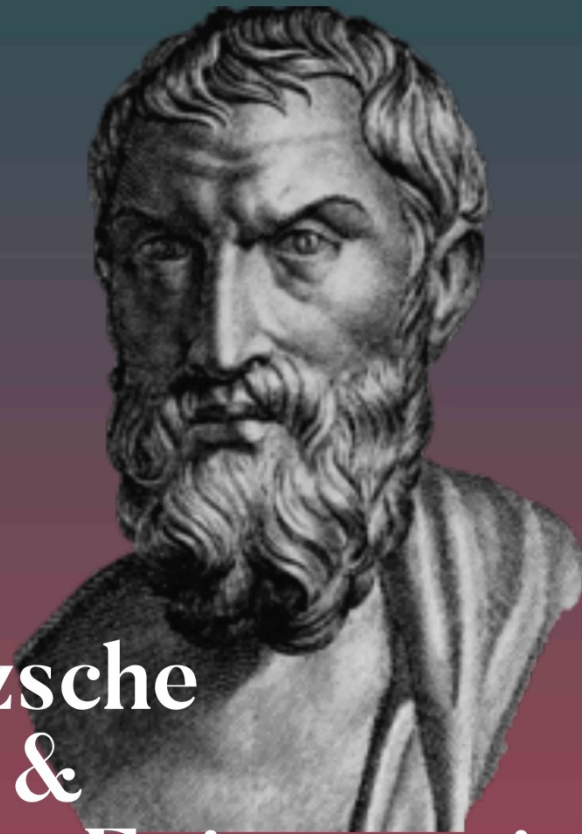


# The Agonist

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## Nietzsche & Epicureanism

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## Great Politics and the Unnoticed Life: Nietzsche and Epicurus on the Boundaries of Cultivation

Peter S. Groff

After virtually a century of neglect, Epicurus has in recent years come to be recognized for the significant influence he had on Nietzsche and the central, if ambivalent, place he holds in his thought.<sup>1</sup> Their affinities are many, but two points of intersection in particular deserve mention: a staunch opposition to metaphysico-moralistic interpretations of the world (Laurence Lampert situates them both in the “subterranean tradition” of philosophical naturalism)<sup>2</sup> and an understanding of philosophy as a ‘way of life’ (*bios*) or ‘art of living’ (*technē tou biou*).<sup>3</sup> As Keith Ansell-Pearson has pointed out, Epicurus looms largest in Nietzsche middle period works,

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<sup>1</sup> While Nietzsche’s relationship to Epicurus was sometimes acknowledged in passing, there were until recently relatively few sustained discussions of Nietzsche’s view of Epicurus. Some noteworthy exceptions prior to the twenty-first century are A. H. J. Knight, “Nietzsche and Epicurean Philosophy,” *Philosophy* Vol. 8, No. 32 (Oct 1933), pp. 431-45; Fritz Bornmann, “Nietzsches Epikur,” *Nietzsche Studien*, Band 13 (1984), pp. 177-88; Joseph P. Vincenzo, “Nietzsche and Epicurus,” *Man and World* 27, no. 4 (October 1994), pp. 383–397 and Marcin Milkowski, “Idyllic Heroism: Nietzsche’s View of Epicurus,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 15 (1998), pp. 70–79.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 444. On this affinity, see Howard Caygill, “Under the Epicurean Skies,” *Angelaki* 11, no. 3 (December 2006), pp. 107–115; Peter S. Groff, “Leaving the Garden: al-Rāzī and Nietzsche as Wayward Epicureans,” *Philosophy East and West* 64:4 (Oct. 2014), 983-1017; and most notably, Keith Ansell-Pearson’s recent work (see below).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Keith Ansell-Pearson, “True to the Earth: Nietzsche’s Epicurean Care of Self and World,” in *Nietzsche’s Therapeutic Teaching: For Individuals and Culture*, ed. Horst Hutter and Eli Friedland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 97–116, “Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing: Nietzsche and the Epicurean Tradition,” *Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Anthony O’Hear, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 74 (2014), pp. 237-64, and “‘We Are Experiments’: Nietzsche on Morality and Authenticity,” in *Nietzsche and the Becoming of Life*, ed. Vanessa Lemm (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 277–299, and “The Need for Small Doses: Nietzsche, Fanaticism, and Epicureanism,” in *Aurore, tournant dans l’œuvre de Nietzsche?* ed. Celine Denat and Patrick Wotling (Reims: ÉPURE, 2015), pp. 193-227. On the recuperation of this ancient model of philosophy as way of life or art of living, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. and intro. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), and *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). See also Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986) and *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Alexander Nehamas’ *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

where select aspects of his thought and life are valorized and appropriated: his vitality, modesty, “heroic-idyllic” mode of philosophizing, therapeutic technique of multiple explanations, embrace of a deathbound soul and rejection of an afterlife, pre-emptive war on Christianity and anticipation of a modern scientific, de-deified worldview.<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses on one aspect of Epicurus’ teachings that has as yet received little attention: his controversial advice to “live unnoticed” (*lathe biōsas*).<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche was familiar with this credo and took it to heart, but it ultimately stood at odds with, and lost out to, his irresistible temptation to engage in great politics. The following discussion is an attempt to track Nietzsche’s conflicted appreciation for the virtues of the unnoticed life.

### A Buried Epicurean Teaching

As traditionally interpreted, the *lathe biōsas* doctrine counsels us to avoid the political life and opt instead for a quiet, sequestered life of contemplation. Most of what we know about it comes to us through doxographies and later critics of Epicurus, but one can nevertheless find similar

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<sup>4</sup> On the continuing vitality of Epicurus’ thought, see AOM 48 and WS 227; on his modesty, see WS 192 and GS 45; on his greatness and heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing see WS 295 and WS 332, as well as Ansell-Pearson, “Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing” and Milkowski, “Idyllic Heroism”; on his higher cultural-spiritual status compared to other Hellenistic philosophers, see HH 275 and GS 306; on his therapeutic technique of multiple explanations (*pleonachos tropos*) see WS 7 and GS 375, as well as Wilson H. Shearin, “Misunderstanding Epicurus? A Nietzschean Identification,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 45.1 (Spring 2014), pp. 68-83; on his embrace of a deathbound soul and rejection of an afterlife see D 72 and Z P, 6, as well as Morgan Rempel “Daybreak 72: Nietzsche, Epicurus and the After Death,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43.2 (Autumn 2012), pp. 49-68; on his pre-emptive war on Christianity, see A 58 and KSA 13:16[15]; on his anticipation of a modern scientific, de-deified worldview, see HH 68 and Groff, “Leaving the Garden”; for an Epicurean anticipation of the death of God, see WS 84. Nietzsche’s later writings take an increasingly unsympathetic view Epicurus, specifically his atomistic materialism (GS 109, 373, BGE 12, TI, “Reason,” 5), his hedonism (BGE 225), and his sickness and decadence (BT P4, GS P2 and 370, GM III.6 and 17, TI “Morality,” 3, A 30, KSA 11:25[95]).

<sup>5</sup> Herman Usener, *Epicurea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Fragment 551. For the most comprehensive discussion of the *lathe biōsas* teaching, see Geert Roskam, *‘Live Unnoticed’: On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). *Lathe* has been rendered variously as “hidden,” “inconspicuously,” “in obscurity,” “unobtrusively,” “secretly,” etc.

sentiments scattered throughout the extant remains of his corpus.<sup>6</sup> For instance, he repeatedly warns against the limits of attaining security through other human beings (*asphaleia ex anthrōpōn*).<sup>7</sup> He urges his adherents not to seek happiness in fame or honor and to shun the multitude.<sup>8</sup> He contends that “the purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many.”<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, he encourages his followers to “free themselves from the prison of daily duties and politics” and not to get involved with the political life (*me politeuesthai*).<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Epicurus’ doctrine of the hidden life was wildly unpopular in its time and has remained so to this day. It ran against the grain not only of common opinion (which placed great emphasis on traditional civic values, as well as reputation, honor, and fame), but also against the views of most philosophers. Socrates himself admittedly eschewed political offices, but nonetheless provided an even greater public service through his zetetic activities in the marketplace—ultimately, at the cost of his own life. Plato, envisioning the ideal coincidence of political power and wisdom in the wake of Socrates’ death, placed philosophers at the very center of the city as its rulers.<sup>11</sup> For Aristotle, the human being is the *zōon politikon*: human

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<sup>6</sup> As Roskam points out, “One of the sad consequences of the manuscript tradition of Epicurus’ works is the that the maxim *lathe biōsas* has in the end applied its own advice. For indeed, it nowhere appears in the extant writings of Epicurus, leading, as it were, to its own hidden life, far away from inquisitive or boring scholars” (33).

<sup>7</sup> *Principle Doctrines* 6 and 7 (henceforth PD).

<sup>8</sup> *Vatican Sentences* 64 (cf. PD 7) and 81 (henceforth VS).

<sup>9</sup> PD 14. All translations from *The Epicurus Reader*, trans and ed. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). Cf. Usener, fragment 187.

<sup>10</sup> VS 58 and Diogenes Laertius 10.119 (henceforth DL); cf. DL 10.10: “So gentlemanly was [Epicurus] that he did not even participate in political life.”

<sup>11</sup> He also contrived to mold existing rulers into something resembling a philosopher king, e.g., his ill-fated engagement with Dionysius II—which led Epicurus mockingly to describe Plato as “golden” (*chrusuon*) and his followers as “flatters of Dionysius” (*Dionysiokolakes*) i.e., tyrants’ sycophants. See DL 10.8; cf. BGE 7.

flourishing is simply impossible shorn of certain political advantages and perks, and even the optimal life of contemplation seems to require recognition and acknowledgment—an intellectual fame of sorts—from a community of expert knowers. And the Stoics, despite their famous withdrawal into the ‘inner citadel’, nonetheless acknowledged the duties we have to our communities as rational and virtuous beings, and so saw an ethical obligation to take part in politics.

Epicurus’ unapologetically apolitical stance represents such a striking divergence from the norm that it is sometimes explained away in historicist or psychologistic terms, e.g., as a function of the political malaise following Alexander the Great (the retreat from the polis to the individual), or a shortcoming of his character (excessive gentleness, softness, etc), or perhaps some pivotal traumatic episode that soured him on politics once and for all. But bearing in mind the comparably heretical status of Epicurus’ other teachings within the tradition, there’s no reason to assume that his rejection of the political requires an ad hoc explanation. As Geert Roskam has argued, it is nothing more nor less than a reasoned philosophical teaching proceeding from his fundamental commitment to pleasure as the highest good. Specifically, Roskam links it to three components of Epicurus’ ethical thought: (1) his therapeutic attempt to cure the soul of painful irrational fears and vain desires, (2) his analysis of desire (and consequent recognition that the desires for fame, honor, power, influence, or even to contribute to the public good are neither natural nor necessary), and (3) his prudential calculus of pleasure.<sup>12</sup> Put simply, if one seeks tranquility of the soul (*ataraxia*) and wishes to minimize mental anxiety, a private life off the radar is far preferable to a public, political one. But if the human being is for Epicurus not necessarily a political animal, we nonetheless require some

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<sup>12</sup> Roskam, pp. 34-35.

degree of sociality to lead good lives. Hence Epicurus' Garden: a small, relatively independent community of friends hidden away from the city and its empty distractions, engaged in revivifying philosophical therapy, cultivating themselves into god-like beings who live lives of quite, simple, stable, tranquil pleasure in accordance with the "deep-set boundary stone" of nature.<sup>13</sup> To understand the radical significance of the Garden for the philosophical life, it is necessary to place it against the background of Epicurus' canonical antipode Plato, and his own attempt to resolve the tension between philosophy and the city. As suggested above, Plato attempts, in the *Republic* at least, to accomplish this by dragging the philosophers from the margins of the *polis* to its very center as rulers. But as Socrates and his comrades construct their "Fine and Noble City" in speech, an even more beautiful counter-image repeatedly presents itself to them: the ancient dream of the "Blessed Isles," where philosophers can dwell in contemplative peace apart from the wearisome, soul-grinding business of the state.<sup>14</sup> The best Socrates can do, though, is to dangle this primordial utopia in front of the philosopher-guardians as a vague

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. DL 10.121b: "[The sage] will found a school, but not so as to draw a crowd." On the "deep-set boundary stone" (*alte terminus haerens*), which indicates the necessary limitations of nature according to which we should think and live (and thus rules out vain fears and desires), see Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* I.77, cf. I.596, II.1087, III.787, 794, 990, and 1014.

<sup>14</sup> The Blessed Isles (*makarōn nesoi*) are in Greek myth an eschatological paradise located in the far Western streams of Okeanos where the elite few – originally heroes, later the righteous, in Platonic dialogues, philosophers—live eternally and happily. They begin as a conception of the afterlife (in opposition to Hades; later merged with Elysium), but in some versions become merely a place where life is easiest and best for mortals on earth. In the *Republic*, they become a kind of sop thrown to the philosopher-rulers: Socrates promises that after they have discharged their civic duty, they will be allowed to return to their contemplative life, this time on the Isles of the Blessed, while new guardians take over and pay back their own debt to the city (*Republic* 540b). Whether the philosophers ever finally liberate themselves from the tyranny of the city hinges on whether we understand this concession as the prospect of a happy retirement or simply a blithe recognition of their eventual death. An earlier remark made by Socrates (*Republic* 519c) would suggest that they function as at most a kind of afterworldly reward. For other references to the Blessed Isles in Plato's dialogues, see *Symposium* 179e, 180b and *Gorgias* 523b, 524a. For pre-Platonic sources, see Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 167-173, Pindar, *Olympian Odes*, 2.68-80, and Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.26.1. See Eckart Olshausen, "Makarōn Nesoi" and Christine Sourvinou Inwood, "Elysium," in *Brill's New Pauly Encyclopedia of the Ancient World: Antiquity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 2006).

promissory note while they grudgingly discharge their political duties. Epicurus' Garden is in effect the ancient dream of the Blessed Isles made concrete, in the here and now.<sup>15</sup>

### Great Politics and the Platonic Philosopher-Legislator

There is an obvious sense in which Nietzsche can be said to share Epicurus' dismissive views on the political. For instance, he repeatedly distances himself from the interests of the state even in his early writings: "he who has the *furor philosophicus* within him," he writes, "will already no longer have time for the *furor politicus* and will wisely refrain from reading the newspapers every day, let alone working for a political party" (SE 7, p. 181).<sup>16</sup> And Nietzsche is forever reminding us of his disdain for the petty nationalistic politics of Bismarck's *Reich*, pointing out that the growth of political and military power inevitably comes at the cost of cultural degeneration and "spiritual flattening" (*geistige Verflachung*).<sup>17</sup> In these respects, Nietzsche can perhaps fairly describe himself as "the last *antipolitical* German" (EH "Wise," 3).<sup>18</sup> Of course,

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<sup>15</sup> On this, see Bernard Frischer, *The Sculpted Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> I use Walter Kaufmann's translations for Penguin/Vintage and R.J. Hollingdale's translations for Cambridge University Press, with occasional emendations in favor of greater literalness. The single exception is Graham Parkes' recent translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for Oxford. Translations of passages from the *Nachlass* or letters are my own unless otherwise noted. Cf. SE 6, p. 165, where he defends a conception of education (*Bildung*) "that makes one a solitary, that proposes goals that transcend money and money-making, that takes a long time," characterizing it (affirmatively, in spite of popular opinion) as "'refined egoism' and 'immoral cultural Epicureanism'."

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. TI, "Germans," *passim*; cf. BGE 241.

<sup>18</sup> On this, see Peter Bergmann, *Nietzsche, "The Last Antipolitical German"* (Bloomington, IN: Indian University Press, 1987). I set aside here the deeper and more difficult question whether Nietzsche does have a political philosophy in any traditional sense, and if so, how it ought to be understood. The literature on this question is steadily growing and far too voluminous to cite comprehensively, but see e.g. Tracy Strong, *Nietzsche and Politics of Transfiguration* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1975/2000), Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1995), Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997), Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), as well as three excellent recent anthologies: *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy*



being *antipolitisch* is not the same as being *unpolitisch*—apolitical, indifferent to politics—an attitude that arguably aligns more closely with Epicurus’ maxim. Put differently, the relevant choice for Nietzsche is not between politics or no politics, but between small politics (*kleine Politik*) and great politics (*grosse Politik*).<sup>19</sup> Politics becomes great when an actual “revaluation of all values” is at stake, when it involves a cultural “war of spirits” (*Geisterkrieg*) rather than merely a crude power conflict over legal systems, economic policies, material resources or national boundaries (EH, “Destiny,” 1).

“It is only with me,” Nietzsche famously claims, “that the earth knows *great politics*” (ibid.). An immodest, self-mythologizing claim perhaps, since elsewhere he recognizes that initiating such world-transforming revaluations is precisely the true task of the *philosopher*:

*Genuine philosophers, however, are commanders and legislators [Befehlende und Gesetzgeber]: they say, “thus it shall be!” They first determine the Whither and For What of humankind . . . With a creative hand they reach for the future and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their “knowing” is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—will to power. (BGE 211)<sup>20</sup>*

Interestingly, in the *Nachlass* drafts for this passage from 1884-85, Nietzsche even points to Plato and Muhammad as paradigmatic examples of commanders and legislators, despite the residual self-deception under which they were laboring. That is to say, Nietzsche sees these

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*for Political Thought*, ed. Herman W. Siemens and Vasti Roodt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), and *Nietzsche as Political Philosopher*, eds. Manuel Knoll and Barry Stocker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche’s use of the the expression *grosse Politik* is sparse and not exactly univocal. Sometimes it’s loosely associated with any agent—princes, rulers, masses—that is spurred by the need for the feeling of power (D 189); sometimes it’s used ironically and in scare quotes to describe the shallow, petty, provincial power politics of the *Reich* (BGE 241, 254); sometimes it has to do with the “the struggle for the dominion of the world,” which at first may seem to indicate simply a more ambitious transnational European or world political power conflict (BGE 208). His final usage of it, however, suggests that it ultimately signifies a spiritual-cultural struggle for the future of the human (EH, “Destiny,” 1).

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche grants this privileged status to the philosopher even in his early writings. See e.g. SE 3, p. 144; cf. Z III, “On Old and New Tablets,” 2.

predecessors as involved in the same sort of transformative world-historical task that he himself is qua philosopher; they are simply less self-aware of the radically creative nature of their legislations.<sup>21</sup> And indeed, it seems particularly appropriate for Nietzsche to place himself in the lineage of Plato here, since the conception of philosophers as “commanders and legislators”—even *prophets* in the manner of Zarathustra—is itself a distinctly Platonic idea. Nietzsche’s nomothetic great politics can thus be understood as a late modern radicalization of Platonic political philosophy: specifically, the ideal coincidence of wisdom and political power epitomized by the philosopher-king.<sup>22</sup> His new philosophical legislators, however, do not pretend to transmit some preexistent universal Good to us, nor are they trying simply to realign the human soul with the rational and moral order of things; rather, they are bringing into being a new table of goods according to which humanity can live, and in doing so are experimentally attempting to transform humanity. They must accordingly prepare “great ventures and over-all attempts of discipline and cultivation [*Zucht und Züchtung*]” in order to determine the future of the human (BGE 203). This ambitious project of transfiguration is crystalized in the dramatic image of Zarathustra attempting to produce his *Übermensch* from the ugly, uncarved stone of humanity (Z II, “Upon the Isles of the Blessed”).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> There are of course other differences too: their teachings are afterworldly, ostensibly universal, transcultural and ahistorical, etc.

<sup>22</sup> On Nietzsche as Platonic political philosopher, see Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 174-191, Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), and *Nietzsche’s Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), Horst Hutter, *Shaping the Future: Nietzsche’s New Regime of the Soul and Its Ascetic Practices* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005) and Groff, “Wisdom and Violence,” pp. 71-75.

<sup>23</sup> See BGE 62 and 225 for similar sculptural metaphors. Cf. Z III, “On Old and New Tablets,” 29: “And blessedness it must seem to you to press your hand upon millennia as upon wax . . .”

### Concealment and the Discreet Therapeutic Philosopher

Yet Platonic as this all sounds, one can nevertheless find deeper Epicurean reservations in Nietzsche's thought even here. For the Nietzschean philosopher-lawgiver is a shadowy, unobtrusive, hidden figure who dwells far from the centers of conventional political power, shunning fame and the recognition of the masses.<sup>24</sup> As Zarathustra says in his initial condemnation of the city: "Around inventors of new values the world revolves—invisibly [*unsichtbar*] it revolves. Yet around play-actors the people and fame revolve: that is 'the way of the world'" (Z I, "On the Flies of the Marketplace"). This same line is repeated later on after he and his students have abandoned the city, albeit with a small alteration: "Not around the inventors of new noise," he says, "but around the inventors of new values does the world revolve, *inaudibly* [*unhörbar*] it revolves." (Z II, "On Great Events").<sup>25</sup> A powerful but confusing image: what would it mean for the world to revolve "invisibly" or "inaudibly" around something or someone? It's difficult to envision. The sense seems rather to be that it is the inventors of new values who themselves remain invisible or inaudible to the world, even as they shape it. Certainly Nietzsche saw himself that way as he wandered anonymously throughout southern Europe, and despite his occasional frustrated desire for recognition, believed—in a residually Epicurean spirit—that it was probably for the best.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche's early

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<sup>24</sup> A beautiful aphorism from *Daybreak* entitled "Do not perish unnoticed," (D 435) would at first seem to suggest an explicit repudiation of Epicurus' teaching, insofar as his counsel to live unnoticed was often understood as entailing that we should die unnoticed (*lathe apobiōsas*). However, D 435 has more to do with the ways in which we gradually get ground down to nothing by the seemingly small, everyday, repetitive details of our lives about which we are inadequately cognizant. In this sense it should be understood against the background of passages like WS 5-6, 16, D 553, and EH, "Clever," 10—Epicurean passages which emphasize the importance of attending to the "closest," "smallest and most everyday things," e.g. diet, housing, clothing, nutrition, place, climate, recreation, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Z II, "The stillest hour": "It is the stillest [*stillsten*] words that bring on the storm. Thoughts that come on dove's feet guide the world."

<sup>26</sup> See letters to Heinrich Köselitz, Aug. 26, 1883 (KSB 6, 436) and Dec 10, 1885 (KSB 7, 121-22).

retirement from the academy in 1879 and the inconspicuous, nomadic regimen that shaped the next ten years of his life were prompted not only by chronic health issues, but by his growing Epicurean inclination to free himself from the prison of daily duties and politics and become a genuine philosopher.<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that his withdrawal from that world left him literally stateless.<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned earlier, it is in Nietzsche's middle period works (1878-1882) that one finds the richest trove of Epicurean insights, and the siren call of the sequestered life is no exception. In describing the "prudence" of free spirits Nietzsche observes,

[They] will easily be content with, for example, a minor office or an income that just enables them to live; for they will organize their life in such a way that a great transformation of external circumstances, even an overturning of the political order, does not overturn their life with it. Upon all these things they expend as little energy as possible. . . . There is in [the free spirit's] way of living and thinking a *refined heroism* which disdains to offer itself to the veneration of the great masses, as his coarser brother does, and tends to go silently [*still*] through the world and out of the world. Whatever labyrinths he may stray through, among whatever rocks his stream may make its torturous way—if he emerges into the open air he will travel his road bright, light and almost soundlessly [*geräuschlos*] and let sunshine play down into his very depths. (HH 291)

The mood and language of this passage is deeply Epicurean: the emphasis on prudence (*Vorsicht*, a common German rendering of *phronēsis*, which is for Epicurus the root of all other virtues), the desideratum of minimizing interaction with and dependency upon the city, the strategy of creating stabilizing bulwarks against social and political disruption, the evocation of

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<sup>27</sup> On this, see Paolo D'Iorio, *Nietzsche's Journey to Sorrento: Genesis of the Philosophy of the Free Spirit*, tr. Sylvia Mae Gorelick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Ostensibly an account of Nietzsche's initial voyage to Sorrento during his year of sick leave to live in a friendship community with Malwida von Meysenbug, Paul Rée and Albert Brenner, it provides a rich and insightful portrait of the turn in Nietzsche's life from disenchanted university professor to nomadic philosopher. His middle period works—especially *Human, All Too Human*—are strewn with warnings against the petty, obsessive *vita activa* of modern life; see e.g. HH 283: "As at all times, so too now, human beings are divided into the slaves and the free: for he who does not have two-thirds of his day to himself is a slave, no matter what else he may be: statesman, business, official, scholar."

<sup>28</sup> As D'Iorio points out, due to an unusual combination of circumstances, Nietzsche was by this time no longer a citizen of any country—an appropriate status for a self-proclaimed "good European" (D'Iorio, p. 9).

refined heroism,<sup>29</sup> the avoidance of the masses, going silently-soundlessly through and out of the world (*lathe biōsas, lathe apobiōsas*), and the themes of open air and sunlight.<sup>30</sup> But who is the “coarser brother” (*gröberer Bruder*) of this Epicurean free spirit who seeks popular veneration? The meddling Socratic gadfly? The Platonic philosopher ruler? The vain Peripatetic seeking recognition as a knower? More likely, it is either the theatrical Cynic- or the Stoic-type, both of whom Nietzsche elsewhere compares unfavorably to the more nuanced, cultural and spiritual Epicurean.<sup>31</sup>

One finds reminders of this Epicurean prudence even in the post-Zarathustran works. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, he counsels his nascent free spirits in similar terms:

Take care, philosophers and friends, of knowledge, and beware of martyrdom! Of suffering “for the truth’s sake” [in the manner of Socrates, Spinoza, Giordano Bruno, etc!] . . . Rather, go away. Flee into concealment [*Verborgene*]. And have your masks and your subtlety, that you may be mistaken for what you are not, or feared a little. And don’t forget the garden, the garden with golden trelliswork. And have people around you who are as a garden . . . choose the *good* solitude, the free, playful, light solitude that gives you too the right to remain good in some sense. (BGE 25)

Apart from the obvious Epicurean tropes of withdrawal and concealment—earlier in the same book, he describes Epicurus as “hidden away [*versteckt sass*] in his little garden” (BGE 7)—it

<sup>29</sup> Cf. SE 6, p. 165 and WS 295. On Nietzsche’s appropriation of Epicurus’ “refined egoism” as a kind of naturalistic care of the self, see Ansell-Pearson, “True to the Earth,” pp. 97-116; for an excellent discussion of Epicurus as exemplifying the “heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing,” see Ansell-Pearson, “Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing,” pp. 237-63. See also Marcin Milkowski, “Idyllic Heroism: Nietzsche’s View of Epicurus,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 15 (1998), pp. 70–79.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche often associates Epicurus with sunlight (specifically a clear, bright exterior light); see e.g. WS 295, WS 332 and GS 45. Cf. implicitly Epicurean passages where Nietzsche describes his own predilections, e.g. D 553.

<sup>31</sup> See GS 306, which purports to compare the Stoic and the Epicurean as types. The passage has an inescapably autobiographical or even confessional tone: “The Epicurean selects the situation, the persons, and even the events that suit his extremely irritable, intellectual constitution; he gives up all others, which means almost everything, because they would be too strong and heavy for him to digest. . . the Epicurean would rather dispense with [the Stoic’s theatrical cultivation to insensitivity], having his ‘garden’! For those with whom fate attempts improvisations—those who live in violent ages and depend on sudden and mercurial people—Stoicism may indeed be advisable. But anyone foresees more or less that fate permits him to spin a long thread does well to make Epicurean arrangements. That is what all those have always done whose work is of the spirit.” (GS 306). Cf. HH 275, where the Epicurean type is favored over the more ham-fisted Cynic.

should be noted that the figure of Epicurus is sometimes associated in Nietzsche's writings with having an unknown or obscured identity: being mistaken for what one is not.<sup>32</sup> And note that even the emphasis on solitude here—an ascetic practice that looms large throughout Nietzsche's corpus—is construed in Epicurean terms: the “good” and “light” solitude is the garden, where one is not entirely alone and never lonely, because there are always healing friends and kindred spirits.<sup>33</sup>

Sometimes this Epicurean withdrawal-concealment strategy is cast as a necessary prologue to more ambitious cultural or even political projects: a desire to be useful on a grander scale. In an aphorism entitled “*The buried*” (*Vergrabenen*), he writes,

We withdraw [*zurückziehen*] into concealment [*Verborgene*]: but not out of any kind of personal ill-humor, as though the political and social situation of the present day were not good enough for us, but because through our withdrawal we want to economize and assemble forces of which culture will *later* have great need, and more so if this present remains *this* present and as such fulfils *its* task. We are accumulating capital and seeking to make it secure: but, as in times of great peril, to do that we have to *bury* it. (WS 229)<sup>34</sup>

The predominant emphasis in the middle period writings, however, is on a more modest task: cooperative therapy and pluralistic experiments in self-cultivation among a small elite circle of

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<sup>32</sup> On Epicurus' mistaken identity, see WS 227, GS 45 and BGE 7; cf. Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, Aug. 3, 1883 (KSB 6, 418).

<sup>33</sup> On solitude in Nietzsche, see Peter H. Van Ness, “Nietzsche on Solitude: The Spiritual Discipline of the Godless,” *Philosophy Today* 32.4 (Winter 1988), pp. 346-358 and Hutter, pp. 47-74. As D'Iorio points out (*Nietzsche's Journey*, p. 16), the original projected title for *Human, All Too Human* was “The Light Life” (*Das leichte Leben*). The initial sketches from 1876 are again strikingly Epicurean in spirit, describing an “art of living” (*Lebenskunst*) that aims not at lightening life (i.e., making it easy for us), and certainly not at making it even harder (so as to offer afterwards some supreme soteriological recipe), but rather helping us “to take life lightly,” like the gods, standing before the truth in vivid rapture. See KSA 8:16[7], 17[74] and 17[85].

<sup>34</sup> Cf. HH 285, which casts the Epicurean need for contemplative repose (*Ruhe*) in comparable terms. Zarathustra's multiple withdrawals into solitude, away from both the cities and his own disciples, are framed in this way as well. On the notion of a provisional, strategic withdrawal into Epicurean friendship communities in order later to engage in great politics, see Hutter, p. 5.

like-minded free spirits.<sup>35</sup> This is often juxtaposed with the imprudent desire (rooted in sympathy or pity) to eliminate danger and suffering from the lives of others. An aphorism in *Daybreak* concludes:

the question itself remains unanswered whether one is of *more use* to another by immediately leaping to his side and *helping* him – which can in any case be only superficial where it does not become a tyrannical seizing and transforming – or by *creating* something out of oneself that the other can behold with pleasure: a beautiful, restful, self-enclosed [*abgeschlossenen*] garden perhaps, with high walls against storms and the dust of the roadway but also a hospitable gate. (D 174)<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, the Platonic strategy of “tyrannical seizing and transforming” is considered here, but quickly passed over in favor of a more voluntary, private Epicurean cultivation. A year later in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche returns to this idea and unpacks it more carefully. Pointing out the ways in which the causes and inner logic of a person’s suffering are for the most part inaccessible or incomprehensible to others—and thus why pity is an ineffective and even counter-productive response to suffering—he encourages philosophical therapists to prioritize their own self-discovery and cultivation and then, by extension, focus only on kindred souls who they can genuinely understand and help. The primary concern is never to lose “one’s own way”:

How is it possible to keep to one’s own way? Constantly, some clamor or other calls us aside; rarely does our eye behold anything that does not require us to drop our own preoccupation instantly to help. I know, there are a hundred decent and praiseworthy ways of losing *my own way*, and they are truly highly “moral”!

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<sup>35</sup> On this see Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche’s Psychology* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1994), esp. pp. 157-203, Michael Ure, *Nietzsche’s Therapy: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), and of course, Ansell-Pearson’s many article and chapters on Nietzsche and Epicurus.

<sup>36</sup> Cf BGE 25, where one’s friends are the garden in a “*good solitude*”; here one becomes the healing, inspiring garden for other like-minded spirits. See also D 194, which similarly contends that instead of offering moral prescriptions for everyone, “One should seek out limited circles and seek to promote morality for them . . . Great success, however, is reserved above all to him who wants educate, not everybody or even limited circles, but a single individual . . .” This more modest, conservative, selective approach to transfiguration can be seen in other passages from *Daybreak*, e.g., D 534, where he emphasizes “small doses” rather than great revolutions, or D 462, where he advocates “slow cures” of the soul, focusing again on the overlooked “little” things (cf. WS 5-6, 16, D 435, 553). On this theme, see Ansell-Pearson, “The Need for Small Doses.”

Indeed, those who now preach the morality of pity even take the view that precisely this and only this is moral—to lose one’s *own* way in order to come to the assistance of a neighbor. I know just as certainly that I only need to expose myself to the sight of some genuine distress and I am lost. And if a suffering friend said to me, “Look, I am about to die; please promise to die with me,” I should promise it; and the sight of a small mountain tribe fighting for its liberty would persuade me to offer it my hand and my life . . . All such arousing of pity and calling for help is secretly seductive, for our “own way” is too hard and demanding and too remote from the love and gratitude of others, and we do not really mind escaping from it . . . while I shall keep silent [*verschweigen*, i.e., hide, conceal, keep secret] about some points, I do not want to remain silent about my morality which says to me: Live in seclusion [*Lebe im Verborgenen*, i.e., live secretly, discreetly, in hiding or concealment] so that you *can* live for yourself. Live in *ignorance* about what seems most important to your age. Between yourself and today lay the skin of at least three centuries. And the clamor of today, the noise of wars and revolutions should be a mere murmur for you. You will also wish to help – but only those whose distress you *understand* entirely because they share with you one suffering and one hope – your friends – and only in the manner in which you help yourself. (GS 338)<sup>37</sup>

The conclusion to this passage (“live in concealment so that you can live for yourself”) is an elegant summation of the *lathe biōsas* maxim, and more generally of the kind of refined egoism that drew Nietzsche to Epicurus.

Even when the theme of philosophical *therapeia* is expressed in a more generous, expansive and inclusive mood, the Epicurean watchwords remain. In one such passage, Nietzsche speaks of the desire to “give away one’s spiritual house and possessions” in assisting those working on themselves.<sup>38</sup> Such a therapist, Nietzsche suggests,

is not merely not looking for fame: he would even like to escape gratitude, for gratitude is too importunate and lacks respect for solitude [*Einsamkeit*] and silence [*Stillschweigen*]. What he seeks is to live nameless [*namenlos*] and lightly mocked at, too humble to awaken envy or hostility . . . To be like a little inn which rejects no one who is in need but which is afterwards forgotten or ridiculed! . . . Forever in a kind of love and self-enjoyment! To be in possession of a dominion and at the same time concealed [*verborgen*] and renouncing! To lie continually in the sunshine and gentleness of grace, and yet to know that the paths

<sup>37</sup> Cf. SE I, *passim* on the theme of not losing oneself.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Z I, “On the Bestowing Virtue.”



that rise up to the sublime are close by—That would be a life! That would be a reason for a long life! (D 449)

The emphasis on (relative) solitude, namelessness, silence and concealment is obviously Epicurean, as is the indirect utility of refined egoism, the sunshine motif, the reference to the sublime, and even the evocation of a long life.<sup>39</sup> But in a *Nachlass* note from Autumn 1880, we find a link that tethers this passage even more closely to Epicurus. There he offers a strikingly resonant portrait of the type sketched out above: those who are in possession of a dominion and at the same time concealed and renouncing. “I found strength,” he writes, “in the very places one does not look for it, in simple, gentle and helpful human beings, without the slightest inclination to rule. . . powerful natures *dominate*, that is a necessity, even if they do not move one finger. And when they bury [*vergraben*] themselves, in their lifetime, in a garden house [*Gartenhaus*]!” (KSA 9:6[206]).<sup>40</sup> Once again, one feels the magnetism of the hidden Epicurus, and with it, Nietzsche’s desire to play a similar role.

### **The Hidden, Helpful Life**

To engage with Nietzsche’s writings as though he’s offering a series of claims that might be true or false is to lose the power of philosophy as a way of life and indeed, to overlook the importance of philosophers as interlocutors, educators and examples.<sup>41</sup> It is tempting,

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<sup>39</sup> On the Epicurean compatibility between self-realization and helping select others, see D 174 and GS 338, as well as Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Beyond Selfishness: Epicurean Ethics in Nietzsche and Guyau,” in *Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Bamford (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), pp. 49-68; on sunshine as an Epicurean symbol, see again WS 295, WS 332 and GS 45; on Epicurus and the sublime, see WS 295; on the association of Epicureanism and a long life, see GS 306.

<sup>40</sup> On Epicurus’ “powerful nature,” see Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, July 1, 1883 (KSB 6, 389); cf. Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, Jan. 22, 1879 (KSB 5, 383). On the image of being “buried” and “concealed” in an Epicurean sense, see WS 229; cf. D 449 and BGE 25.

<sup>41</sup> On this, see SE 1, p. 129-30 and 3, p. 136-37.

when observing Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran descent into great politics, to conclude that he somehow lost his way—that he should have stuck with his Epicurean experiments in private self-cultivation and not worried about redeeming humanity—but what ultimately is the point of such criticisms? Nietzsche made the moves he made and there's no sense in pronouncing upon what he should have said. But that doesn't mean we have to give up what Nietzsche himself abandoned. Nietzsche took what he wanted from the Greeks in the construction of his own art of living, and we in turn can take what we want from him.<sup>42</sup> Some of it will be useful to us, some of it not. I am of the opinion that his middle period experiments, when he was closest in spirit to Epicurus, are the ones we can profit from the most.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche is most helpful when he wants least to be noticed, when he is discreet and modest like the powerful philosopher-therapist hidden in the garden: “in possession of a dominion,” as he says, “and at the same time concealed and renouncing” (D 449, cf. KSA 9:6[206]). This is the Nietzsche who is the true educator, who liberates and invigorates and augments the lives of his readers. George Eliot, that other great modern Epicurean, perhaps put it best when she observed that

The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See e.g. KSA 9:15[59].

<sup>43</sup> In this respect, while acknowledging the reality of a more robustly political Nietzsche, my approach obviously inclines towards the sort of apolitical, privatized readings of Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 242–56 (cf. p. 418) and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. chap. 4.

<sup>44</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York, Harper Collins, 2015), p. 838.