

**CLINAMEN, NECESSITY AND MODERN RECEPTIONS OF  
EPICUREANISM: THE FIGURE OF SPINOZA<sup>1</sup>**

[CLINAMEN, NECESSIDADE E RECEPÇÕES MODERNAS DO EPICURISMO: A  
FIGURA DE ESPINOSA]

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**Abstract:** Early modern readings of Epicureanism carried various prejudices and the term epicurean often designated an impious and potentially dangerous thinker. This was the case for Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza whose contemporaries compared his doctrine to Epicureanism on several occasions. However, how accurate would it be to affirm that Spinoza's philosophy belongs to the neo-epicurean tradition? We find such a comparison in many 17th and 18th century texts, especially in works written by critics of his thought, such as François Fénelon or Jean La Placette. Epicurean doctrine on chance was compared to Spinoza's theory on necessity, but despite the prejudices of the comparison, both Epicurus's and Spinoza's philosophies had an important influence on the Enlightenment, namely on French materialists. In our paper, we proceed to an analysis of this comparison and shed light on one of the most influential receptions of Epicurus's philosophy in modernity. In this perspective, we show their inherent relation and focus more particularly on their modal theories; we thus examine the reasons why- contrary to other cases- the comparison was based less on ethical and mostly on metaphysical matters and we show at what extent it is legitimate.

**Keywords:** Clinamen. Epicureanism. Lucretius. Modal metaphysics. Necessity. Spinoza.

**Resumo:** As primeiras leituras modernas do epicurismo carregavam vários preconceitos e o termo epicurista frequentemente designava um pensador ímpio e potencialmente perigoso. Este foi o caso do filósofo holandês Baruch de Espinosa, cujos contemporâneos compararam sua doutrina ao epicurismo em várias ocasiões. No entanto, quão correto seria afirmar que a filosofia de Espinosa pertence à tradição neo-epicurista? Encontramos tal comparação em muitos textos dos séculos XVII e XVIII, especialmente em obras escritas por críticos de seu pensamento, como François Fénelon ou Jean La Placette. A doutrina epicurista sobre o acaso foi comparada com a teoria da necessidade de Espinosa, mas apesar dos preconceitos da comparação, tanto a filosofia de Epicuro como a de Espinosa tiveram uma influência importante no Iluminismo, nomeadamente nos materialistas franceses. Em nosso artigo, procedemos a uma análise dessa comparação e lançamos luz sobre uma das recepções mais influentes da filosofia de Epicuro na modernidade. Nesta perspectiva, mostramos sua relação inerente e focamos mais particularmente em suas teorias modais; examinamos assim as razões pelas quais - ao contrário de outros casos - a comparação se baseou menos em questões éticas e mais metafísicas e mostramos até que ponto é legítima.

**Palavras-chave:** Clinamen. Epicurismo. Lucrécio. Metafísica modal. Necessidade. Espinosa.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is not paradoxical that many 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers perceived epicurean thought as dangerous. Neither is the fact that religious authorities presented Epicureanism as a philosophy that threatened the Christian teaching on divine providence and immateriality of the soul. Moreover, intellectual life of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the emergence of Cartesian philosophy who threatened the dominant scholastic doctrines and reinforced the sense of a crisis. In this perspective, French thinker Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) had undertaken the task of rehabilitating Epicurus's philosophy, an effort that consisted in reconciling it with Christian thought, whereas later thinkers such as Boyle or Hobbes were influenced by the philosophy of the Garden.

Within this framework, the philosophy of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) provoked numerous reactions as had previously done Epicureans. Spinoza's enemies in France and Netherlands reacted to his ideas, just after the publication of his works in 1677, criticized his doctrine on divine substance, the idea that God is nothing other than Nature, and rejected Spinoza by associating his philosophy to Epicureanism. This strategy had been persistent and as we will see, adopted by his censors on many occasions. Nevertheless, what reasons permit this comparison and on what ground was it based on? In contemporary commentaries, French thinker Louis Althusser famously put Spinoza and Epicurus under the same label, by pointing out the existence of an "underground current of aleatory materialism"<sup>2</sup>. Could we find evidence of such a current in the anti-epicurean discourse that equals Spinoza to the philosophy of the Garden?

In this paper, I intend to show the limits of Althusser's claim that Spinoza and Epicurus belong in the same philosophical current. I thus proceed in the three following ways. First, I show how and why the censors of Spinoza in 17<sup>th</sup> century France perceived his philosophy as epicurean. Dealing with cases of anti-epicurean discourse, I show the ground upon which the image of an epicurean Spinoza has based on. Secondly, I examine the problems of associating Spinoza's metaphysics to Epicureanism and lastly, I examine the potentials of such a comparison and show at what extent we can affirm it is legitimate.

## 2 A PERSISTENT LABEL

Many works that had an impact on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers presented Spinoza as epicurean. A text that proposed such a comparison and that influenced the diffusion of Spinoza's philosophy in the *Enlightenment* was the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* of Pierre Bayle. In his *Dictionnaire*, published in 1697, Pierre Bayle gives a thorough exposition of various philosophies, both ancient and modern and presents Spinoza as a "virtuous atheist". This positive presentation

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<sup>2</sup> He would alternatively name it an "underground current of the materialism of the encounter". See: "Althusser épïcúrien?" by Jean-Claude Bourdin, in Alain Gigandet, ed., *Laïcité et La Modernité: Le Vingtième Siècle*, Recherches (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013).

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goes with a similar presentation of Epicurus. In his article “Epicure” of the *Dictionnaire*, Bayle clearly defends the morality of epicureans in the following terms<sup>3</sup>:

Let us be told afterwards that people who deny Providence, and who establish for their ultimate purpose their own satisfaction, are in no way capable of living in society, that they are necessarily traitors, deceivers, poisoners, robbers, etc. (...). Here is the Sect of Epicurus whose practical morality on the duties of friendship has not been denied for a few centuries: and we will see that instead of the most devout Sects who were filled with quarrels and partialities, Epicurus’s Sect enjoyed a profound peace<sup>4</sup>.

Even if he admits that epicurean philosophy has impious implications, Bayle underlines the fact that an epicurean can be a virtuous individual. Understanding Bayle’s insistence on this point is important; it reveals a possibility that Bayle would apply to Spinoza’s figure. In the article “Spinoza” of the *Dictionnaire*, Bayle writes that Spinoza rejects divine providence and immateriality of the soul, “as did Epicureans”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, he associates Spinoza to Epicureanism on a metaphysical ground, whereas he admits that he could have been a pious and virtuous individual. Suggesting the comparison on this ground is not strange, as we will see.

This has been a common strategy amongst certain French thinkers. We find it in refutations of Spinoza, by François Fénelon, Jean La Placette and Isaac Jacquelot<sup>6</sup>. Fénelon’s work, the *Démonstration de l’existence de Dieu* proposes a refutation of epicurean doctrine (from Section LXXI to Section LXXXVII<sup>7</sup>) and focuses on the concept of chance. He thus aims to show that the world is not the product of chance, but that there has to be a being who created it. However, in the second edition of the *Démonstration*, we find a *Preface* where he refutes Spinoza and affirms that his necessity doctrine equals epicurean doctrine on chance. In order to refute Spinoza, Fénelon considers sufficient to associate him to Epicureanism:

Such is the last resource of the so-called atheists; they cannot escape the pressing objections of true philosophers except by reversing the clearest notions. What did I say? They do not avoid the force of these objections: natural necessity is no more real than chance; and it is equally untenable to say that everything is produced by a natural necessity, as it is untenable to say that everything is done by chance<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> If not otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Bayle, Article “Epicure”, *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1697.

<sup>5</sup> “Note that those who deny the immortality of the soul and Providence, as did the Epicureans, are the ones who maintain that one must attach oneself to virtue because of its excellence, and because one finds in this life enough advantage to the practice of moral good to have no reason to complain. This is probably the doctrine that Spinoza would have spread, if he dared to publicly dogmatize.”, Bayle, Article “Spinoza”, *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*

<sup>6</sup> The works of the three authors discussed here have rarely been edited. In the end of this text, you will find the hyperlinks to the online editions where they are available.

<sup>7</sup> In pp. 240-294 of the first edition of the *Démonstration*.

<sup>8</sup> Fénelon, *Démonstration*, Préface de la 2<sup>e</sup> édition, 61-62.

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We find a similar reference in Jean La Placette's text *Eclaircissements sur quelques difficultés*, published in 1709:

What can one imagine of more incomprehensible than all this? And what can in particular the chance of Epicurus- that produces the world, without anyone having formed the design, and having led and directed the execution- can have of more incredible? In fact, this chance and this necessity are equally blind, and consequently equally incapable of making works of the nature and order of the latter. I am even convinced that what Epicurus called *chance*, and what Spinoza calls *necessity*, is the same thing, and I do not think it would be difficult to prove it, if it were necessary. Thus, all that is usually said against Epicurus falls with the same force on Spinoza<sup>9</sup>.

La Placette notes that the objections we address against Epicurus's philosophy are, at the same time, addressed against Spinoza and thus, employs the same argument with Fénelon. We should finally mention Isaac Jacquelot, a French protestant who criticized Spinoza following the same strategy as Fénelon and La Placette. The comparison between Spinoza and Epicureanism appears in the title of the work<sup>10</sup>, whereas in the chapter where he introduces his criticism of Spinozism, Jacquelot states that it would not even be necessary to refute him, since he did this in the previous passages, where he deconstructed epicurean philosophy<sup>11</sup>.

To sum up, associating Spinoza to Epicureanism is a gesture of which the reasons are to be found in 17<sup>th</sup> century historical background. However, French thinkers adopt this strategy for a long period. We find it in 18<sup>th</sup> century texts, in the poem "La Religion vengée" by Bernis\_François-Joachim or even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in the case of the edition of "La Réfutation inédite de Spinoza" by Leibniz, in Foucher de Careil's *Preface*. In these refutations, even as a brief reference, the comparison to Epicurus was a way to underline the fact that Spinozist philosophy is atheistic and thus, dangerous. This strategy is particular compared to Hobbes's case for example, if one considers the ideas that are in the center of this attack. Spinoza's censors presented him as epicurean on the ground of his necessity doctrine. However, how legitimate it is to associate Spinoza's necessity to Epicureanism?

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<sup>9</sup> La Placette, *Eclaircissements*, 317.

<sup>10</sup> *Dissertations sur l'existence de Dieu*. Complete title of Jacquelot's work: "Dissertations on the existence of God in which this truth is demonstrated by the universal history of the first antiquity of the world, by the refutation of the system of Epicurus and Spinoza, by the characters of divinity, which are found in the religion of the Jews and in the establishment of Christianity. There will also be convincing evidence of the revelation of the sacred books."

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Jacquelot, *Dissertations Sur l'existence de Dieu*, 1697, vol. 2, 422. On Jacquelot and Fénelon, see Jacqueline Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux: lectures du Traité théologico-politique en hommage à Stanislas Breton* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 146–59.

### 3 THE PROBLEM OF AN EPICUREAN SPINOZA

At first, we should verify Spinoza's relation to the philosophy of the Garden. Spinoza had indeed a solid education on Latin literature, a fact that allows us to address the question of his proximity to Epicureanism and underline some the problems it entails. We know that when he was in Amsterdam, Spinoza followed courses on Latin literature, under the supervision of a Cartesian teacher, named Franciscus Van den Enden<sup>12</sup>. Even though explicit references are rare in his works, we know that he had thus knowledge of classic literature and that he had probably studied *De Rerum Natura*.

However, the problems deriving from the image of an epicurean Spinoza appear when one examines his philosophical system. Spinoza identified Nature to God and asserted that everything exists in God<sup>13</sup>. He also suggested that both the existence and the order of things derive necessarily from God's divine nature. These propositions, largely developed in the first part of his major work, the *Ethics*, lead to associate him to naturalism and to equal his name to absolute necessity. On the other hand, we know that Epicurean doctrine admits the possibility of an infinity of worlds. It is what Epicurus himself described in the *Letter to Herodotus* §45. In 17<sup>th</sup> century context, this could be interpreted as an assertion of possibility. The case of Leibniz who formed a theory of possibility based on the infinity of possible worlds is indicative of such an approach.

We thus have a hint of the epicurean idea that the actual world is the product of chance. However, whether it is accurate or not, it was the Lucretian version of atomic Epicureanism that was associated to chance in the eyes of 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. More specifically, the doctrine of atomic swerve- known as *clinamen* in Latin- would lead to equal Epicureanism to the doctrine of chance. According to Lucretius, who transmitted this doctrine in his poem *De Rerum Natura*, the atoms that compose the world fall in a parallel way into the void and through an imperceptible swerve- called *clinamen*- collide with each other. Their collision causes chained reactions that result to the creation of a world. The idea of *clinamen* is the heart of the non-providential position established by atomism. Lucretius states it in the following terms:

(...) while the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void, at times quite uncertain and uncertain places, they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first-beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything<sup>14</sup>.

It is tempting to assert that it is the fact that the swerve is imperceptible that introduces contingency in the world. This would bring it close to Spinoza who qualifies contingency as a lack

<sup>12</sup> Koenraad O. Meinsma, *Spinoza et Son Cercle*, trans. S. Roosenburg (Paris: Vrin, 1984), 192.

<sup>13</sup> EIP15. When referring to the *Ethics*, we employ a capital E (for Ethics), followed by the number of the book in Latin and the number of the proposition (or the scholium, if necessary).

<sup>14</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. Rouse, ed. Smith, (Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), II, 216-224

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of knowledge<sup>15</sup>. In any case, there is no evidence that Spinoza's censors had this in mind when they accused him of Epicureanism. Moreover, associating the concept of *clinamen* to Spinoza poses various problems. Spinoza does not accept atomistic theory and his alleged materialism is questionable. From this point of view, the *clinamen* theory or the doctrine on the infinity of worlds are not compatible with Spinoza's metaphysics. Furthermore, the conception of human freedom that goes with the idea of *clinamen* is also not compatible with Spinoza's philosophy that rejects the concept of freedom of will. We thus have a series of elements that point out the difficulty of associating the epicurean *clinamen* to Spinoza's necessity.

Moreover, Spinoza's doctrine is dependent to his conception of Nature as God, a position he defends systematically in the First Part of the *Ethics*. This follows clearly from the passages where he first presents this doctrine, as for example in EIP33, where he states, "things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from that which has in fact obtained"<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, even if Spinoza asserts that Nature is divine, he nevertheless does not adopt the Lucretian model that personifies Nature on the figure of Venus or any other Lucretian *topos* that seems to introduce teleology<sup>17</sup>. In the *Appendix* of the First Part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza rejects the tendency to attribute human characteristics to God or Nature, a criticism that could question many Lucretian themes. From this point of view, even though a certain proximity with Epicureanism is possible, one should be cautious in qualifying Spinoza as neo-epicurean. Conceiving God as Nature could be more a stoic than an epicurean inspiration.

However, these remarks should not lead us to oversee the similarities. Spinoza admits many epicurean themes, such as the idea that a divine being does not interfere with human affairs. Moreover, his criticism of teleology brings him close to epicurean tradition and as do Epicureans, Spinoza rejects the providential representation of divinity. More importantly, his conception of Nature implies a rejection of creationism, a position that would seem radical in 17<sup>th</sup> century context. Not only Spinoza accepts the ancient principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*<sup>18</sup>, but also this rejection of creationism, evident in many passages of *De Rerum Natura*<sup>19</sup>, is an important element of his conception of Nature. To put it differently, Spinoza shares a series of objections with Epicureans, some of which were dangerous in the eyes of his contemporaries.

If we consider these elements, we have to acknowledge both a proximity and a distance between Spinoza and Epicureanism. Whereas he adopted the above-mentioned objections with Epicureans, Spinoza also endorsed divergent positions on several matters. He shared some commonplaces with Epicureanism and namely, the objections that are traditionally addressed against religious superstition (creationism, divine providence, teleology, divine intervention etc.). Given this fact, the problem that persists is that of knowing why many thinkers presented him as neo-epicurean. Should we interpret his differences with Epicureanism as the necessary marks of a simple adaptation of this tradition in 17<sup>th</sup> century context? Do we have- in Spinoza's case- the same epicurean content under a different form?

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<sup>15</sup> EIP33s1

<sup>16</sup> EIP33

<sup>17</sup> Morel in James Warren, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 78–79.

<sup>18</sup> EIVP20s

<sup>19</sup> "Lucretius also plays a part in the history of anti-creationist reconstructions of the development of life on earth, with the account in Book 5 of the random and materialist origins of living beings, only the fittest of which survive. Thus far Lucretius may be said to anticipate Darwinianism, but his belief in the fixity of species runs counter to the theory of evolution proper.", Stuart Gillespie and Philip R. Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

#### 4 CONTENT, FORM AND CONSEQUENCES

We can highlight the significance of this comparison, when we consider the case of one of the most important figures of early modern Epicureanism, the French thinker Pierre Gassendi. Even though Gassendi explicitly supported Epicurean philosophy, he was not received the same way as Spinoza or Hobbes (who was also accused of Epicureanism). The reason is that Gassendi attempted to adapt epicurean atomism to his religious beliefs: he provided a doctrine suggesting that God creates atoms and thus preserved divine providence and creationism.

There is no similar elements in Spinoza's case and given the problems we pointed out, the association of Spinoza with Epicureanism should be difficult to be made on a metaphysical ground. Nevertheless, certain elements should help us change this perspective. What if Spinoza had been epicurean, not because he adopted the *clinamen* doctrine, but because he suggested certain philosophical thesis that had similar consequences? We know that epicurean physics imply an ethical dimension and that Lucretius's poem studies the atomic composition of the universe, but also human morality<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, Spinoza's major work, the *Ethics*, starts by examining God or Nature to pass on to a study of human individual and its passions. Therefore, in both cases, studying the world follows or leads to a study on how to act in it.

Moreover, in Spinoza's correspondence, we find his stated preference for ancient materialist tradition, over Plato and Aristotle. In one of his letters to Boxel, Spinoza states:

To me the authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates is not worth much. I would have been amazed if you had mentioned Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius, or any of the Atomists, or defenders of invisible particles. But it's no wonder that the people who invented occult qualities, intentional species, substantial forms, and a thousand other trifles contrived ghosts and spirits, and believed old wives' tales, to lessen the authority of Democritus, whose good reputation they so envied that they had all his books burned, which he had published with such great praise<sup>21</sup>.

This reference is unique in Spinoza's texts. More specifically, in his correspondence with Boxel, Spinoza discusses the matter of specters and rejects his correspondent's superstitious position. His letter is a criticism of superstition and focuses namely on beliefs in the existence of ghosts. Even if he does not quote Epicurus, the rejection of specters echoes the Epicurean motto, inciting us not to fear death. Furthermore, this context is indicative of the way Spinoza perceived Epicureanism. In his perspective, ancient Greek materialism constituted a valuable alternative to dominant Aristotelian teachings and an answer to the superstition that goes with them. His reference had therefore an essentially ethical dimension.

The connection between metaphysics and moral action is evident on other matters as well. As we have seen, Spinoza shares certain epicurean commonplaces. Even if his doctrine on necessity is not epicurean, the fact that he grounds it on the rejection of creationism for example, in order

<sup>20</sup> Ethics occupy a lesser space in *De Rerum Natura* comparatively to physics but are present to an important extent.

<sup>21</sup> Spinoza, letter 56 to Boxel, *The Collected Works*, trad. Edwin Curley, (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 423.



to build his anthropology and ethics, is an *Epicurean gesture*. Lucretius developed the *clinamen* doctrine in an ethical perspective and Spinoza developed his doctrine on necessity in a book named *Ethics*. The rejections that he shares with the Epicureans provide us with an ethical model, for which we need no transcendent foundation (such as the fear of God or of death). For this reason, Spinoza is close to Epicureanism in terms of his philosophy's consequences: he provides an ethical model that has no need for religious or other superstition. The objections he shares with Epicureans, such as anti-creationism or anti-teleology fit in this interpretation.

Furthermore, Lucretius's reception in 17<sup>th</sup> century went with a distinction: most seem to recognize *De Rerum Natura*'s literary value, against its philosophical content that they condemned<sup>22</sup>. The distinction points out a difference between form and content: a recognition of the value of the poetic form, against the ethical danger of its content. In Spinoza's case, we have a different model. Spinoza's enemies questioned both the way he proceeded in the *Ethics*, and the direction towards which he went. Thus, his contemporaries condemned both his doctrine, and its form of exposition. Pierre Bayle named Spinoza the first « athée de système », by pointing this fact, but also a novelty of Spinozism.

We cannot compare Lucretius' poetic form of exposition in *De Rerum Natura* with Spinoza's geometrical method in the *Ethics*. Nevertheless, we should underline the following point: in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, religious authorities treated them differently on the grounds of form and content. Whereas it seemed possible to taste the honey of Lucretius poetic expression though avoiding the poison it contained, there was no way of avoiding the impious consequences of Spinoza's geometrical method<sup>23</sup>. In both cases, the danger was similar, if not identical. Whereas Spinoza's necessity is not compatible with Lucretius's hazard, their consequences were not so different. Anti-providential and anti-teleological, Spinoza's metaphysics is Epicurean as far as it adopts some of the most fundamental objections Epicureanism had raised against religious superstition. However, this is not all. Both philosophies encourage us to study nature, not because of an arbitrary theoretical demand, but because of its concrete, practical significance.

As we previously saw, Fénelon, La Placette and Jacquelot focus on metaphysical matters and it is through metaphysics that they imply a proximity between Spinoza and Epicurean tradition. It would be vain to look for ethical references in these texts: there are numerous references, but they have a merely rhetorical character. Dominant authorities would not criticize seriously Spinoza's anthropological or ethical positions. However, their metaphysical criticism implicitly involves these dimensions, since it underlines the moral consequences of any philosophy that rejects divine providence. For these thinkers, it was sufficient to show that Spinoza equals to Epicurus, not because of a real proximity between their systems, but because of the moral connotation of this strategy.

In any case, Spinoza's metaphysics entails a moral attitude that is close to Epicureanism. Let us take for example the following passage from Spinoza's *Ethics*. In the second scholium of the EIVP63, Spinoza uses an example that seems to be inspired by Lucretius: "The sick man through fear of death eats what he naturally shrinks from, but the healthy man takes pleasure in his food,

<sup>22</sup> "Dante places the Epicureans 'who consider the soul mortal together with the body', in the sixth circle of hell (Inf. 10.15). Various expedients could be used to excuse an interest in the *DRN*, via what Valentina Prosperi calls the 'dissimulatory code' [sic]: an open acknowledgement of the error of Lucretian teaching, sometimes paired with a positive valuation of his poetic virtues, or the enforcement of a division between content and form easy enough to make in a didactic poem on so technical a subject (but one that recent criticism has been at pains to qualify or even deny). The honey round the rim of the cup could be enjoyed so long as one did not drink deeper; the medicinal wormwood had turned into poison.", Gillespie and Hardie, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> I here use the image quoted in the previous footnote, *ibid*.

and thus gets a better enjoyment out of life, than if he were in fear of death, and desired directly to avoid it”<sup>24</sup>. This text echoes the Lucretian passages with which starts the fourth book of *De Rerum Natura*, passages where the philosopher compares himself to a doctor<sup>25</sup>. Against such texts, we see an inherent proximity between Spinoza and Epicurean tradition. It is not a proximity in terms of modal metaphysics, even if it is on this ground that the comparison has been the most persistent, but it is on an ethical ground. This does not mean that Spinoza’s metaphysics imply morality in the exact same way as epicurean philosophy. The *clinamen*, for example, supports the freedom of will, a position that Spinoza rejects. Independently of what moral action really is, Spinoza supports it is possible without any need of appealing to superstition, a possibility that brings him close to epicurean tradition.

As we have seen, Spinoza adopts a series of positions that have been associated with the Epicureanism. This is the case for example with the rejection of divine providence or the rejection of creationism. However- and this seems to be the most important point of proximity- Spinoza intends to inspire a certain moral attitude, a way of living in a world where morality can no longer be founded in providence. This point of view allows us to better interpret the hostility with which his philosophy was perceived by his posterity. Spinozism was indeed as dangerous as Epicureanism since it formed a rupture, a swerve with the dominant tradition of his time, as Epicureans had previously done. This is the reason why his enemies criticized with such intensity and persistence a philosophy that would later influence the *Enlightenment*<sup>26</sup>.

In this perspective, what seems to be the closest point of proximity and a possible reason why Spinoza was perceived as neo-epicurean is the fact that he defends the possibility of acting morally in a world that is not ruled by divine providence. It can thus be questioned- not of a proximity in terms of modal metaphysics- but in terms of what this metaphysics ethically imply. Whether it is a theory on chance, such as Lucretius’s doctrine on *clinamen*, or a theory on absolute necessity, such as that of Spinoza, the proximity points out an essentially ethical dimension. From this point of view, Spinoza can be seen as neo-epicurean, as far as his philosophy shows the way of thinking of morality, without the need of divine providence.

## 5 CONCLUSION: THE POTENTIALS

Firstly, we have noted that many of Spinoza’s censors compared his philosophy to Epicureanism. As we have seen, this association was mainly focused on his necessity doctrine. Afterwards, we noted the difficulties in understanding Spinoza as a neo-epicurean. Even though he preferred epicurean over Aristotelian tradition, such an association should be seen with cautiousness. Spinoza shares certain positions with the Epicureans, such as the rejection of

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<sup>24</sup> EIVP63s2

<sup>25</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. Rouse, ed. Smith, (Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), IV, 1-25

<sup>26</sup> As did Epicureanism: “The anxieties of the forces of conservatism and reaction were not unfounded, since the *DRN* plays an important role in the several movements of libertinism and enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed the names of his more prominent eighteenth-century admirers- Voltaire and Kant, d’Alembert and Rousseau- are synonymous with the phenomenon we call ‘the Enlightenment’”, Gillespie and Hardie, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 8.

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creationism, divine providence, or the idea of divine intervention in human affairs; but he rejects others that are equally important, such as the *clinamen* doctrine.

In any case, it is a fact that Spinoza and Epicureans adopt certain common positions. This common ground, based mostly on what they reject than on what they profess, is what allows shedding light on different ways of perceiving Spinoza as neo-epicurean. We attempted to show that people who associated Spinoza to Epicurus on a metaphysical ground saw the risk of a philosophy that reconstructs and promotes epicurean principles that they thought to be dangerous and extremely influential. In this perspective, their strategies allow us to underline an inherent proximity between the two philosophies, a proximity that lies on an ethical ground.

To put it differently, if we see Spinoza as Epicurean it is less because of the alleged similarities between his necessity doctrine and the *clinamen* theory, as his enemies had claimed. It is mostly, in virtue of the moral consequences of these very doctrines. To return to Louis Althusser's words, in the place of an "underground current of the materialism of the encounter", historiographical and reception studies point out to an "underground current of the *ethics* of the encounter"; that is a current of thinkers who attempted to conceptualize ethics, without the need for grounding it in divine providence. Thus, instead of asking whether Spinoza exposes the same epicurean doctrines under a different form, one can ask what is the ethical model implied by his philosophy and compare him to Epicureanism in terms of the *effects* of his ideas.

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**Annexes<sup>27</sup>**

1. « Qu'on nous vienne dire après cela que des gens qui nient la Providence, et qui établissent pour leur dernière fin leur propre satisfaction, ne sont nullement capables de vivre en société, que ce sont nécessairement des traîtres, des fourbes, des empoisonneurs, des voleurs, etc. (...) Voici la Secte d'Epicure dont la morale pratique sur les devoirs de l'amitié ne s'est nullement démentie pendant quelques siècles: et nous allons voir qu'au lieu que les Sectes les plus dévotes étaient remplies de querelles et de partialités, celle d'Epicure jouissait d'une paix profonde<sup>28</sup> ».

2. « Notez que ceux qui nient l'immortalité de l'âme et la Providence, comme faisaient les épicuriens, sont ceux qui soutiennent qu'il faut s'attacher à la vertu à cause de son excellence, et parce qu'on trouve dans

<sup>27</sup> Translated passages used in the first section of this text.

<sup>28</sup> Bayle, Article "Epicure", *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*

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cette vie assez d'avantage à la pratique du bien moral pour n'avoir pas sujet de se plaindre. C'est sans doute la doctrine que Spinoza aurait étalée, s'il avait osé dogmatiser publiquement<sup>29</sup> »

3. « Telle est la dernière ressource des prétendus athées : ils ne peuvent se dérober aux objections pressantes des véritables philosophes, qu'en renversant les notions les plus claires. Que dis-je ? Ils n'évitent pas la force de ces objections : la nécessité naturelle n'est pas plus réelle que le hasard ; et il est aussi insoutenable de dire que tout est produit par une nécessité naturelle, qu'il est insoutenable d'avancer que tout est fait par hasard<sup>30</sup> ».

4. « Que peut-on imaginer de plus incompréhensible que tout ceci ? Et qu'est-ce en particulier que le hasard d'Epicure, qui a produit le monde, sans que personne en ait formé le dessein, et en ait conduit, et dirigé l'exécution, peut avoir de plus incroyable ? En effet ce hasard et cette nécessité sont également aveugles, et par conséquent également incapables de faire des ouvrages de la nature et de l'ordre de celui-ci. Je suis même persuadé que ce qu'Epicure appelait *hasard*, et ce que Spinoza appelle *nécessité*, est la même chose, et je ne crois pas qu'il me fût difficile de le prouver, si la chose était nécessaire. Ainsi, tout ce qu'on dit d'ordinaire contre Epicure tombe avec la même force sur Spinoza<sup>31</sup> ».

5. « Dissertations sur l'existence de Dieu où l'on démontre cette vérité par l'histoire universelle de la première antiquité du monde, par la réfutation du système d'Epicure et de Spinoza, par les caractères de divinité qui se remarquent dans la religion des Juifs et dans l'établissement du christianisme. On y trouvera aussi des preuves convaincantes de la révélation des livres sacrés<sup>32</sup> ».

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<sup>29</sup> Bayle, Article "Spinoza", *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*

<sup>30</sup> Fénelon, *Démonstration*, Préface de la 2<sup>e</sup> édition, p. 61-62

<sup>31</sup> La Placette, *Eclaircissements*, p. 317

<sup>32</sup> Complete title of Jacquolot's work