

*Caesar the Epicurean? A Matter of Life and Death**Katharina Volk\**

Was Julius Caesar an Epicurean? It seems unlikely. No ancient source identifies him as an adherent of the Garden, nor are we told that he studied with Greek philosophers of any persuasion, as so many of his peers did both at Rome and abroad. In addition, the man who ambitiously maneuvered himself into the power-sharing arrangement known as the First Triumvirate, spent years battling the Gauls, started and won a civil war and then ruled Rome as a quasi-monarch until being assassinated would appear to be an improbable follower of a school that counseled political quietism and the cultivation of simple pleasures. On the contrary, Caesar might be seen as a perfect example of the wretched individual who, in the words of Lucretius, “strives day and night with the utmost toil to reach a position of prominence and assume power” (*noctes atque dies niti praestante labore | ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri*, 2.112–13). It is on men like these that the enlightened Epicurean looks down with quiet self-satisfaction from the serene temples of the wise.

That Caesar’s ambition could be viewed by his contemporaries as the very antithesis of Epicurean ideals is apparent from a passage in Cicero’s invective *Against Piso* of 55 BC. Among many other criticisms, Cicero reproaches Piso for his perverted Epicureanism, which has led this Roman aristocrat to his highly un-Roman refusal to seek a triumph for his military exploits in Macedonia. L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, the patron of Philodemus and indeed well-known for his Epicurean leanings,<sup>1</sup> was also the father of Caesar’s wife, a fact that enables Cicero to suggest sarcastically that Piso give an Epicurean lecture to his son-in-law, telling him that public thanksgivings and triumphs are just so many meaningless baubles,

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<sup>1</sup> On Piso’s Epicureanism, see esp. Griffin: 2001 and Benferhat: 2005a, 173–232, as well as Roskam in this volume (Chapter 2).

“almost the playthings of children” (*delectamenta paene puerorum*, 60).<sup>2</sup> As Cicero goes on to point out, Caesar would be anything but receptive to this kind of argument: “Believe me, that man is carried on by glory; he is aflame, he burns with the desire for a grand and deserved triumph. He has not learned those same things as you” (*fertur ille vir, mihi crede, gloria; flagrat, ardet cupiditate iusti et magni triumphi. non didicit eadem ista quae tu*, 59).

Despite these obstacles, however, scholars have over the past few decades repeatedly ascribed some form of Epicureanism to Caesar.<sup>3</sup> While the evidence, such as it is, is well known and has been discussed from many different angles, it will be worthwhile to consider the question once more. There has been a recent surge of interest – of which this volume is an excellent example – in Roman philosophy in general and Roman Epicureanism in particular, with special attention paid to the intersections of philosophy and politics in the turbulent period of the late Republic.<sup>4</sup> Given that Caesar was the era’s foremost political figure, as well as a formidable intellectual,<sup>5</sup> we would like to know what, if anything, he thought about philosophy and especially about the school most popular among his contemporaries, that of Epicurus.

That Caesar was informed about Epicureanism is without doubt. Even if he had undergone no specifically philosophical training himself,<sup>6</sup> basic knowledge concerning the major philosophical schools was, by the first century BC, part and parcel of the Roman aristocracy’s cultural competence, and Caesar can hardly have failed to pick up the principles of Rome’s most fashionable philosophical creed. Furthermore, as has often been pointed out, many of Caesar’s friends and followers were Epicureans. These include not only his father-in-law Piso, but also his trusted lieutenant C. Vibius Pansa Caetronianus and the jurist C. Trebatius Testa. In the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the whole passage, 59–61, with Rambaud: 1969, 412–413, and Garbarino: 2010, 211–212.

<sup>3</sup> Strongly in favor of an Epicurean Caesar: O. Seel: 1967, 77–83; Rambaud: 1969 and 1984; Paratore: 1973, 184–191; Bourne: 1977; and Fussl: 1980. More tentative: Castner: 1988; Benferhat: 2005a; Pizzani: 1993; and Garbarino: 2010. See also Hanchey in this volume (Chapter 3). I have not been able to find out who first suggested an Epicurean affiliation for Caesar.

<sup>4</sup> Roman philosophy: e.g., Williams and Volk: 2016; Epicureanism: e.g., Benferhat: 2005a, Fish: 2011 and Gilbert: 2015. In my own monograph on the intellectual history of the late Republic (Volk: 2021), philosophy and its political implications and applications figure large as well.

<sup>5</sup> For Caesar’s intellectual pursuits in general, see Fantham: 2009. On his most significant scholarly publication, the grammatical work *On Analogy*, see Garcea: 2012. For possible Epicurean influences on Caesar’s linguistic thought, see Willi: 2010, 239–241, and Garcea: 2012, 114–124.

<sup>6</sup> This is not assured: The biographies of both Suetonius and Plutarch lack or have lost an opening discussion of Caesar’s boyhood and schooling. However, they also mention no association with philosophers later in life, as we so often find with Caesar’s contemporaries.

case of such other Caesarians as L. Cornelius Balbus, A. Hirtius and C. Matius, we cannot be sure about their philosophical allegiance, but Epicurean leanings have often been suggested.<sup>7</sup> While older views that Epicureanism provided a political ideology for the Caesarian party have long been debunked,<sup>8</sup> and it is well established that Epicureans stood on both sides of the Civil War, the concentration of putative Epicureans in Caesar's circle is still worth noting.

What is especially interesting is the evidence for Epicurean activity in the Caesarian camp during the campaigns in Gaul, Germany and Britain. Trebatius, who had joined Caesar's staff on the recommendation of Cicero, converted to Epicureanism in 53 BC, apparently under the influence of Pansa. His mentor back in Rome reacted in mock horror: "My friend Pansa tells me you have become an Epicurean. That's a great camp you got there!" (*indicavit mihi Pansa meus Epicureum te esse factum. o castra praeclara!*, *Fam.* 7.12.1). Just a year earlier, the leisure hours of the campaigning Caesarian officers may have been taken up with studying Lucretius' brand-new poem. As Christopher Krebs has shown, following F. R. Dale, Caesar himself must have read *On the Nature of Things* in 54, to judge from striking verbal echoes in Books 5, 6 and 7 of his *Gallia War*.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that Caesar, and perhaps other philosophically interested members of his staff, were introduced to Lucretius by Quintus Cicero, who knew the poem by February 54 (*Cic. QFr.* 2.10.3) and joined Caesar's campaign shortly thereafter. Dale (1958, 182) fondly imagines that Caesar "read Lucretius with Quintus in Britain, on a summer evening in his tent."

Familiarity with Epicureans and knowledge of Epicurean writing, however, do not an Epicurean make (after all, the decidedly non-Epicurean Cicero had many Epicurean friends and read Lucretius' poem). What did Caesar actually believe? In the absence of ancient claims that he espoused Epicurean views, all the evidence is circumstantial, which means that the man's philosophical opinions, if any, need to be inferred from his behavior and oral and written utterances. I will not here review all the characteristics of Caesar that have been adduced to demonstrate his Epicureanism. Scholars have pointed to his rationalism and cool aiming at *utilitas*, his religious skepticism, his flair for friendship, his policy of *clementia* or even

<sup>7</sup> On Epicureanism in Caesar's entourage, see Fussl: 1980 and Valachova: 2018. On the individuals mentioned and their Epicurean credentials, see Castner: 1988, Benferhat: 2005a and Gilbert: 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See esp. Momigliano: 1941, 150–157, and Benferhat: 2005a.

<sup>9</sup> See Krebs: 2013 with Dale: 1958.

his entire political trajectory and program as indications of Caesar's allegiance to the Garden.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, such arguments are highly speculative. If we assume for the sake of argument that Caesar in fact possessed all the traits ascribed to him (which is not a given), they are far too unspecific to prove his philosophical views. If we knew for certain that Caesar espoused Epicureanism, then we might be justified in wondering to what extent his displayed character, behavior and decisions might have been informed by his creed.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of a more obviously smoking gun, a mere cool and rational religious skeptic and good friend with an aversion to the needless bloodshed of his peers cannot as such be convicted of Epicureanism.

There is, however, one additional and promising set of evidence that scholars have often pointed to and that concerns Caesar's attitude to death. According to Epicurus, of course, fear of death is – together with fear of the gods – the main obstacle to attaining a happy life, and a person cannot achieve ἀταραξία without having internalized the truth that “death is nothing to us” (ὁ θάνατος οὐδέν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, KD 2).<sup>12</sup> Whatever his other philosophical beliefs may or may not have been, Caesar on a number of occasions displayed a contempt for death that might be seen as at least Epicurean-inflected. Passing over his well-attested physical courage and death-defying acts during his military campaigns, I will concentrate in what follows on a few attested utterances, which combine to allow perhaps some insight into Caesar's views on life and death.

The first is an argument Caesar reportedly made in his speech on December 5, 63 BC, when the senate debated the fate of the convicted Catilinarians. After the consul-designate Silanus had proposed the death penalty and the subsequent speakers had seconded his motion, Caesar suggested instead lifelong imprisonment without the possibility of parole. While the greater part of his speech as reconstructed by Sallust in his *War against Catiline* is concerned with cautioning the senators against

<sup>10</sup> Rationalism: Rambaud: 1969, Bourne: 1977, Fussl: 1980, Minyard: 1985, 17–20 and Pizzani: 1993; religious skepticism: Rambaud: 1969, Pizzani: 1993 and Benferhat: 2005a; *clementia*: Rambaud: 1969 and Bourne: 1977; friendship: Rambaud: 1969, Bourne: 1977 and Benferhat: 2005a. Farthest reaching are speculations that Caesar's striving for power and establishing sole rule was motivated by an Epicurean wish to bring about a state of peace and quiet for the benefit of all mankind (see Rambaud: 1969, 419, Paratore: 1973, 190 and Fussl: 1980, 80).

<sup>11</sup> E.g., since we know that Piso had Epicurean interests and associations, it makes sense to ask – as scholars have done (see n. 1) – whether his moderate and conciliatory politics owe anything to his philosophy. If we knew nothing about his philosophical pursuits, by contrast, we would not be justified in inferring his Epicureanism from his political behavior.

<sup>12</sup> On the Epicurean arguments against the fear of death, see Warren: 2004 and Asmis in this volume (Chapter 7).

approving a measure of questionable legality, Caesar also offers a striking argument against the death penalty itself (Sall. *BC* 51.20):

de poena possum equidem dicere, id quod res habet, in luctu atque miseriis mortem aerumnarum requiem, non cruciatum esse; eam cuncta mortalium mala dissolvere; ultra neque curae neque gaudio locum esse.

About the punishment I can speak according to the facts: in sorrow and misery death is a relief from grief, not a torture. It dissolves all human ills, and beyond it, there is place for neither care nor joy.

While Sallust is not quoting Caesar verbatim, he presumably availed himself of the senatorial archives in reconstructing the speeches,<sup>13</sup> and the historicity of the remarks on death is confirmed not only by the fact that Sallust's Cato, in responding to Caesar, refers back to them, but crucially also by Cicero's own summary of the discussion in the fourth speech *Against Catiline*. As for Cato, he begins his attack on Caesar's proposal as follows (Sall. *BC* 52.13):

bene et composite C. Caesar paulo ante in hoc ordine de vita et morte disseruit, credo falsa existumans ea quae de inferis memorantur, divorso itinere malos a bonis loca taetra, inculta, foeda atque formidulosa habere.

C. Caesar a little while ago gave this order a well-phrased and well-structured lecture on life and death, apparently deeming false what is said about the underworld, namely, that divorced from the good, the wicked inhabit horrid, desolate, foul and fearful places.

Cicero, finally, paraphrases Caesar's views on death as follows (*Cat.* 4.7–8):

alter intellegit mortem ab dis immortalibus non esse supplicii causa constitutam, sed aut necessitatem naturae aut laborum ac miseriarum quietem esse. itaque eam sapientes numquam inviti, fortes saepe etiam lubenter oppetiverunt . . . vitam solam relinquit nefariis hominibus; quam si eripuisset, multas uno dolore animi atque corporis miserias et omnis scelerum poenas ademisset. itaque ut aliqua in vita formido improbis esset posita, apud inferos eius modi quaedam illi antiqui supplicia impiis constituta esse voluerunt, quod videlicet intellegebant his remotis non esse mortem ipsam pertimescendam.

The other speaker understands that death was not created by the immortal gods for the sake of punishment, but is either a necessity of nature or freedom from toil and misery. Thus wise men have never undergone it unwillingly, and brave men have often even willingly sought it . . . He leaves

<sup>13</sup> We know that the consul Cicero had the debate taken down in shorthand: Plut. *Cat. min.* 23.3.

only life to the criminals. If he had taken that away, he would have removed with one single pain many miseries of mind and body as well as all punishments for their crimes. Therefore, in order that there be some fear left in life for wicked men, those men of old maintained that there were some punishments of this sort set for the impious in the underworld—since of course they understood that without them, not even death would have to be feared.

Even though Caesar's and Cato's words are filtered through Sallust, and it is unclear to what extent Cicero is distorting or embellishing Caesar's argument, there still emerges a reasonably clear image of what Caesar must have said. Apparently, he claimed that the death penalty was not a suitable punishment because death constitutes the absolute endpoint for human experience beyond which a person will be affected by neither good nor ill – and certainly not the punishments of the traditional underworld. As a result, death is not to be feared (*non esse mortem ipsam pertimescendam*, Cic. *Cat.* 4.8).

While the idea that “death is not an evil” is a philosophical commonplace, there is certainly an Epicurean flavor to Caesar's argument.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have pointed to the language of dissolution (*[mortem] cuncta mortalium mala dissolvere*)<sup>15</sup> and to the debunking of the myths about the underworld.<sup>16</sup> We might also wonder whether Caesar's statement that, beyond death, there is place for neither *cura* nor *gaudium* alludes to the two poles of Epicurean experience, (mental) pain or disturbance and (mental) pleasure. None of this amounts to a sustained exposition of Epicurean doctrine – which would at any rate be out of place in a political speech – but the passage shows that Caesar was well versed in at least some aspects of Epicurean thought. Why he chose to include those in his plea for moderation vis-à-vis the Catilinarians must remain open. Of course, Caesar may simply have been voicing his own, deeply held convictions. Perhaps, however, he was also trying to appeal to his fellow senators with philosophical aspirations: The entire speech is an attempt to induce the

<sup>14</sup> In favor of a strong Epicurean interpretation: O. Seel: 1967, Paratore: 1973, Bourne: 1977, Fussl: 1980, Pizzani: 1993, Benferhat: 2005a and Garbarino: 2010; tentative: Castner: 1988; skeptical: Mulgan: 1979 and Wardle: 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See Benferhat: 2005a, 298–299, who points to KD 2, where what is dead is referred to as τὸ . . . διαλυθὲν (translated as *dissolutum* in Cic. *Fin.* 2.100), and Garbarino: 2010, 217, who compares the use of *dissolvere* by Lucretius. Of course, the word choice may be Sallust's rather than Caesar's own.

<sup>16</sup> See Garbarino: 2010, 216–217. What was peculiar about the Epicureans was not that they did not believe in punishments in the underworld (if we trust Cicero, no reasonable person took those seriously), but that they continued to make them a topic. Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.10–11; Lucr. 3.978–1023.

audience to approach the question of the conspirators' punishment rationally rather than emotionally, and the observation that "death is nothing to us" may have served both as an argument to calm those carried away by the calls for the malefactors' blood and as an intellectual fig leaf for those who (like Caesar himself) might have had political or private sympathies with the convicted men.

In addition to this soundbite from an early stage in Caesar's career, we also have a number of utterances from the end of his life, when he held sway in Rome as dictator after having emerged victorious from the Civil War. A number of sources report that Caesar was wont to express a feeling that he had lived enough, with the implication that he was unafraid of death. The most prominent incident is one discussed by Cicero in his speech *For Marcellus*, given in the senate in 46 BC. In this rhetorical balancing act, the speaker, on the one hand, bestows extravagant praise on Caesar for his decision to pardon and recall his exiled foe M. Marcellus. On the other, he argues that it is the dictator's duty to restore the republican form of government, insinuating that Caesar will fall short of his potential and miss out on true glory if he allows matters to persist in the present, undesirable status quo.

As part of his argument Cicero cited a phrase that Caesar himself had just used in his own speech, in which the dictator, apparently to rally senatorial sympathy and support, not only complained about Marcellus' past enmity and mentioned current threats against his own life, but also made the resigned claim that he had "lived long enough for both nature and glory" (*satis diu vel naturae vixi vel gloriae*, 25). Since, in Cicero's opinion, Caesar had not lived enough until he had done his duty by the *res publica*, he took it upon himself politely to combat the dictator's assertion, constructing a philosophical counter-argument in which he clearly interprets his opponent's view as Epicurean.<sup>17</sup> As Cicero recognizes, the idea of a point of "enoughness" beyond which life provides no further attractions is peculiar to the teachings of the Garden. The Epicureans held that perfect pleasure cannot be increased by the duration of time and that one may as well quit while the going is good and one has had *satis* of good things. Thus in her diatribe at the end of Book 3 of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, personified Nature tells the man unwilling to die that "there is nothing that I could additionally contrive and invent to please you: Everything is always the same" (*nam tibi praeterea quod machiner*

<sup>17</sup> See Rambaud: 1984, Dobesch: 1985, 188–190, Benferhat: 2005a, 300–301, Garbarino: 2010, 212–213 and Volk: 2021, 139–146, and forthcoming b.

*inveniamque, | quod placeat, nil est: eadem sunt omnia semper, 3.944–945)* and that he ought to leave while “sated and full of things” (*satur ac plenus . . . rerum, 960*). Of course, a true Epicurean has no desire for glory, but Cicero himself points out that this part of Caesar’s utterance is heterodox and not part of his Epicurean *sapientia*: “You will not deny that *even though* you are wise, you are most desirous of fame” (*cuius [sc. gloriae] te esse avidissimum, quamvis sis sapiens, non negabis?, 25*).<sup>18</sup>

From Cicero’s perspective, of course, Caesar’s view is completely wrong. He may have lived enough for nature and for glory, “but not enough for the fatherland, which is the most important thing” (*at, quod maximum est, patriae certe parum, 25*): If Caesar quits now, he will lose his chance of leaving behind a lasting legacy. Pleasure, even the memory of past pleasure, by which the Epicureans set so much store, will end with death; only true glory lives on. Therefore, there is only one course possible for Caesar, provided that he is truly *sapiens* and not just imbued with Epicurean pseudo-wisdom (27):

haec igitur tibi reliqua pars est; hic restat actus, in hoc elaborandum est ut rem publicam constituas, eaque tu in primis summa tranquillitate et otio perfruare: tum te, si voles, cum et patriae quod debes solveris, et naturam ipsam expleveris satietate vivendi, satis diu vixisse dicito.

This part is left for you, this deed remains, to this you must devote your effort: Put the Republic in order, and you first and foremost will be able to profit from it in the greatest tranquility and peace. At that point, once you have paid your debt to the fatherland, and—sated with life—have satisfied nature, you may say that you have lived enough.

While it is theoretically possible that Cicero added an Epicurean slant to Caesar’s *satietas vivendi*, it seems to me more likely that he interpreted correctly something that was already present in Caesar’s attitude. That the dictator was in the habit, in the last months of his life, of expressing a sense that he had lived his life to the full, and a concomitant lack of fear of death is attested by a number of historical sources.<sup>19</sup> Suetonius reports at length the various explanations given by contemporaries of Caesar’s jaded attitude in the face of possible death through attempts on his life (*Iul. 86*): Was his

<sup>18</sup> Compare Cicero’s depiction of Caesar’s un-Epicurean hunger for fame in *Against Piso*, cited above. For the role of personified Nature in Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, see Asmis in this volume (Chapter 7).

<sup>19</sup> Cicero, too, mentions that the sentiment was one that Caesar voiced “all too often” (*nimis crebro, Marc. 25*); interestingly, at that point he reports the tag as *satis te tibi vixisse* (“that you have lived enough for yourself”).



health failing and he therefore “wished to live no longer” (*neque voluisse se diutius vivere*)? Did he prefer “to face danger once and for all rather than always fear it” (*subire semel quam cavere semper*)?<sup>20</sup> Or was Caesar genuinely convinced that he had lived “enough”? According to some of his friends, he was accustomed to state his view as follows:

non tam sua quam rei publicae interesse, uti salvus esset: se iam pridem potentiae gloriaeque abunde adeptum; rem publicam, si quid sibi eveniret, neque quietam fore et aliquanto deteriore condicione civilia bella subituram.

[He used to say that] his safety was not so much in his own interest as in that of the commonwealth. For he had long achieved more than enough of power and glory. But if something should happen to him, the commonwealth would not be at peace and would slide back into civil war in a rather worse condition.

This arrogant assertion almost sounds like a response to Cicero’s exhortations in *For Marcellus*: Rather than accept his duty to continue working for the common good, Caesar puts the ball firmly back in the court of the *res publica*. If his fellow Romans want peace and quiet, they need to protect Caesar’s life. As for Caesar himself, he has long fulfilled his own desires and could not care less.

Suetonius concludes with an anecdote found also in Plutarch and Appian.<sup>21</sup> The night before he was assassinated, Caesar attended a dinner party where the conversation turned to a discussion about what kind of death was the most desirable. The dictator (seemingly predicting his own imminent demise) declared his own preference for one that was sudden and unexpected (*repentinum inopinatumque*).

Considered in combination, Caesar’s reported utterances about life and death can – with all due caution – be considered evidence for an attitude in keeping with Epicurean thought. Death is not to be feared: It is a dissolution and absolute end, beyond which there is nothing that concerns us. Conversely, life is not something that can be profitably prolonged forever: Once one has lived enough, one might as well die with equanimity. This attitude is indicative of what Raphael Woolf has described as the Epicurean “small-scale” view of human existence.<sup>22</sup> Since all necessary

<sup>20</sup> This same sentiment is reported also by Vell. 2.57.1, Plut. *Caes.* 57.7 and App. *BC* 2.109.

<sup>21</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 87, Plut. *Caes.* 63.7 and App. *BC* 2.115.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf made this point in a paper (“Philosophy and Death in Cicero’s Letters to Atticus”) that he delivered in April 2016 at the symposium “Philosophy in Cicero’s Letters” at Columbia University. He has kindly permitted me to refer to this hitherto unpublished work. See further Warren: 2004,

desires can be easily fulfilled and the *summum bonum* of katastematic pleasure thus easily achieved, Epicurean life is, as it were, not a big deal and, as a result, neither is death. The person who has reached *satietas vivendi* has no reason not to die. As Woolf puts it, “it is only the philosophy that regards life as essentially small-scale that can regard death as essentially a matter of indifference.”

Caesar’s own life, of course, was anything but small-scale, and when he declared that he had lived enough or achieved the object of his desires, he was clearly not referring to his having met the minimalist conditions of Epicurean hedonism. It is, however, conceivable that it was a small-scale view of life and death that enabled Caesar to aim as high as he did. Someone who considers neither life nor death a big deal can take risks that others will shrink from because he is justified in being unafraid of whatever the outcome will be. The man who told his mother before his election to Pontifex Maximus that he would return as the winner or not at all, and who likened his beginning a civil war to entering a game of chance (*alea iacta est*), may well have been able to keep his cool in these high-risk situations because he was certain that death is nothing to us.

By this point in my discussion, individual readers may be more or less convinced by my claim that Caesar’s views on life and death owe something to Epicurean doctrine. I admit that the argument is speculative, and I am willing to push it as far as I have, and no further. If, however, merely for the sake of argument, we accept for the moment the idea that Caesar had adopted the Epicurean maxim “death is nothing to us” for his own purposes, the question still remains: Was he an Epicurean? At the risk of invoking the infamous Curate’s Egg, I would be inclined to answer, “in part.” Perhaps, though, it is time in turn to question the question and to ask ourselves what it would actually take for an ancient Greek or Roman to “qualify” as an Epicurean (or, for that matter, an adherent of any other philosophical school). Note that I am not now, as at the beginning of the chapter, concerned with the matter of evidence. The question is not how we, with our limited sources, can identify a potential adherent of the school but, rather, what conditions must be fulfilled for us to consider someone an Epicurean.

In the history of philosophy, such labels as “Academic,” “Stoic” or “Epicurean” are most often used to designate authors of philosophical

199–212 on the problem that their arguments against the fear of death leave the Epicureans “with precious few resources to explain why continued life is worth pursuing” (210). For the Epicureanism of Atticus, see Gilbert in this volume (Chapter 4).

works that espouse and expound the doctrine of the sect in question. Very often, such individuals were affiliated with the school as an institution or otherwise active as teachers professing a specific philosophical affiliation. Philosophical teachers who did not publish may likewise be labeled according to their school allegiance, as may philosophical writers who had no official connection to a school and did not engage in teaching. By this convention, for example, Chrysippus and Posidonius are both Stoics, as are Cicero's teacher and houseguest Diodotus (who did not, as far as we know, write anything) and even Seneca (who had nothing to do with the Stoic school as an institution and was not a professional teacher). We are in the habit of calling all such persons "philosophers," even if some of them would not have applied this designation to themselves,<sup>23</sup> and modern scholars occasionally feel that particular ancient thinkers and writers do not fit their own understanding of what philosophy is.

Terms like "Epicurean" or "Stoic," however, clearly also have a wider application, and that is what is at issue here. It surely makes sense to use such designations for people who are not philosophers by any description but who for themselves embrace the teachings of a particular school as a convincing mode of theoretical explanation and/or guide to practical behavior. It is in this sense that we call Piso an Epicurean and the younger Cato a Stoic, and it is in this sense that we are investigating whether Julius Caesar might have been an Epicurean. The question remains: What justifies us to claim a particular individual as the adherent of a particular school, if that individual not only had no institutional affiliation but did not even teach or write philosophy? What does it take to make Piso or Caesar or, for that matter, any modern follower of Epicurus, an Epicurean?

The answer, I posit, is very simple. A person is an Epicurean (or Stoic or Academic or Peripatetic) if he or she identifies as such. If a person proclaims, *te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus*, or calls himself *Epicuri de grege porcum*, that person should be considered an Epicurean.<sup>24</sup> Of course, as we have already seen, in the case of many ancient figures, we lack such explicit self-identification and must carefully review whatever additional sources there may be. Thus, for example, we possess no direct testimony to the

<sup>23</sup> Hine: 2016 shows that philosophically engaged Romans of the late Republic and early Empire did not refer to themselves as *philosophi* but reserved this term for Greek professionals; as Trapp: 2017 demonstrates, this changed in later periods.

<sup>24</sup> Lucr. 3.3; Hor. *Epist.* 1.4.16. Of course, the declarations of poetic personae cannot be treated as straightforward statements of their authors; by quoting these famous tags, I am making no claims about the historical Lucretius and Horace. For the Epicureanism of Catullus, see Gale in this volume (Chapter 6).

younger Cato's ever referring to himself as a Stoic; however, the fact that his contemporary Cicero repeatedly calls him a *Stoicus* and considers his behavior and utterances from a Stoic perspective makes us reasonably confident that Cato himself identified as a Stoic – and thus, by my definition, was a Stoic.

The posited self-identification criterion may sound banal, but it has an important corollary for our understanding of philosophical allegiance. If, in order to qualify as, say, an Epicurean, it is sufficient merely to consider oneself an Epicurean, then Epicurean orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not necessary conditions. In other words, an Epicurean by this definition may hold opinions incompatible with Epicurean doctrine or may act in ways not conforming to Epicurean ethical teaching. As a matter of fact, unless the person in question happens to be a sage, it is highly unlikely that her thoughts and actions will be in keeping with Epicureanism at all times. As long as she identifies as an Epicurean, however, we should consider her an Epicurean. Of course, she may, as it were, be a bad Epicurean – but that is a different question.<sup>25</sup>

The study of philosophical affiliation in ancient Rome in general and of Roman Epicureanism in particular has long suffered from anxiety over whether individual Romans were really “serious” about philosophy or qualify as, say, “real” Epicureans. Working with an expectation of doctrinal consistency (related to the charity principle conventionally applied to the interpretation of philosophical texts), scholars have struggled with a perceived lack of intellectual coherence and/or ethical commitment on the part of some of the individuals they study, and have attempted to come to terms with this problem in one of three ways. First, there has been a long tradition of flat-out denying philosophical credibility or sophistication even to Romans with proven philosophical interests and expertise. This tendency is found even among scholars who specifically study such individuals and have contributed much to our knowledge of the history of Roman thought. Thus, for example, within the scholarship of Roman Epicureanism, Catherine J. Castner's *Prosopography of Roman Epicureans* (1988) is notorious for its scornful dismissal of the superficiality and “cavalier attitude” (xvii) toward Epicurean doctrine of the very men whom the author identifies as (possible) Epicureans.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, we are accustomed to accept the self-identification of people as, e.g., Christians, Buddhists or Marxists, notwithstanding their occasional or even frequent failure to fully embrace or live up to the tenets of the creed in question (not even to mention disagreements as to what these tenets are and imply).

Such a view has been widely felt to be unfair and unhelpful, and in recent years, important work has been dedicated to the intellectual rehabilitation of Roman philosophy and of individual Roman thinkers, including Epicureans. This second, apologetic approach has succeeded in demonstrating the high level of doctrinal knowledge and the sophistication of argument of many Romans with philosophical interests and allegiances. Focusing not only on the published works of men like Cicero but on the everyday epistolary exchanges of a wide range of individuals, such scholars as Miriam Griffin, Sean McConnell and Nathan Gilbert have put paid to the notion that Roman philosophy was just the fashionable pastime of an upper class in search of cultural capital.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, readings of this type, often fueled by a desire to prove the orthodoxy of the text or figure in question, run the risk of becoming over-charitable and glossing over tensions and inconsistencies. To stick with the school at issue in this chapter: Even the most learned and committed Roman Epicureans do not always conform to what we understand Epicureanism to entail.

This is where the third approach comes in. A number of scholars – first and foremost Michael Erler and Jeffrey Fish<sup>27</sup> – have argued that Roman Epicureans adopted a form of “unorthodox” Epicureanism (cf. the title of Erler: 1992b), one that was deemed more appropriate to their society and their lifestyle as members of the Roman elite. Sometimes the practitioners in question are seen as developing this particular brand of “Roman Epicureanism” on their own, simply adjusting Epicurean teachings to a new context. Often, however, scholars assert the influence of contemporary Greek Epicureans, in particular Philodemus, the friend and protégé of Piso. A case in point is the potentially embarrassing fact that so many Roman Epicureans by no means adhered to their master’s injunction to “live unnoticed” and instead followed the typical political careers of the Roman aristocracy.<sup>28</sup> If it can be shown that there was instead a bona fide Epicurean point of view that condoned political engagement, then numerous “bad” Epicureans will have been saved as perfectly orthodox. The problem is that, given the fragmentary nature of Philodemus’ surviving

<sup>26</sup> See Griffin: 1995 and 2001, McConnell: 2014 and Gilbert: 2015 in this volume (Chapter 4).

<sup>27</sup> See Erler: 1992, Fish: 2011 and compare now Yona: 2018.

<sup>28</sup> As Roskam: 2007a has shown, the Epicurean injunction to avoid political engagement was never absolute and allowed for various exceptions and escape clauses. Even so, Epicurus appears to have held that for most people in most circumstances, a life spent in politics will not be conducive to εὐταρξία – which means that the political activity of a large number of Roman Epicureans should still be considered, if not a problem, at least a phenomenon that calls for discussion. Roskam in this volume (Chapter 2) explores further what it meant to be an Epicurean in Cicero’s Rome.

work (and the near-total lack of information about the teaching of other Greek Epicureans active in Italy), claims of this nature are often inconclusive<sup>29</sup>; even so, the situatedness of Roman Epicureanism in a social and intellectual context quite different from that of Epicurus' original Garden is a point very much worth taking. Despite the school's well-known veneration of its founder, Epicureanism was not an unchanging monolith but developed over time, with first-century Rome and Italy providing a particularly intriguing chapter.

All three approaches discussed capture important aspects of the Epicurean scene at Rome. There are many examples of highly sophisticated orthodoxy and orthopraxy, of which Epicurus himself would have been proud. There are signs of developing new orthodoxies and Epicurean practices, whether homegrown or influenced by the thought of contemporary Greek teachers. And there certainly are cases of individuals who, despite their declared allegiance, did not, or not always or in all ways, conform to Epicurean doctrine and ethics. At the same time, all three approaches, adopting a somewhat narrow focus, risk losing sight of some aspects of Roman Epicureanism, simply because they do not fit their definitions.

I suggest that by freeing ourselves of the consistency requirement – our desire to have Epicureans think and behave in an Epicurean way, with any departure from orthodoxy considered an intellectual and ethical failure – we will be able to gain a wider and deeper appreciation of the phenomenon of Roman Epicureanism (and, indeed, Roman philosophy and the history of philosophy in general). When an upper-class Roman adopts the teachings of Epicurus for himself, it is obviously interesting to determine how sophisticated his philosophical theory and practice turn out to be, and how he goes about living according to the precepts of the Garden. It is equally interesting to see where he either consciously refuses or tacitly fails to adopt Epicurean teaching, or – to take a broader view – which aspects of Epicurean doctrine appeal to Roman society and which ones do not. Once we stop worrying whether particular individuals were “real” or even “good” Epicureans, we can gain a picture of Roman Epicureanism in all its originality, diversity and self-contradiction.

I would like to take this plea for an inclusive and holistic approach to the historical study of philosophy one step further, and this brings me back

<sup>29</sup> Since the editing of the fragments continues apace, the study of Philodemus is a rapidly developing field where new readings and interpretations are constantly being (re)formulated. As a result, there have been both exciting new insights into Philodemus' thought and fair amounts of controversy.

to Caesar. Was he an Epicurean or not? Even by my minimalist criterion, the answer – at least as based on the evidence we have – must surely be no. No ancient source comes even close to indicating that Caesar identified as an Epicurean, and we might therefore consider the case closed. I have been arguing, however, that Caesar held certain ideas about life and death that were informed by Epicurean doctrine: Being knowledgeable about Epicureanism, he apparently adopted and adapted some teachings for his own life without taking on board others, let alone declaring allegiance to the school as a whole. In doing so, Caesar was hardly alone. No doubt many educated Romans let themselves be influenced in one way or another by individual tenets of the various philosophical systems they encountered, just as human beings through the ages have picked and chosen from the philosophies, religions, political ideologies and other creeds available in their societies. The history of philosophy, properly understood, needs to consider not only philosophers and their declared followers, but also philosophy's manifold manifestations in human culture as a whole. Moving out from the core of doctrine, it needs to take account of practice and of expressions in a wide variety of media and contexts. Questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy will of necessity play an important role in this enterprise, but will not, on their own, succeed in unlocking the historical significance of philosophy in either a specific society or its development over time.

As the papers in this volume show, Epicureanism was extremely influential in ancient Rome during the last century BC and beyond, and this influence is on evidence not only in such philosophical writers as Lucretius and Cicero or such self-identified Epicureans as Cassius and Piso. It pervades Roman society as a whole, leaving its traces in poetry, oratory, inscriptions, art work and the thoughts and utterances of many people. One of them was Julius Caesar. Caesar was not an Epicurean, but he very much deserves a place in the history of Epicureanism.