

Problems in Epicurean Readings of Horace

The exact role of Epicurean thought in Horace's poetry remains a contentious topic. This paper will examine the poems in Horace's *Odes*, Cicero's explications of Epicurean views in *On Moral Ends*, and some secondary scholarship on the topic, and attempt to determine whether the underlying structure of Horace's thought on Epicureanism can be made out from the text. Ultimately, I will contend that assuming Horace had unwavering commitment to orthodox Epicurean thought is problematic, as the poems in *Odes* 1 vary in whether they are implicitly aligned with Epicurean views or implicitly contradict them.

It is indeed true that a number of poems in *Odes* 1 do reflect Epicurean views, and the influence of Epicurean thought on Horace in general can hardly be understated. For example, one of the most prominent positions Epicurus advocated is, according to Cicero's interpretation in *On Moral Ends*, to live with the acceptance that death will inevitably come. (Cicero 1.49, 1.62, 1.64). In *Odes* 1.11, we find a very clear example of the influence of these ideas on Horace: "*Tu ne quaesieris (scire nefas) quem mihi, quem tibi/finem di dederint, Leuconoe, nec Babylonios/temptaris numeros*" (1.11.1-3). The emphasis here on living in the moment, on doing away with any speculation on the fated coming of death so as to seek pleasure in the life before you, expresses a deeply Epicurean life-philosophy. A similar case is found in *Odes* 1.1, where Horace advises the reader: "*vina liques et spatio brevi/spem longam reseces*" (1.11.6-7). Here, Horace's injunction to the reader to cut back hope of a long life echoes a key tenet (as noted earlier) of the philosophy.

Another example is to be seen in Ode 1.1, where Horace mocks the merchant who, ever motivated by profits, is "*indocilis pauperiem pati*" (1.1.18). A good Epicurean, on the other

hand, would know that this is hardly the pathway in life that will bring the most pleasure (Cicero 1.59). 1.9, too, seems highly Epicurean in its outlook at points (1.9.13-25).

Reading these poems, it is easy to fall under the impression that Horace was an Epicurean in the strongest sense - but certain of the poems in *Odes*, at a closer look, develop ideas that are incompatible with the Epicurean corpus. This is even seen in *Odes* 1.1, despite its seeming Epicurean leanings. Here, we are given an account of poetry which very much appears to foreground its sacred aspects. The poem takes the form of a long list of other occupations and lifestyles, with (arguably) the implication being that they are banal or lesser in some deep sense, before coming to the poetic life that Horace leads (1.1.1-29). In this lifestyle, in contrast to those mentioned before, it is claimed that Horace's laurels "*sercenunt populo*" (1.1.32); he even frolics with lesser deities (1.1.31) in a "*gelidum nemus*" (1.1.30).

Crucially, this understanding of poetry as a sacred art, as supported by the allusions to gods and separation from the common people, stands in deep conflict with the orthodox Epicurean view of poetry. As noted by McCosker (2021) Epicurus viewed poetry much more harshly. For him, poetry was not sacred in any sense, and lacked even the potential for edification (40-41). This view, McCosker argues, was the standard one for Epicureans as long as the tradition persisted (51-52). It is an understanding of poetry entirely alien to the Horace of 1.1, and helps to demonstrate that Horace was not an orthodox Epicurean.

Another problem for a purely Epicurean reading of Horace is seen in the poems addressed to Virgil, which would seem to characterize a friendship beyond a mere "friendship of pleasure," as the Epicureans advocated for (Cicero 1.70). In *Odes* 1.3, Horace's attention to Virgil's safety is immediately apparent: "*navis, quae tibi creditum / debes Vergilium; finibus Atticis / reddas incolumem, precor, / et serves animae dimidium meae*" (1.3.5-9) Here, his

pleading to the ship that it return Virgil safely to land suggests that he does not value Virgil for merely instrumental, pleasure-generating purposes. Instead, we see Horace's genuine solicitude over the safety of his friend, extending beyond a "friendship of pleasure." Other poems that seem, at points, irreconcilable with Epicureanism, such as *Odes* 1.19, 1.22, and 1.24, will also be adduced to support this argument, as well as recent work done on the subject by Armstrong (2004) and Yona (2018).

Bibliography

- Armstrong, David. 2004. *Vergil, Philodemus, and the Augustans*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Cicero. 2001. *On Moral Ends*. Translated by Raphael Woolf, edited by Julia Annas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McOsker, Michael. 2021. *The Good Poem According to Philodemus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garrison, Daniel. 1991. *Horace Epodes and Odes: A New Annotated Latin Edition*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Yona, Sergio. 2018. *Epicurean Ethics in Horace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.