodoxy meant that Jews had to confront the question that Breuer had phrased so elegantly: whether “God and the Torah are primary over the Jewish nation or if the historical relation is primary.”³⁸ By his phrase “the historical relation,” Breuer meant to invoke the Jewish people’s “entrance into history” through modernization and assimilation into European society—he conjured up an opposition familiar to traditional Jewish thought, between the timeless and basically ahistorical condition of the Jewish people in exile and the “historical” experiences of the Gentile nations.³⁹ Reading Breuer at the same time as he labored over Spinoza and the major works of Maimonides, Strauss developed what could with some justice be called a philo-orthodox attitude.⁴⁰ Given his attraction to the idea of Judaism as a religion of revealed law, his use of the devices of Epicureanism and heresy to describe Spinoza can be understood as radicalizing the ongoing conversation concerning the relationship between philosophy and

religion. Viewed in the context of the Weimar intellectual scene in which Strauss crafted these arguments, the invocation of heresy can be seen as signaling that moderate positions such as those of Hermann Cohen and Julius Guttman, who, like Maimon's interlocutor Mendelssohn, argued that a harmonious relationship between religion and reason was possible, would have to be abandoned.

A very different internal Jewish debate may have also influenced Strauss's deployment of the language of Epicureanism and heresy at this juncture: while Strauss had begun his study of Spinoza in order to fulfill Julius Guttman's wish for a study of Spinoza's Bible science, the project became an effort to resist the impact of historicism on the study of Jewish thought. The apparently innocuous question upon which the study was based—namely, whether Spinoza's Enlightenment critique of religion had succeeded—was thus far from innocuous. It was Spinoza's "scientific" treatment of the Bible that had helped inspire the modern project of treating Judaism as a cultural artifact rather than the result of revelation. In German Jewish thought, such a project found influential exponents in the early nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("Science of Judaism") school.⁴¹ The intention of many *Wissenschaft* thinkers was to provide Judaism with a degree of dignity as an object of scholarly investigation, but this effort was linked to the more general attempt to apply the tools of Western scholarship to the central texts and traditions of Jewish life: studying them meant depriving them of their power to guide everyday affairs. The choice seemed to be between historical consciousness and living tradition; the cost of modernizing—of entering the modern world as a historical people with equal standing to other peoples—was to give the Jewish tradition "a decent burial."

In Strauss's view, Guttman was unfortunately complicit with the tendency of modern Jewish thought toward historicism. As he said in a critical review of Guttman's work, written

after he had left the *Akademie*'s employ, "scientific knowledge of Judaism is purchased at the price of belief in the authority of revelation."⁴² Treating Judaism as a cultural rather than a legal affair seemed part of the general trend toward historicism that Strauss hoped to work against and, more importantly, in following the *wissenschaftlich* (scientific) approach to Jewish thought, Guttmann was following in step with the general trend in German political life during the 1920s: pursuing a liberal hope despite the evidence that liberalism was incapable of resolving the crisis of the present. What Strauss hoped to do, then, was to revive the rhetoric of heresy, whether by the name of Epicureanism or *apiqorsut*, in order to adequately address the climate of crisis in German Jewish life during the 1920s. Not mere concern for the truth but, rather, an attunement toward the political stakes in scholarship guided Strauss toward his designation of heresy as "Epicurean."

Another intriguing document, seldom discussed by Strauss's biographers, is a letter that he sent in 1930 to his friend Gerhard Krüger.⁴³ Strauss's letter to Krüger reveals that he felt at a loss about how to engage with the phenomenon of "Epicureanism," which is puzzling, given the apparent confidence with which Strauss had labeled Spinoza an Epicurean in a work published that same year. At the very least, the letter suggests that Strauss's understanding of the term was still in flux at the time. Tellingly, Strauss describes what motivated his interest in heresy and atheism, saying, "The next answer is given to me directly from the Jewish tradition, which identifies the heretic absolutely as an Epicurean." He also speaks of his need to "justify himself" before "the forum of Jewish tradition." That latter phrase attests to Strauss's consciousness of the same pun (which was more than a pun) that Solomon Maimon had once used. Strauss does not say whether he himself *shared* the traditional Jewish view of heresy, only that he feels somehow bound to it. To set the letter's message in almost formulaic terms, then, Strauss simultaneously

characterizes Epicureanism as a classical impulse that has become part of the non-scientific and “willful” side of modernity and reveals that his own sense of responsibility to *respond* to Epicureanism stems from his Jewish background. While there is little discussion of the Jewish view of Epicureanism in Strauss’s later writings, in which Strauss became more interested in the modern adaptation of Epicurean themes and less preoccupied by the critique of religion, his later efforts display the same moral tone that derives from the characterization of Epicureanism as heresy.

Hobbes, Epicureanism, and the Emergence of “Political Hedonism”

In 1932 Strauss left Germany in order to pursue research on Thomas Hobbes, first in France and then in England, aided by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.⁴⁴ Out of this research he produced *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, part of his ongoing efforts to locate the origins of modern political thought in the fraught space between “ancient” and “modern” thinking.⁴⁵ Strauss at this point considered Hobbes to be the founder of modern political philosophy, and while he would later correct this view and give that laurel to Machiavelli instead, he would continue to see Hobbes’s *De Cive* and *Leviathan* as crucial texts in the establishment of modern liberal thought.⁴⁶ Crucially, the study of Hobbes would also contribute to Strauss’s own reorientation away from an explicit consideration of religious themes and toward the motif of nature. Despite the relatively few references to Epicureanism, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* continues inquiries that Strauss had begun in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, including his comparison of Spinozist and Hobbesian attitudes toward religion and science. Furthermore, there is reason to see the earlier, more extensive treatment of Epicureanism provided in the Spinoza volume as the key to understanding Epicureanism’s place in *The*

Political Philosophy of Hobbes.⁴⁷ Strauss himself noted the continuity between his first two works, writing that in the Hobbes volume he sought to “reopen” “the case of the moderns against the ancients,”⁴⁸ much as he had in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*. Before his later discovery of Machiavelli’s importance, Spinoza and Hobbes were, for Strauss, the founders of the modern order.

Intriguingly, the two explicit references to Epicureanism in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* present the book’s central figure as rejecting all Epicurean tendencies. Criticizing Wilhelm Dilthey for portraying Hobbes as a Stoic—mistaking “residual” elements of ancient thought in Hobbes’s writings for evidence of a classical basis for his thought—Strauss writes that Dilthey “did not take Hobbes’s express and systematic opposition to the whole tradition—including the Stoa and Epicureanism—seriously enough.”⁴⁹ Through this criticism of Dilthey, Strauss sought to free scholarship from the trap of rooting Hobbesian philosophy either in classical ideas or in the modern scientific break with them. As Strauss saw it, Hobbes’s relationship with classical sources, including Epicureanism, was more complex than designations of Hobbes as “classical” or “modern” could convey: “a transitional figure, Hobbes . . . philosophized in the fertile moment when the classical and theological tradition was already shaken, and a tradition of modern science not yet formed and established.”⁵⁰ In other words, the categorical distinction between modern and premodern thought was not yet operative, with the result that Hobbes’s criticisms of classical philosophies such as Stoicism have to be understood carefully. Against those who would underestimate the complexity of Hobbes’s relation to both Stoicism and Epicureanism, Strauss hoped that his readers would see Hobbes as bound up in a complex relationship with the classical sources he hoped to employ in untraditional ways.

While much of the Hobbes book is taken up with relatively clear discussions of its subject's central views and his various debts to modern science, humanism, Aristotle, and Plato, Strauss does return to the comparison between Hobbes and Spinoza that he had begun to explore in his previous work. Here he attends to the way in which Hobbes's and Spinoza's respective critiques of religion related to the very modern categories of the public and the private. In his view, Hobbes, like Spinoza, treated and thus encourages us to treat "theologico-political" predicaments. Referring to *De Cive*, *Leviathan*, and *The Elements of the Law*, he writes that "Hobbes's three presentations of political philosophy may with scarcely less justice than Spinoza's expressly so entitled work be called theologico-political treatises."⁵¹ The *Leviathan*, Strauss observes, marks a deepening of Hobbes's criticism of religion, and we may infer that said critique of religion is by extension comparable with those of Spinoza and Epicurus. However, whereas Spinoza sought to deny both Christianity and Judaism—and thus became a heretic and, in the sense conveyed by Maimon's Epicurean/*apiqores* wordplay, a new kind of atheistic person—Hobbes kept his private feelings about religion from influencing his public statements. He was willing to support the church and religion insofar as they contributed to social cohesion and the virtues that make social life harmonious.⁵² As Strauss notes, Hobbes understood his own skepticism regarding either positive or natural religion to be dangerous and, accordingly, hid it. If Hobbes was an Epicurean in this regard, he was a distinctive kind of Epicurean, one who constructed his public views according to the dictates of political philosophy rather than natural philosophy or natural science. Hobbes's "Epicureanism" was tempered by his conclusion that "Man" is the highest creation in the universe and that, accordingly, the harmony of "Man's" social life is more important than the truth as it is understood by natural scientists. The public-spirited aspect of Hobbes's concerns was part of a larger shift in focus from the

eternal order to “Man,” from natural philosophy and its reflection on atoms and *pneuma* to political philosophy. This pattern of interests justifies the observation that, for Strauss, the distinction between Hobbes and Spinoza has less to do with an actual disagreement about the nature of truth and more to do with their disagreement about what account of religion is most beneficial for society.

Some of the ideas regarding Epicureanism developed in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* are also presented in slightly different forms in an unpublished text that occupied Strauss during the early 1930s, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion*. As in his published volume, Strauss here argues that Hobbes’s connections with Epicureanism had been insufficiently appreciated in the existing scholarly literature.⁵³ He names Epicurus as the source of Hobbes’s critique of religion and also describes Epicureanism as an expression of a fundamental human drive toward pleasure and away from suffering, much as he had in 1930. Interestingly, in this work Strauss cites in passing Hobbes’s “Concerning Heresy and The Punishment Thereof,” a brief text that surveys the early history of the concept of the heretical and its later development in the Christian church and begins with an epigram from Lucretius.⁵⁴ Strauss understood that for Hobbes, the relationship between philosophy and heresy was of the utmost importance, much as it had been for Spinoza. In this text, Hobbes gives “opinion” as the original meaning of “heresy,” and names a collection of prominent Greek thinkers—including Epicurus—as “heretics” in the sense that they were men who made their private opinions known to the public at large. According to Hobbes, it was from the reception of their ideas and the mistranslation of these ideas in the hands of lesser thinkers that the term “heretic” derived the secondary meaning “member of a sect.” Hobbes holds that the concept of heresy entered the Christian church due to the prominence of philosophers within the early church’s leadership. Then, due to the need to control differing

opinions, “heresy” went from meaning the private opinion of a philosopher and became a public act of disobedience against the church. Catholic and heretic were from then on opposed terms. Hobbes then proceeds through a chronicle of the major heresies in church history, leading up to the charge of heresy that, presumably, occasioned his essay: the charge against his own *Leviathan*. Hobbes defends his work against the charge that it opposed the ecclesiastical powers-that-be by saying that: “A book called *Leviathan* was written in defense of the King’s power, temporal and spiritual, without any word against episcopacy, or against any bishop, or against the public doctrine of the church.”⁵⁵ It cannot be inferred from Strauss’s discussion that Hobbes’s “Heresy” was a key work in shaping Strauss’s view of the relation between Hobbes and Epicureanism. However, Hobbes’s effort to save political philosophy from the charge of heresy by showing that it was more like the work of philosophers like Epicurus than a truly antireligious effort may well have served to exemplify the dangerous associations between philosophy and heresy and to strengthen the associations that Strauss had drawn between Hobbes, Epicurus, and Lucretius.

By the late 1940s, Strauss was at work on his strongest statement on the implications of Epicureanism in the modern era, and one that explicitly made Epicureanism into the forerunner to modern materialism: *Natural Right and History*, which began as the Walgreen Lectures, a series presented at the University of Chicago in 1949.⁵⁶ Strauss had recently moved to that institution from the New School for Social Research in New York, where he had taught for nearly a decade, and his Walgreen Lectures marked the beginning of a new phase in his career. Between 1935 and 1949, Strauss had published a number of important essays on medieval Jewish thought, political theory, and the relationship between literary style and political life, including the classic “Persecution and the Art of Writing.” He had also enjoyed a formative

exchange of letters with the influential Hegel scholar Alexandre Kojève, an exchange that produced two competing readings of Xenophon's *Hiero*, published together as *On Tyranny*.⁵⁷ Indeed, the period between *Hobbes's Political Science* and *Natural Right and History* was characterized by an increasing politicization of Strauss's view of intellectual history and a deepening sense that a fundamental contradiction existed between classical political philosophy and modern thought.⁵⁸ These shifts transformed Strauss's reading of Hobbes and made Strauss far more direct in deploying the category of Epicureanism to explain trends in intellectual life, particularly as it developed during the modern age that Spinoza, Hobbes, and Machiavelli had ushered in.

Before examining Strauss's treatment of Epicureanism in *Natural Right and History*, it is useful to understand the larger project of the book. The book is notoriously difficult to summarize, both because its chronological scope ranges from the classical period to the present and because it seems to argue from many perspectives at once. This point is perhaps best illustrated by Strauss's exchange with one of his early reviewers, Helmut Kuhn, who called the text a defense of the idea of natural right against modern liberalism by historical, rather than philosophical, means.⁵⁹ There is some justice to Kuhn's claim: the book makes the case that the question of natural right, that is, of the existence of an ideal political order, universal and without the limitations inherent in merely conventional systems of rights and politics, might not have been closed by the rise of historicism and relativism within modernity. Strauss opened his responding letter, however, by saying "I myself regard the book as a preparation to an adequate philosophic discussion rather than as a treatise settling the question."⁶⁰ That is, Strauss claimed that his work was intended to reopen the question of natural right, rather than to champion natural right as the proper foundation of political theory. He argued, therefore, that *Natural Right*

and History should be read as a work in the tradition of the history of ideas that seeks to provoke a reexamination of questions generally considered closed by philosophers and by academics, especially those in the social sciences. It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that Strauss hoped to reopen the question of natural right solely out of scholarly interest. Any choice of research topic carries with it a polemical thrust, a point illustrated by Strauss's own earlier shift from researching Spinoza's Bible science to researching his critique of religion.⁶¹

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss traces the development of his title's two keywords, "natural" or more properly, "nature," and "history," from the forms they took in classical thought to the way modern discussants, principally Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Burke, understood them. By tracing these ideas, Strauss means to make an intervention in the historiography of the ideas of natural right and natural law. While many historians considered modern natural right to be the result of the secularization of Jewish and Christian natural law, Strauss finds its origins in the birth of political philosophy in the classical period. Natural right was always a concept apart, he insists, rather than part of the idea of revealed legislation standing behind Judeo-Christian practice. Strauss defines the classical idea of natural right as being "identical with the actualization of a human possibility which, at least according to its own interpretation, is trans-historical, trans-social, trans-moral and trans-religious."⁶² As another early reader of Strauss's work pointed out, the decision to employ the phrase "natural right" rather than "natural law" was itself important. In a 1954 review, the legal scholar Harold Gil Reuschlein noted,

there is a point to this inasmuch as the word "right" in its abstract sense indicates something that our word "law" does not. "Right" in its abstract sense conveys the idea of ethical correctness. It answers to one meaning of the Latin "jus," serving to indicate law in the abstract, that is, law as the foundation of all rights, the sum total of underlying

moral principles which gives the affirmative character of justice to positive law and imparts to it an ethical content.⁶³

Viewed in this light, the choice of “right” over “law” becomes an effort to undo the common translation of *jus* as “law.” In Strauss’s view, the concept of natural right becomes necessary at a point when laws seemed to have only a mere conventional validity, lacking the ethical implications that *jus* might carry.⁶⁴

It is precisely the point of transition from political philosophies relying on the concept of natural law to ones reliant on the concept of natural right that concerns Strauss in *Natural Right and History*. Hobbes becomes a crucial figure in Strauss’s narrative because he is situated at precisely that historical juncture at which a discourse of *law* was replaced by a discourse of *rights*. Importantly, Strauss disputes the idea that Hobbes himself represented the origin of natural rights discourse. Instead, Strauss’s Hobbes takes up the question of natural right—namely, the question of how the regime might best be constituted—that Aristotle and Plato had meditated on before him and changes it fundamentally. Rather than ask how the human political order might reflect a greater cosmic order, he asks how “Man’s” immanent and, comparatively speaking, baser needs might be satisfied. These, of course, included the defense of one’s bodily health, property, and peace of mind. Without disregarding the importance of these goals, Strauss notes Hobbes’s role in a shift from an ethic of virtuous aspiration to an ethic of base instincts and needs. Such an understanding of society based on personal rights rather than duties to the world beyond the self seemed to Strauss to be the basis of modern liberalism.

One of the indirect results of this shift from law to rights is the politicization of philosophy. A fixation on the defense of personal rights and welfare transforms philosophy, as it transformed all sciences and arts, into an instrument for the amelioration of humanity’s estate on

earth. Moreover, it transforms philosophers into mere “intellectuals” (Strauss’s term) less concerned with the pursuit of truth than with applying the techniques of philosophy to merely “local” problems. Against this Epicurean turn, complicit with the politicization of philosophy, Strauss pits Plato, noting at one point that “the whole work of Plato may be described as a critique of the notion of ‘the intellectual,’” that is, the sort of person who politicizes philosophy.⁶⁵

The term “history” in Strauss’s title, though seemingly polyvalent—referring either to the process of natural right’s development or to the version of intellectual history that Strauss employed in order to trace that arc—quickly becomes attached to the premise of historicism as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Strauss, however, the word does not merely imply *historismus* as the methodological agenda championed by figures in the German academy like Julius Guttman. It suggests to him a radically relativist attitude toward the possibility of philosophical or religious truth, with corresponding implications for the validity of different modes of government. Strauss thus spends the opening sections of *Natural Right and History* attacking those historicist thinkers who “deny the significance, if not the existence, of universal norms,” and in the process destroy “the only solid basis of all efforts to transcend the actual.”⁶⁶ While Strauss’s attitudes toward historicism were complex, as noted earlier in this essay, in *Natural Right and History* historicism becomes a keyword by which Strauss could refer to a conventionalism that seeks to “make men absolutely at home in ‘this world,’” by abandoning all pursuit of the transcendent (as Strauss defined it) in order to make the present world a better one. Historicism is, then, the ideology of the intellectuals and not the philosophers. Strauss was eager, however, to differentiate historicism and skepticism, arguing that while skepticism represents a timeless view that “all assertions are uncertain,”⁶⁷ historicism, to be consistent,

would have to locate *its* version of uncertainty in a particular historical moment.⁶⁸ Because of its inability to do so while retaining any critical purchase, historicism was inevitably self-undermining in Strauss's view.⁶⁹

In an effort to undo the historicist challenge to natural right, Strauss goes on to retell natural right's history. He leads his readers through the rebellious replacement of private meditation on the truth as conveyed by tradition with the public discussion of the truth provided by scientists through their investigation of nature. What differentiates classical natural philosophy from modern science, on Strauss's view, is that, according to classical philosophy, the natural order is greater than "Man" and is owed a special kind of obedience that has the same structure as obedience to the revealed divine Law. The distinction between nature and convention serves to distinguish between the work of philosophers and the immediate political realities that govern men. It is this distinction that the modern Enlightenment sought to efface, seeking as it did to simultaneously mold both nature and convention. The oldest and most influential version of conventionalism that preoccupies Strauss in *Natural Right and History*, unsurprisingly, was Epicureanism.

Here Strauss is less explicitly concerned with Epicureanism's critique of religion and more concerned with a different dimension of the Epicurean impulse, namely, the drive to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering, writing that "[t]he most developed form of classical hedonism is Epicureanism." He further associates Epicureanism with both materialism and conventionalism, citing no less an authority than Plato's *Laws* as a precedent for this association.⁷⁰ According to Strauss, Hobbes was an Epicurean to the extent that he arrogated to humans the power to change their own world and, in the process, attributed a kind of "messianic potential" to philosophy as a transformative tool. It was Hobbes, moreover, who was responsible

for transforming Epicureanism into part of an ideology that went on to have disastrous consequences for political life (and thought) in the modern period: Strauss dubs this ideology “political hedonism.” Hobbes had joined the Epicurean tradition by rejecting the assumption of traditional political philosophy that “Man” is “by nature a political or social animal.”⁷¹ Hobbes then tried to form a political philosophy out of Epicureanism’s apolitical anthropology, or as Strauss writes, “He thus bec[ame] the creator of political hedonism, a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching.”⁷²

This “political hedonism” combined, in a contradictory manner, the idealistic assumption of the fundamental status of political philosophy with the view that, because of our asocial and animal natures, the good for us is identical with the pleasant. As Strauss writes, Hobbesian political hedonism was “the typically modern combination of political idealism with a materialistic and atheistic view of the whole.”⁷³ Strauss then divides political hedonism from classical Epicureanism and provides an intriguing redefinition of classical Epicureanism itself by comparing the two.⁷⁴ According to Strauss, “Hobbes had to oppose Epicurus in two crucial points in order to make possible political hedonism.”⁷⁵ The first point is that, whereas Epicurus had denied that man enjoyed natural rights within a state of nature, Hobbes sees such rights as a minimum requirement for the emergence of civil society. The second is that Hobbes rejects Epicurus’s ideal of repose, finding it too ascetic, and replaces it with a more active ideal of pleasure. The “realistic” approach to politics forced Hobbes to lift all restrictions on the striving for unnecessary sensual pleasures or, more precisely, for the *commoda hujus vitae*, or for power, with the exception of those restrictions that are required for the sake of peace.⁷⁶

By means of this contrast with political hedonism, Strauss shows Epicureanism to be nonpolitical. This understanding, while not entirely unprecedented in Strauss’s work—for he had

always noted the contrast between Epicureanism natural philosophy and Platonist political philosophy—does mark a shift away from his earlier understanding of Epicureanism’s theologico-political implications. The “classical form” of the critique of religion always has political consequences because of religion’s political character. Despite these differences, Strauss points out, Hobbes and Epicurus still agreed on the equivalence of the good with the pleasant and the consequential unimportance of virtue or the pursuit of excellence. Their primary difference had to do with whether they advocated pursuing their goal of maximizing pleasure in the public sphere or minimizing unhappiness via an ascetic existence in the private.

To Strauss, one of political hedonism’s hallmark traits was its typically bourgeois denigration of excellence in favor of comfort. Moreover, the followers of comfort were likely to reinterpret human excellence as a means toward the end of securing greater pleasure and security. Strauss, on the other hand, saw such excellence—for example, in the arts, in government, in science or athletics—as evidence of the existence of natural right: “We admire excellence without any regard to our pleasures or to our benefits. No one understands by a good man or man of excellence a man who leads a pleasant life.”⁷⁷ Moving from this comparison between the self-indulgent subject of political hedonism and the self-improving, relatively anhedonic subject of natural right to a comparison between the forms of government with which they are correlated, Strauss took these arguments further. If, as he put it, “Man is so built that he cannot achieve the perfection of his humanity except by keeping down his lower impulses,” governments are much harder to perfect.⁷⁸ Ideal government requires the kind of restraint represented by the self-improving subject, but it is even harder to impose such control on others than it is to impose it on the self. To rule over the body politic is much harder than to rule over the actual body: “Serious concern for the perfection of a community requires a higher degree of

virtue than serious concern for the perfection of an individual. The judge and ruler has larger and nobler opportunities to act justly than the ordinary man.”⁷⁹ Strauss was fundamentally suspicious of the security and pleasure of the individual as a basis for politics. He thus turned a dubious eye toward the self-gratifying subject of political hedonism. In contrast, within classical natural right the pursuit of excellence—especially in the public field of political life—provided a much sounder basis. The formulation of a theory of happiness rooted in sound political practice rather than the pursuit of pleasure struck Strauss as the sign of the superiority of classical political philosophy over Hobbesian political hedonism. The latter philosophy sought not so much to champion Epicurus over Plato as to completely abandon the plane of philosophical contestation upon which Platonic and Epicurean forces did battle by moving into the political sphere. However, Hobbes’s abandonment of any political or natural teleology left his philosophy without a solid foundation.

Thus one of the interesting aspects of Strauss’s reading of Hobbesian “political hedonism” is that it condemned, as noted previously, the effects of Epicureanism without condemning the Epicurean impulse itself. Strauss began with the “purer” and more ancient forms of the doctrine, which associate the most pleasurable life with philosophy, and then proceeded to the modern period in which Epicureanism was mistranslated or corrupted, in part through the influence of Hobbes and the Enlightenment *philosophes*, into a doctrine that hedonistically satisfies the body rather than the mind. Thus Strauss was able to show that while Epicurus and his school were never Strauss’s true opponents, they were genealogically linked to “political hedonism,” which revealed the potential for abuse within the original Epicurean motivation. Yet Strauss also understood that the same motivation prompted other Epicureans, such as the Roman

Lucretius, to provide philosophy with an enormously useful rhetorical aid in the form of poetic writing.

Reading Lucretius with Strauss

During the first two-thirds of his career, Strauss conspicuously employed the terms “Epicurean” and “Epicureanism” as if for their symbolic value without meditating on explicitly Epicurean texts themselves. *Natural Right and History* marked the beginning of a shift, with Strauss identifying the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius as the greatest document of philosophic conventionalism.⁸⁰ Strauss would subsequently continue his treatment of that text with the essay “Notes on Lucretius,” published in the later collection *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*.⁸¹ In *Natural Right and History*, Lucretius’s work is simply offered as the exemplary text of conventionalism, the category in which Strauss gathers together Rousseau, Hobbes, and the other founders of modern liberalism. Appropriately, given his preoccupation with larger arguments about Hobbes and the modernization of political thought, Strauss provides only a brief account of the work’s content and does not treat its formal properties, and he does not go into detail regarding the relationship between Lucretius and Epicurus. It is precisely these aspects of *De Rerum Natura* that preoccupy him in his later essay. It seems justifiable to claim that “Notes on Lucretius,” while substantially an elaboration of the extended narrative of the *De Rerum Natura*, is really a meditation on the relation between the philosopher Epicurus and the poet Lucretius and, more specifically, on the peculiar fact that Lucretius wrote an epic poem about a philosophy that resists many of the central themes of the poetic epic, including romantic love, the designs of the gods, and fate.⁸² From that latter, potentially inconsequential fact, Strauss extracts a lesson regarding the utility that poetry may hold for the expression of the philosophical truth, especially

given the politically hostile conditions in which philosophers often work. The late “Notes on Lucretius” thus bind Strauss’s earlier interests in Epicureanism together with his fundamental preoccupation with the political character of philosophy.

At the essay’s opening, Strauss describes Lucretius’s poem as a gradual introduction to Epicureanism. The poem’s reader—perhaps projecting herself or himself into the position of the Roman politician Memmius, to whom the poem is addressed—is to ascend from her or his current temporal position to a greater position as an Epicurean. This helps us to understand the beginning sections of the *De Rerum Natura*, which offer an elaborate genealogical link between the Romans and the Greeks; as Strauss puts it, the Roman politician must be reminded that he has links to the Greek world before he can grasp that world’s philosophies. Once he has grasped the Epicurean doctrine and gained access to the state of *ataraxia* that it provides, Memmius will also have been cured of the religious beliefs that cause him fear and suffering because of his expectations for the afterlife.

The pain associated with the knowledge of the Epicurean truth can, however, be counteracted by clothing philosophical material in poetic form. As Strauss writes,

The movement from the untruth to the truth is not simply a movement from unrelieved darkness and terror to pure light and joy. On the contrary, the truth appears at first to be repulsive and depressing. A special effort is needed to counteract the first appearance of the truth. This special effort is beyond the power of philosophy; it is the proper work of poetry.⁸³

Even if Strauss refers to Lucretius as Epicurus’s “weaker follower,” unable to say the truth directly as his master could, poetry makes Lucretius capable of doing something Epicurus could not. He is the doctor who has bitter medicine to administer and coats it in a sugar pill. Lucretius

himself offers an analogy between the use of poetry to sweeten the truth and the doctor's use of honey to sweeten a dose of wormwood before giving it to children.⁸⁴ For Strauss, Lucretius's poetry is a politically expeditious adaptation made necessary by the threatening elements inherent in Epicurus's philosophy, which might be depressing for the individual but offered a genuine threat to society at large.

Poetry's powers are not limited to sweetening the truth, however. In addition to its rhetorical advantages, which enable philosophers to tread the very difficult path between the philosophical truth and the necessities of political life, poetry offers the advantage of an ambiguous relationship between worldliness and worldlessness. Strauss writes,

Philosophy which, anticipating the collapse of the walls of the world, breaks through the walls of the world, abandons the attachment to the world; this abandonment is most painful. Poetry on the other hand is, like religion, rooted in that attachment, but unlike religion, it can be put into the service of detachment.⁸⁵

Lest this passage be misunderstood, we have to bear in mind that for Strauss, "religion" was associated here not with a transcendental divine order but rather with a revealed legislation governing the temporal world. Poetry, like religion, is directly concerned with the temporal world. Yet because of its rhetorical qualities, on the one hand, and its attention to transcendental themes, on the other, it readily functions as philosophy's handmaiden. This may make it the best possible medium for those who wish to live both philosophically and politically, or at least a vehicle to bring listeners from the one realm to the other, just as Lucretius seeks to recruit Memmius.

A requirement for poetic mediation may have been built into the fabric of Epicureanism itself. As James Nichols has argued, Epicurean philosophy enjoys a fraught relationship with the

category of “the political” due to its origins in natural philosophy.⁸⁶ As he points out, “one will search in vain in the works of Epicurus or in the *De Rerum Natura* for a political teaching like what one finds in Plato or in Aristotle.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, ascetic Epicureanism seems to have counseled retreat from political life into the “garden” where Epicurus taught his students, and furthermore to have urged men to avoid public life altogether.⁸⁸ Against the standard view, Nichols argues that there is an Epicurean political philosophy, with the result that Epicureanism presents us with a very curious turn in classical thought. Following arguments laid down by Benjamin Farrington, he sees it as the descendent of the naturalistic philosophical tradition that originated with Thales, but having the aim not of describing the universe and its laws but of explicating a philosophy of “Man” and society. Epicureanism accepted Democritean atomism as a sufficient description of the structure of matter, but inquired into what kind of human life must follow from such a description.⁸⁹ As Strauss noted, Epicurean thought contains a kind of political philosophy that is entirely unlike those of Plato and Aristotle: Epicureans like Lucretius were concerned with politics in part because the philosophy they offered had direct implications for the political world, but unlike Platonists or Aristotelians, they had no substantial theory of how the political community should operate. The materialist critique of religion is political because religion is political. Largely because it offers only political critique and analyzes human life in terms of the nature of the universe, Epicureanism requires poetic explication in order to have a less harmful effect on the social order as a whole.

As this essay has endeavored to show, Strauss hardly ever wrote about Epicurus himself but always about how other thinkers received and developed Epicureanism. It was precisely this tendency that enabled him to treat Epicureanism in highly abstract terms—almost as a universal impulse in philosophical life rather than as a historically situated view. In stating that the “classic

of the tradition,” the *De Rerum Natura*, was written not by a philosopher but, rather, by a poetic ally of the philosophical, Strauss implies that Epicureanism required a poetic agent for its best expression. Throughout his career, Strauss developed the notion that there is an inherent tension between rationalist philosophy and the interests of society at large. This was largely because philosophers can foment doubt regarding the legitimacy of religion and the state, institutions essential to society’s stability. Epicureanism, the “classic” of the critique of religion, would naturally be potentially inimical to the interests of society and, as such, it needs to be candy-coated. It is entirely possible that a parallel exists between Hobbes’s adaptation of Epicurus into a modern form of political hedonism and Lucretius’s poetic adaptation of Epicurus, a parallel of which Strauss was aware. In other words, both writers found a way to make the lessons of Epicurus tame enough so that they would not threaten social stability.⁹⁰

Conclusion

The chronological account of Strauss’s interest in Epicureanism presented in this essay is intended as a suggestive rather than an exhaustive study, a starting point for further work on the subject. On examining Strauss’s treatments of the term “Epicurean,” it becomes tempting to summarize the basic conflict he surveyed, throughout all his works, as the struggle between Platonism and Epicureanism, or between idealism and conventionalism. However, this would be unjust due to the range of purposes to which Strauss set the term “Epicureanism.” It would be less ambitious but more accurate to call Epicureanism a “bridge” concept that links Strauss’s early concern with religion, law, and the relationship between the philosopher and the heretic, and his later concern with the definition and political consequences of the ideas of nature and convention.

However, as I suggested in my discussion of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss's sense of his own proximity to Epicureanism deserves special consideration. Strauss's early reflection on Epicureanism as *apikorsut* was likely driven by an awareness that he himself might be seen as an Epicurean, despite his leanings toward Plato. While he never associated himself, either at that early moment in his career or later, with the materialism or conventionalism that he associated with Epicurus and Lucretius, he believed that any philosopher could be a heretic due to the distance he might take from the political community at large. And while Strauss was not an observant Jew, he frequently expressed the view that philosophers are incapable of the salutary obedience to the law that religion brings. His discourses on heresy seem to implicate him as a heretic in the same spirit as Solomon Maimon. Strauss himself was a creature of paradoxes—an admirer of orthodox religion who once said that he hoped his own soul would “die the death of philosophers.” While it is unclear what he meant by that statement, it is possible that it reflects a very Epicurean understanding of the soul as having a material, and thus mortal, nature.

Meditating on Epicureanism was thus a means by which Strauss could meditate on the larger meanings of his own identity as a Jewish philosopher. In continuing to use the term “Epicurean” throughout his career—which, as we have seen, was not really necessary, for Strauss could have used different terms rather than imputing different meanings to the same one—Strauss maintained his attachment to the word's heretical associations. Epicureanism was philosophy red in tooth and claw, at least when it came to maintaining Jewish religious beliefs, and thus dramatized the basic conflict that Strauss—against his teacher Julius Guttmann—saw running between philosophy and religion. Strauss may not have considered himself an Epicurean, but the Epicurean impulse earned his respectful treatment. He always understood its

proximity to the skeptical elements in his own thought, which Wittgenstein has taught us to call a “family resemblance.”⁹¹

Notes

1. By “natural right,” Strauss meant the existence of an ideal political order, one in which humanity would naturally flourish. Strauss understood “natural” to imply universality, and distinguished natural right from merely conventional systems of rights that could hold only within a given culture or polity. The concept of “natural right,” then, rested upon an implicit division between the natural and the merely cultural and historically contingent. For one classic account of nature in political thought, see Collingwood (1949).
2. For a review of Epicureanism’s reception as an apolitical philosophy, see Nichols (1976). Nichols offers a sustained reading of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* in order to argue that, despite Epicureanism’s apparent counsel of retreat, it is still politically minded: its argument for human happiness is intended to help those living within the human realm rather than sequestered from it.
3. Among Strauss’s readers and critics, the political theorist Shadia Drury holds that Strauss understands Epicureanism as a variant of conventionalism. This essay implicitly argues that Drury’s account is too constrained, missing some of the other meanings Strauss sees in Epicureanism. See Drury (1987).
4. One irony in Strauss’s characterization of Epicureanism as a critique of religion is that Epicurus himself was at one point venerated as the central figure of a cult, and his disciple Lucretius considered him a god. For an account of Epicureanism that attends to the cultic aspects of its tradition, see Clay (1999), a collection of papers that spans the previous thirty years.
5. Strauss (1965). Hereafter I will cite this work as SCR.

6. Strauss (1950). Hereafter I will cite this work as NRH.

7. The genealogy of Leo Strauss's political philosophy has been traced many times by scholars both friendly and hostile to his thought and with increasing frequency since the mid-1990s, when his *Gesammelte Schriften* appeared under the editorial supervision of Heinrich Meier. Given Strauss's own conservatism and the political influence of a handful of his students and his students' students, it is unsurprising that his reception has been a politicized one. If it is understandable that we tend to see Strauss's attacks on modern liberalism as stemming from his conservatism, it is unfortunate when our readings skip over the details of those attacks. Strauss's engagement with Epicurean thought is precisely such a detail, readily lost when we attend only to the larger contours of his arguments. Returning to Strauss's reading of Epicureanism follows naturally from the recent return to the historical roots of Strauss's thought, seen in the recent intellectual biographies by Eugene Sheppard and Daniel Tanguay, and in a philosophical-theological study by Leora Batnitzky. He first used the term "Epicurean," after all, in the politically and intellectually fraught climate of Weimar Germany. Caught by his own admission in a "theologico-political predicament," Strauss began his career-long effort to think his way out of such predicaments in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. There he would read Spinoza as the first in a long line of modern Epicureans, stating "Epicurus is truly the classic of the critique of religion." See Batnitzky (2005); Sheppard (2006); Tanguay (2007).

8. Strauss's work with Kojève and his interest in Plato are well known. Tanguay (2007) provides the most complete treatment of Strauss's interest in Alfarabi. Alfarabi's reading of Plato's *Laws* was especially important for Strauss, offering a politicized understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religion that helped Strauss develop ideas he had been entertaining ever since his work on Spinoza and Maimonides during the 1920s and early 1930s. Michael Zank, in

an introductory essay for Zank (2002) offers an intriguing critique of the idea of the motif of the “turn” deployed by intellectual historians in order to understand their subjects of inquiry.

9. For a detailed account of the *Akademie*'s history, see Myers (1992).

10. In 1924, Strauss had published an essay contesting the reading of Spinoza's Bible science put forward by Hermann Cohen, Guttman's own teacher. In the essay, “Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science,” Strauss attacked Cohen's treatment of Spinoza without actually defending Spinoza. It seems, rather, that Strauss was eager to have a stronger foundation from which to defeat the Spinozist project of biblical criticism than that which Cohen provides.

Strauss's criticisms of Cohen's treatment of Spinoza are too complex for easy summary here, but it suffices to say that while Strauss agreed with Cohen that Spinoza's philosophy ignored the political interests of the Jewish people, he disagreed with Cohen on the question of whether or not rationalist philosophy and the interests of the Jewish people could ever be harmonized.

Despite Strauss's disagreements with Guttman's own mentor, the essay impressed Guttman sufficiently that he invited Strauss to join the *Akademie* as a researcher. See also Wurgaft (2009).

11. The comparison Strauss struck between the medieval and the modern naturally stood in a particular relation to the later juxtaposition he struck between ancient and modern thought.

Medieval thinkers such as Maimonides, for Strauss, were the inheritors of classical thought rather than philosophical innovators in their own right. Moreover, they inherited and developed ancient thought at a very specific historical juncture where circumstances of political persecution constrained the direct verbal and written expressions available for philosophers. Thus, while Maimonides was not himself an “ancient” thinker, he became, for Strauss, a mouthpiece for a modified classical attitude. It is important to note here that Strauss was also part of a running debate among interpreters of Maimonides regarding whether the “great eagle” (as he was

sometimes called) was an Aristotelian or a Platonist. In 1908, Hermann Cohen had published an important study, the “Ethics of Maimonides,” in which he argued for the Platonist view (recently translated into English as Cohen (2004)). Strauss, despite his criticisms of Cohen on other issues, would be deeply indebted to Cohen’s view.

12. See Gibbs (1992); Batnitzky (2000); Gordon (2004).

13. SCR 19.

14. *Ibid.*, 38.

15. Interestingly, Strauss did not place much emphasis on the distinction between the Greek terms *eudaimonia*, or “happiness,” and *ataraxia*, “freedom from disturbance.” As we will see later in this essay, when Strauss turned to the subject of Lucretius he used the term *ataraxia* in such a way that he could as easily have used *eudaimonia*, suggesting that he may have seen this as a distinction without a difference, at least where the Epicureans were concerned.

16. SCR 38.

17. *Ibid.*, 39.

18. *Ibid.*, 40.

19. *Ibid.*, 41.

20. It is important to add that skepticism would go on to be an abiding concern for Strauss throughout his career. Several of his readers, most notably Stephen P. Smith, have described Strauss’s own philosophy as fundamentally skeptical. See Smith (2006).

21. Diogenes Laërtius 10.134: “It were better, indeed, to accept the legends of the gods than to bow beneath that yoke of destiny which the natural philosophers have imposed. The one holds out some faint hope that we may escape if we honour the gods, while the necessity of the naturalists is deaf to all entreaties” (trans. Hicks).

22. SCR 47. Given the resemblance between this line and many of Strauss's later statements regarding the differences between the intellectual elite and the masses, it is important to point out that at this juncture in his career, he had not yet fully formulated those later views. However, his understanding of the social function of religion, which he certainly had developed by the late 1920s, did stand in an indirect relation with those views.

23. It is important to note that Strauss, at this early point in his career, had not yet reached his mature understanding of the divide between philosophers and other men. However, it seems clear that the miniature history of Epicureanism's development presented in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* contained some of the seeds that later produced Strauss's ultimate view of the divide existing between theoreticians and the rest of society.

24. SCR 49. It is perhaps telling that Strauss did not justify his choice to explore Epicureanism over Averroism and Machiavellianism on the grounds that *Spinoza* himself understood himself as an Epicurean. That is, his very grounds for the choice signified his opposition to treating Spinoza as Spinoza treated the Bible—namely, historically.

25. SCR 62.

26. *Ibid.*, 86.

27. *Ibid.*, 210.

28. Although interestingly, Strauss noted that Spinoza's conception of *beatitudo* as "a stable condition complete in itself" (SCR 210) is equally close to the Stoic or Epicurean understanding of such a state. For Strauss both Epicurus and the Stoa agree with Spinoza's essentially pragmatist idea that the ultimate object of philosophical knowledge is, grandly put, the "eternal enjoyment of enduring and supreme joy," or less grandly, an unperturbed mind. One may criticize Strauss to the extent that his discussion ignored the considerable differences between a

modest (the pursuit of peace of mind) or ambitious (the pursuit of eternal happiness) Epicurean project. This is particularly interesting because the distinction he drew between Spinoza and Hobbes is based on a very similar difference in intention.

29. Strauss would have found grounds to disagree, then, with Jonathan Israel's description of the European Enlightenment as fundamentally Spinozist. See Israel (2001).

30. SCR 19.

31. See Socher (2006) 6.

32. If Maimon had indeed been making such a reference, it would have to have been with a sense of irony: Maimonides himself was well known for holding the view that philosophy and Judaism were entirely compatible with one another.

33. See "Apikorus," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972) 177.

34. See Lazier (2008).

35. These essays have been translated and published in a single volume: see Zank (2002).

36. See Myers (2003).

37. Breuer and Strauss also shared an appreciation, more restrained in Strauss's case, for the writings of Franz Rosenzweig. A letter from Breuer to Rosenzweig (March 11, 1924) and Rosenzweig's response (March 28, 1924) testify to the impression that Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* made on Breuer, and to the effect which Breuer's tract, *Messiaspuren* (traces of the Messiah) had on Rosenzweig. These letters are stored at the Leo Baeck Institute Archive, Item # MF 579.

38. Breuer (1925) 353.

39. The problem of history in Jewish thought is explored in depth in Yerushalmi (1989).

40. The attractions of Breuer's neo-Orthodox movement for Strauss went deeper than can be explored within this essay. Briefly, Breuer's philosophy of Jewish law served as a counterpoint to the neo-Kantian emphasis on the individual human subject "giving the law to himself." Strauss had encountered that latter view not only in the works of the prominent neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen but also in certain of his followers, like Julius Guttmann. Kantian thought had always offended Strauss with its tendency to dismiss the idea of religion as a source of law beyond the subject—to say nothing of Kant's derisive dismissal of Judaism as a "defunct constitution for an extinct polity." Where Kant derided Judaism as legalistic, Breuer celebrated it precisely for maintaining an external source of law against the modern temptation to characterize law as self-given, by the individual subject.

41. There is a very extensive literature covering the *Wissenschaft* movement in Jewish studies, and its early nineteenth-century proponents, in particular. See Glatzer (1964) 27–45; Schorsch (1994).

42. Strauss (1987).

43. Like Strauss, Krüger was a philosopher who had studied with Martin Heidegger and had worked under Paul Natorp and Nicolai Hartmann at the University of Marburg as well. He would make some of his greatest intellectual contributions in the fields of Kantian and Platonic philosophy, and he resembled Strauss in that his interests were divided between ancient and modern sources. He was thus a natural person for Strauss to seek out at a time when his research led him from the Enlightenment critique of religion to the question of that critique's larger importance for political theory.

44. Strauss's departure from Germany in 1932 should not be seen to reflect any presentiments of the National Socialists' coming rise to power. Strauss's degree of foresight into the political

situation in Germany, despite his pessimism regarding the fragility of the liberal Weimar government, seems to have been limited. Much has been made of Strauss's correspondence with the National Socialist jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, but as Heinrich Meier has demonstrated in his work on that correspondence, Strauss seems neither to have understood the extremity of Schmitt's political views nor to have known about Schmitt's membership in the Nazi party at the time of their last correspondence in 1933. See Meier (1995).

45. Strauss's interest in Hobbes, naturally enough, had developed out of his earlier work on Spinoza. Daniel Tanguay cites a telling note found in the Strauss archives in which Strauss himself described his research agenda of the early 1930s as an extension of interests he began in his 1920s work on Spinoza and Maimonides. That is, both *Philosophy and Law* and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* attempted to answer similar questions. Strauss wrote, "The two paths of research I have just sketched, although quite far apart in the material they treat, are connected by the intention, which has long guided my work, to contribute to the understanding of the history of political theories, in particular of the history of natural right. Both aim to clarify the genesis of the modern understanding of the State in the light of religious and political tradition, especially that of the Middle Ages" (trans. Tanguay). Tanguay cites this as "Unidentified document [1932?], p.4, in *Leo Strauss Papers*, box 3, folder 8." See Tanguay (2007) 226 n.2 The *Leo Strauss Papers* are stored at the Special Collections Department, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

46. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss would write, "It was Machiavelli, that greater Columbus, who had discovered the continent on which Hobbes could erect his structure" (177). When reading Strauss on Hobbes, it is necessary to recall that it is one thing to call Hobbes a founder of liberalism, another to call him a liberal. Strauss was well aware that, as Ryan (1996)

points out, the term “liberal” did not enter widespread use in English political life until around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

47. Strauss alerts his readers to the fact that his ongoing reading of Hobbes had actually begun in the Spinoza volume via subtle means, with a brief footnote in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*: “For the fundamental difference between Hobbes’s political philosophy and Spinoza’s, cf. Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, Berlin 1930, pp. 222–30” ((1936) 28).

48. Strauss (1936) xv.

49. See Strauss (1936) 4. Strauss is referring to Dilthey (1914–2006) 2: 452.

50. Strauss (1936) 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 71.

52. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

53. Strauss (1996) 315 (my translation): “Hobbes’s explicit judgment regarding Epicurean philosophy (see *Opera* III 540, *English Works* IV 387 and VI 98) is nothing other than an explicit, more or less disparaging judgment over ancient philosophy in general (and see the detailed critique of Epicurus and Lucretius in *De Corpore* XXXVI 3). But the point that in truth a tight relationship between Hobbes and Epicureanism exists is never sufficiently understood. It is only on the judgment of J. Fr. Buddeus that Hobbes is characterized as ‘*Epicurae Philosophie Consectator*.’”

54. See Hobbes (1939–45) 4: 388–89. The epigram:

nam ueluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis
in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus
interdum nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam
quae pueri in tenebris pauitant finguntque futura.

—Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 2.55–58

For just as children tremble and fear all things
in blind darkness, so we in the light fear, at times,
things that are no more to be feared than what
children shiver at in the dark and imagine to be at hand.

55. Hobbes (1939–45) 4: 407

56. We know from Strauss’s letters to Alexandre Kojève that he was greatly preoccupied with writing the Walgreen Lectures during this time. See, in particular, Strauss’s letter to Kojève of September 4, 1949, in Gourevitch and Roth (1991) 243. It is clear that Strauss saw *Natural Right and History* as a major work, the culmination of many of his philosophical efforts up to this point.

57. In the course of the Kojève-Strauss correspondence, Kojève refers to “Epicureanism,” using that term to describe all philosophies based on a withdrawal from the world to a state of reflection. There is no reason to think that this reference left an impression on Strauss. See Kojève’s essay “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in Gourevitch and Roth (1991).

58. For differing accounts of Strauss’s development between 1935 and 1949, see Sheppard (2006), Tanguay (2007); see also Michael Roth’s “Introduction” in Gourevitch and Roth (1991). The different influences acting on Strauss during this time included the obvious weight of his flight from Europe and the need he felt to respond to the Holocaust, a deepened interest in medieval thought that led to several other essays on Maimonides, and an introductory essay written for Pines’s translation of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, and his discovery of the reading of Plato offered by the medieval Islamic thinker Alfarabi. The academic climate in which Strauss operated during this time must also be considered: the New School and its journal were markedly

liberal establishments, and many of its social scientists held views inimical to Strauss's own.

This may well have added to the radicalization of Strauss's views during this time. See Sheppard (2006) 86–92.

59. See Kuhn (1956).

60. See Strauss (1978). The main substance of Strauss's dispute with Kuhn in this letter concerns several technical points beyond this essay's scope. The first was not whether *Natural Right and History* defends natural right, but rather whether Strauss's method in the book entangles him in a "negative historicism" of his own (23). Kuhn and Strauss also disagreed over Aristotle's interpretation of natural right (24).

61. In fact, one criticism of Tanguay on this point is that he affords Strauss a greater degree of "scholarly objectivity" than is perhaps reasonable and that he does not inquire into the polemical aspects of Strauss's interest in reopening the question of natural right.

62. NRH 89.

63. See Reuschlein (1954).

64. NRH 84.

65. *Ibid.*, 58.

66. *Ibid.*, 15.

67. *Ibid.*, 20.

68. *Ibid.*, 20.

69. For a more in-depth examination of Strauss's skepticism, see Smith (2006).

70. NRH 109. Strauss cites Plato's *Laws* 889b–899. It seems certain that, rather than making the anachronistic claim that Plato's *Laws* somehow associated Epicureanism with materialism,

Strauss was reading Plato's *Laws*, book 10 as offering a critique of materialism that could be applied to Epicurean thought.

71. NRH 169.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 170.

74. Ibid., 188.

75. Ibid., 189.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid., 128.

78. Ibid., 133.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., 112.

81. Strauss (1995).

82. Nichols (1976) 25 describes the peculiar aspects of *De Rerum Natura*, including its status as an epic poem that banishes many of the familiar elements of the epic including gods, fate, and romantic love. See also Godwin (2004) 51: "There is a giant problem for an Epicurean poet to overcome, however, and that is Epicurus's own avowed disapproval of poetry as a form of writing. The evidence is scant (as so often), but there is enough of it to suggest that Epicurus—like Plato in many ways—believed that poetry was a bad way to write as it used obfuscating metaphors instead of plain speech and also because poets usually told dangerously false tales about the gods in their poems." If we read Lucretius with Nichols and Godwin in mind, the *De Rerum Natura* becomes an epic poem against the genre of the epic poem, denying the gods, who

are honored by most Greek and Roman epics, and at the same time celebrating the mortal lineage of its addressee, Memmius.

83. Strauss (1995) 83.

84. Nichols (1976) 36 offers the following analysis of the language used by Lucretius in his analogy: “When doctors put honey on the rim of a cup containing wormwood, children are fooled (*ludificetur*, I, 939), deceived (*decepta*, I, 941)—not of course, in order to be harmed, but to be made well.”

85. Strauss (1995) 85.

86. Nichols (1976) 36.

87. *Ibid.*, 14.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Farrington (1965) 20.

90. Strauss (1995) 83.

91. Wittgenstein (2001) 27 (§67).