

**ON CHOOSING AND AVOIDING: *AUTARKEÍA* IN EPICURUS<sup>1</sup>**[SOBRE ESCOLHER E EVITAR: *AUTARKEÍA* EM EPICURO]**Markus Figueira da Silva**[markusficus@gmail.com](mailto:markusficus@gmail.com)<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3036-6575>

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**Abstract:** The pursuit of understanding the *phýsis* (*physiology*) is a never-ending philosophical activity that leads to a praxis (*pragmateía*) which manifests itself in every choice (*haíresin*) and in every rejection (*phygèn*) made by man as he acts in agreement to the knowledge he has of the nature of things. To choose and to reject is only possible for those who place the principle of action in themselves (*autarkeía*). Thus, Epicurus ethics is grounded on the understanding of the *phýsis*, which means, in this context, to rid oneself of ignorance and unwarranted (irrational) fears; misbeliefs and opinions accepted and disseminated by the multitude of the senseless. It is posited here that the relation between *physiologia* and ethics assures coherence to Epicurus' philosophical praxis. The present paper's objective is to make explicit the meaning the term *autarkeía* acquires in Epicurus' thought in the context of *Letter of Epicurus to Menoeceus*, *Principal Doctrines*, and *Vatican Sayings*. Freedom (*eleutheria*) shows itself thru the ongoing exercise of choosing what is desired and rejecting what is harmful; that is, freedom is only possible thru a conduct based on self-sufficiency. Knowledge realizes itself thru action; the same is true for ignorance.

**Keywords:** Ethics. *Autarkeía*. *Eleuthería*.

**Resumo:** A busca pela compreensão da *phýsis* (fisiologia) é uma atividade filosófica sem fim que conduz a uma práxis (*pragmateía*) que se manifesta em cada escolha (*haíresin*) e em cada rejeição (*phygèn*) feita pelo homem ao agir de acordo com o conhecimento que ele tem da natureza das coisas. Escolher e rejeitar só é possível para quem coloca em si o princípio da ação (*autarkeía*). Assim, a ética de Epicuro fundamenta-se na compreensão da *phýsis*, que significa, nesse contexto, livrar-se da ignorância e dos medos injustificados (irracionais); descrenças e opiniões aceitas e disseminadas pela multidão dos insensatos. Postula-se aqui que a relação entre fisiologia e ética assegura coerência à práxis filosófica de Epicuro. O objetivo do presente artigo é explicitar o significado que o termo *autarkeía* adquire no pensamento de Epicuro no contexto da *Carta de Menecceu*, das *Doutrinas Principais* e das *Sentenças Vaticanas*. A liberdade (*eleutheria*) se manifesta no exercício contínuo de escolher o que se deseja e rejeitar o que é prejudicial; ou seja, a liberdade só é possível por meio de uma conduta pautada na autossuficiência. O conhecimento se realiza por meio da ação; o mesmo é verdade para a ignorância.

**Palavras-chave:** Ética. *Autarkéia*. *Eleutería*.

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Nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little.  
(VS, 68, in INWOOD 1994, p.39)

Over the course of the centuries, Ethics is certainly the most studied part of Epicurus thought by the philosophical tradition. The *ethos* (conduct) of the *sophós-phronéo* (wise-prudent), his character, or yet, his way of living, has been regarded as the central question of the epicurean thought because, for Epicurus, the pursuit of wisdom is the thorough realization of the *sophós* nature. Wisdom here is just another way of saying equilibrium, calculus, the thoroughness in action, for the *Sophós* has in himself the principle of his actions. Thus, it is up to *sophós* to choose that which he approves and to avoid that which is not in conformity with his assessment of an equilibrium that expresses his well-being. Among the concepts appropriated by Epicurus from the Greek ethics tradition, the concept of *autarkeía*, in the epicurean sense, plays a fundamental role; by placing ethics outside the political realm and centering it in the individual, it aims to turn philosophy into a wisdom for living, a wisdom for the realization of a life in pursuit of freedom and friendship. *Autarkeía* will be defined as the ground of the *Éthos* of the *Sophós*.

There are many possible translations of the Greek term *autarkeía* in Epicurus; among them, the most frequent ones are: independence<sup>2</sup>, self-sufficiency<sup>3</sup>, self-sustenance<sup>4</sup>. These notions allude to a more fundamental notion of dominium and principle – *archè*, possessed by him whose actions are *tò autò*, that is, grounded on the self. But what exactly is *autarkeía* and how can one accomplish it? Such questions point to the principle of action as it was conceived by Epicurus, the root of which lies in the understanding of the meaning of freedom – *eleutheria*. Freedom understood as that which justifies and grounds the principle of action.

Literally, *autarkeía* is a quality of him who, when acting, is self-sufficient. *Autarkeía*, therefore, allow us to conceive of someone existing or subsisting on his own, for this may be the case only if one's actions have their principles in oneself or if the cause of one's actions rests within oneself. *Autarkeía*, in Epicurus, is what fundamentally characterizes the wise action which, by definition, excludes inactivity, reactivity, and every action whose principle and *telos* are not in itself. Wisdom, in the form of action, carries its meaning within itself, that is, in the very realization of the action. These we denominate non-reactive actions or just “non-reactivity”. Therefore, *autarkeía* expresses a condition of life in the world in which the course of actions tends naturally to a repletion and, thus, to equilibrium. To live a life in equilibrium, one must rely solely on the way he experiences his concrete existential situation, any “power” that transcends his own *dýnamis* of action must be subjected to his discretion to choose or to avoid it. *Autarkeía* is the expression of a way of living free of the necessities which negate life itself and impose on it reactivity or suffering<sup>5</sup>.

In order that *autarkeía* may be achieved or cultivated, it is necessary to act according to *logismós* and *phronesis*. These three concepts define the possibility of pondering, of determining the appropriate calculus for action. Through the exercise of *autarkeía*, the *sophós* defines on his own what is sufficient to fulfill his necessary and natural desires:

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<sup>2</sup> Conche, p.221; Arrighetti, p.112.

<sup>3</sup> Curry, p.313

<sup>4</sup> Salem, p.78.

<sup>5</sup> BOLLACK, J. *La pensée du plaisir*. p. 475.

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And we regard self-sufficiency as a great good, not so as to partake of little on every occasion, but so that if we do not have much we may be content with little, since we are genuinely persuaded that they take the greatest pleasure in luxury who need it least, and that what is natural is easy to procure, while the artificial is hard to come by. (DL, X, 130, in LAERTIUS 2018, p.535)

The term here considered in this passage signifies “contentment”, the correct calculus of repletion, the sufficiency given by nature itself. What Epicurus finds in the way the *Sophós* interact with nature is that what guides the wise action is the appropriate calculus of satisfaction. That is why the action must correspond to the natural needs and desires since acting according to nature, where the transit is immediate, enables the *sophós* to avoid animosity which leads, most likely, to reaction and disequilibrium. Every action contrary to nature is difficult and end up being in vain to him who procures it, for it is the fruit of desires engendered by idle imagination and/or empty opinions (*kénon doxái*) spread among the unreasonable. Philosophy, to Epicurus, is that which opposes itself to unwarranted opinions and, for this very reason, consists in the realization of *autarkeía*.

To act ‘in conformity with nature’ (*katá phýsin*) defines the relation between *physiologia* and ethics for it makes explicit the meaning of the philosophical attitude marked by inquiries that seek grounding the wise action. This mode of action also reveals the true meaning of pleasure as repletion, that is, of actions that generate serenity (*galenismós*). In this respect, the *sophós* acts with joy, and his actions, when considered as a totality, account for a fulfilling life. Indeed, it defines a state of physiologic ‘contentment’, in which one feels wholly integrated with nature and, thus, able, in some cases, to predict and, perhaps, avoid adversities. The action founded in nature is the result of wise choices. In opposition to idle desires that are difficult to be attained because originated on vain opinions, Epicurus projects the notion of simplicity, that is, the concept of living in conformity with the limits given by one’s own nature. The task of the *sophós*, thus, is to discover his own nature through an economy of desires, through a ‘dietetics’ of desires.

Natural philosophy does not create boastful men nor chatterboxes nor men who show off the ‘culture’ which the many quarrel over, but rather strong and self-sufficient men, who pride themselves on their own personal goods, not those of external circumstances. (VS, 45, in INWOOD 1994, p.38)

It is relatively clear that the notion of virtue (excellence), as described in the passage above, is tied not to a life founded on empty values or enmeshed in the public domains, but to a life grounded on the private action. The wise man always grounds his actions, not in subjection, but in his power to choose and reject; his enterprise is to comprehend the limits and possibilities of the nature-reality in which he lives and to seek, in each action or deliberation, the realization of a joyful life. Grounding the *éthos* in the *phýsis*, or deriving it from the *physiologia*, the *sophós* legitimates the *autarkeía* as a condition to conceive ethics outside the public realm. Thus, Epicurus proposes to restore ancient principles found in

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nature<sup>6</sup>, that is, to reclaim them from the realm of established conventions so that they can be lived in the space and time that is proper to them or related to them (*phílos*):

When the wise man is brought face to face with the necessities of life, he knows how to give rather than receive – such a treasure of self-sufficiency has he found. (VS, 44, in INWOOD 1994, p.38).

By acquiring self-sufficiency, one is not excluded from the possibility of sharing contentment, the expression of *autárkeia*, with those living in mutual convenience (*opéleia*). As a matter of fact, the wise man does not project imaginary values on things that belong to nature; on the contrary, he mirrors his actions on the ways of nature. The most convenient limit of an action is not the one that shows excess of power over nature, but that which will turn his being in nature the most pleasurable. Thus, the *sophós* does not expect to receive what he needs from others, for he himself, living according to convenience and contentment, is able to obtain sufficient from the surrounding nature and not suffer from thirst, hunger or cold. The Ideal of wisdom here is that which eliminates every trace of subjection, obligation, debt or favor, since, among wise man, the conventions originated in political societies do not prevail. The wise man will distance himself from situations, places, and people that may constrain him to react to the ‘conventions’ upheld by the unreasonable mob.

While some degree of security from other men can be attained on the basis of stable power and material prosperity, the purest security comes from tranquility and from a life withdrawn from the many. (DL, X, 143, in LAERTIUS 2018, p.540)

There is no political object explicit in the ethical propositions of Epicurus. In a way, what we notice is the transposition of the political to found an ethics on different grounds. By advocating to avoid interacting with the multitude, Epicurus might be indicating his understanding of multitude as a product of necessity, as a way of life governed by necessity. The *sophós* will seek, thus, to forge an alternative course. This course will not constitute a conflict with the political world, instead, it will be built independently of it. Epicurus opts for the wise action grounded on the self, and in the interest of the self. This distrust regarding politics is justified if we consider the miserable wretchedness of human condition, a condition nourished on **misbeliefs** and unwarranted values of his time:

Necessity is a bad thing, but there is no necessity to live with necessity. (VS, 9, in INWOOD 1994, p.36)

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<sup>6</sup> That is: *Philia kai opheleia*.

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To withdraw into philosophy instead of to philosophize to the H elade, that is what Epicurus proclaimed. To engage with the mob of unreasonable will not afford one a tranquil life. Ethical frugality alone can secure *ataraxia*, not political expenditure; one cannot achieve *ataraxia* if enmeshed with the multitude of senseless. Besides, the wise man will never be able to modify the scenario, prevailing in the public sphere, of corruption, misery, and forgetfulness of what constitutes a joyful way of life.

The wise man must not, therefore, engage in politics.  
He Lives in obscurity. (Us., 327,8, in ARRIGHETTI 1962)<sup>7</sup>

Only in the solitude of this own thoughts, the wise man can, finally, encounter the true meaning of freedom, since, according to Epicurus, freedom is not compatible with the prevailing social-political values of his time. Freedom emerges from reflection, the issue proper to philosophy. We will not encounter freedom in the political milieu or in conventions founded on conflicting opinions, but on actions which have their principles in one self, that is, on actions that emerge from the solitude of one's own reflection. *Autarkeia* here is a political concept employed to define a physiological ethics.

A self-sufficient life is wholly incompatible with political life, with the values that sustain it and, in many ways, define it. The wise man performs a movement of decentering in relation to public life, and another to situate himself always in the path of molecular, private, and balanced relationships. The divergences between Epicurus' position and the political institutions in place are blatant, making it extremely difficult the social coexistence of men of such distinct character, thus, his refusal to take part in them. The wise man engages in political discussion only when it is convenient or unavoidable for what matters most to him is to be free to engage with those who share a nature akin to his own, with those who, like himself, make of the ethical action an expression of this nature. For Epicurus, the philosophical *ethos* is the realization of a *physiol gico* balanced state of being. It follows that one must choose the people, the local, and the conditions to allow for a philosophical life, to allow for a life in which the principle of actions rests within himself, that is, a life that allows for *autarkeia*. Only then, freedom, in the epicurean sense, may emerge.

The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom (*eleutheria*).  
(VS, 77, in INWOOD 1994, p.40)

There is an essential relation between freedom, friendship, health, and trust, that defines the effects of *autarkeia*. These are fundamental notions for the ethics of the Garden, as well as the most difficult to put in practice with success. Epicurus employs the physical model to make explicit his divergences regarding the societies historically constituted. The model is devised as an analogy between atoms and individuals, microcosms and communities. The very same *philia* that unleashes and realizes the physical configurations

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<sup>7</sup> Trans. ours.



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denominated ‘bodies’, is responsible for the aggregates of wise men who live, or seek to live, in conformity with the *phýsis* and with the ways nature realizes itself. *Phília* is the very *dýnamis* of the realization of the life of the wise; it is that which determines the common-unity of *éthos* among those who share similar nature.

To ground the action in oneself and to act in conformity to nature are, for the *sophós*, one and the same thing, they constitute the pursuit of *autarkeía* and *eleutheria*. Nevertheless, proper to the nature of the *sophós* is the desire to share with the like-minded the *lógos* that lends meaning to the very realization of the “philosophical community”, a necessary and natural desire that stems from the very way of life of the wise, from the philosophical way of life. To seek to live among the kindred (*phíloí*) is natural and necessary, it pertains to the fulfillment of a mutual convenience (*ophéleia*). *Phília*<sup>8</sup> and *ophéleia* are natural phenomena circumscribed to the exercise of human conduct, nevertheless, from the epicurean perspective, they are only realized within a set of specific conditions which are not to be found in every human aggregate. The human sociability, as a natural phenomenon, is not sufficient to warrant the full exercise of *phília* and *ophéleia*.

Epicurus denominates ‘community of thought and action’, the main criteria that grounds the sociability among *sophoi*. Thus, *phília* may be defined as a community (*κοινωνία*) of thought (*διάνοια*) and action (*πράγμα*). The pursue of wisdom does not sentence men to solitude. Nevertheless, he who seeks wisdom understands, due to the very nature of this search, that he will not find it in the company of the unenlightened. To opt for a restrict and ordered universe of friends is the natural course for those who seek the exercise of the mind, within or outside the public domain. This was Epicurus response the impossibility of associating *phília* to the political considerations in the context of the historical and decadent *polis* or in the context of religious considerations. Friendship differs, in its nature, from political or religious orders as they were conceived and practiced. The reason for this difference is that, rather than being a consequence of a contract, *phília* is immanent in nature. Epicurus saw in the notion of *phília* a voluntary and pleasurable way of living in equilibrium with others. Indeed, a community of *sophós* is borne out of a necessary and natural desire of its members to nourish on affinity. The problem that emerges from this discussion may be put this way: how to separate ‘friendship’ and ‘rights’ in the epicurean community? Or still, how to provide men with security and tranquility so they can exercise wisdom?

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<sup>8</sup> Epicurus thought was influenced mainly by atomism of Democritus and Leucippus; nevertheless, the notion of *phília* has its origin in the propositions of Empedocles of Agrigentun, where *phília* emerges as a mythic principle of friendship through which, the tendency of things to harmony by agreements (accords) that warrant, for a period, the stability of bodies is explained. Epicurus comprehension of genesis distinguishes the simple bodies from the composite bodies. Those that constitute an aggregate of atoms are called compounds, and the others are denominated simple bodies. What happens is that, moving freely in empty space, the atoms collide and, due to their physical properties (shape, weight, and size), they may interlace to compose an aggregate. The compounding happens when the atoms involved in the collision share an affinity (*phília*). Epicurus called this affinity *phília*, and to it he attributed the cause of the compounds; that is, *phília* is the principle that causes the bodies, denominated things, to come into being. This same notion was transposed to the level of human relations to explain the problem of social aggregates. According to this conception of human association, the individual (man) is analogous to the atom; man is initially isolated until he affects or is affected by the other or others. Two phenomena may, then, occur: Either repulsion, rendering impossible the constitution of a body or an aggregate, or, the elements, due to compatibility, come together as a unity through affinity (*phília*). This physical and natural affinity acquires, in the horizon of relations among men, an intellectual aspect: some men harmonize socially according to the modes of thought proper to each one. In this respect, what secures men naturally together is the realization of a behavior fitting to a mode of existence. The term *philos* expresses the fact that the individual belongs to a group and lives for the group, and is correctly translated by “affection” or “friend”.

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Epicurus inherits the notion of friendship from the Greek tradition; nevertheless, he seeks to define mainly the pragmatic and attainable character of affinity that unites the community of wise men. Not every aggregation is of interest to the *sophós*. Nature reserves to the wise the possibility to establish bonds that leads to mutual satisfaction, which evidently will only occur when the relation obeys a symmetry, a proportionality, a calculus that allows for the implicated parts to form a common unity, a community. In the general context of societies, the mutual convenience is grounded, above all, on the accord on security from others and economic security of its members. In the few occasions that Epicurus manifested his thoughts regarding established relations external to the community of friends, he asserts the need to the existence of laws (*nómos*) due to its utilitarian character. Epicurus realizes, nevertheless, the shortcomings of a system of laws due to its incapacity to solve the crucial problem of the principle of action, the principle of conduct, because this principle is an ethical issue and inhabits the privacy of each one. The utilitarian and, thus, relative character of the laws is ambiguous, since it is necessary, but not satisfactory, for it carries within it the contradictions and paradoxes that lead to conflict of interests, powers, and ideas.

According to the epicurean critique, the issues relative to politics may be exposed by the dissimilarities of attitudes of its members, consequence of, above all, the lack of reflection regarding the nature of community and regarding living a life in equilibrium. In place of reflection, unwarranted or empty opinions are projected allowing for unlimited beliefs and desires, natural or unnatural, but most certainly, unnecessary. These desires, beliefs, and false opinions lead to unjust injuries, power disputes, distrust, senselessness, and anguish:

Natural justice is a pledge of the advantage associated with preventing men from harming or being harmed by one another. (DL, X, 150, in LAERTIUS 2018, p.542)

The laws that are established in societies respond to the pact of non-aggression; the origin and reason of being of societies. If human nature calls for a life in society, then this pact, in a sense, founds his own nature. If we reason as Epicurus does, the correct comprehension of nature would suffice to maintain humans within the bounds of the “pact” and/or within the limits of the natural rights. Nevertheless, the false opinions lead to conflict when, intentionally or not, agreements are disregarded and the efforts to equilibrium and symmetry are disrupted. In such political scenario, the individuals lack *autarkeía*. Epicurus envisions a molecular, discontinuous order, a self-sufficient community, in which social life is established based on mutual convenience impelled by an enlightened will and driven by affinity. A community of friends, that is, a community of thoughts and actions, requires a shared understanding among its members of the natural meaning of action in community. In other words, *philia* emerges as a community of thought expressing the sole possible organization of a group in equilibrium. Justice as it is exercised among *philoí* differs radically from a theory of justice that is imposed on a senseless mob, on those incapable of comprehending it and, due to the lack of sufficient character, exercising it:

Those animals incapable of making agreements with one another, that they may neither inflict nor suffer harm, are without justice or injustice.



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The same is true of peoples who are unable or unwilling to make such agreements. (DL, X, 150, in LAERTIUS 2018, p.542)

Persisting the problem of the conflicting will of the individuals, the solution will also depend on the will of each one. Despite its importance for the societies, the pact is not the determinant to the conduct of the *sophós* in a community. Epicurus draws the limits that separate the public from the private realm once he demonstrates that the aim of philosophy is to preserve the principle of the individual action as a discretion of the wise man; he centers this principle in the capacity of realization of each one within the limits proper to them. As to the public realm, the participation of the members of the community of wise men will take place only in matters of legal order external to the community and that somehow refers to them directly. As it was pointed out, the effective participation on political representations is not an end; on the contrary, the wise man has his interests centered in the edification and maintenance of a private world, in the self-sufficiency engendered and sustained through *philia*.

While some degree of security from other men can be attained based on stable power and material prosperity, the purest security comes from tranquility and from a life withdrawn from the many.  
(DL, X, 143, in LAERTIUS 2018, p.540)

The wise man will not engage in public affairs unless in an emergency.  
(Us., 327,8, in ARRIGHETTI 1962)<sup>9</sup>

The notion of *autarkeía* shows clearly the possibility for an ethics that has its origin and its command in the individual, a way of life in which effectiveness lies in the action of choosing and avoiding.

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<sup>9</sup> Trans. ours.

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