

Epicureanism and Cynicism in Lucian

Allison Graham

Lucian's satires are wide ranging in their targets: gods, heroes, language, and especially, philosophy. Despite, or perhaps because of his emphasis on philosophy, "Lucian's treatment of philosophy is at once a central feature of his works and one of the most paradoxical" (Jones 24). In addition to a large number of works that focus on philosophy, Lucian often uses philosophy, sometimes negatively and sometimes positively, in satires that are not strictly philosophical. Thus, "[w]hen he aims his satire at targets such as religious belief or magic, he often does so by making philosophy their defender or representative; when he mocks vices like hypocrisy or venality, he often incorporates them in philosophers" (Jones 24). In some satires, such as *Alexander*, *De Morte Peregrini*, *Demonax*, and *Nigrinus*, Lucian seems to side with specific philosophical schools and attack others. One of his positive depictions of philosophy is in *Alexander*, in which the narrator is an Epicurean, but even in this work, Lucian does not commit himself to Epicureanism. Similarly, Lucian attacks the Cynicism of Peregrinus but lauds the Cynicism of Demonax, leaving his opinion of Cynicism unclear. Rather than indicating a lack of understanding, the contrasts in Lucian's representations of philosophy suggest that he is well-aware of philosophical beliefs and their nuances. However, Lucian is a satirist, not a philosopher, so while he has philosophical preferences, he does not adhere to a philosophy.

Before examining Lucian's texts, a few ideas about his philosophical background can be gained from Lucian's autobiographical writings and from his contemporary Galen. In his *Bis Accusatus sive Tribunalia*, Lucian's character **ΣΥΡΟΣ** (Syrian), whom scholars consider an autobiographical representation of Lucian (Francis 53, Fields 224), abandons rhetoric for τὴν Ἀκαδημειαν (the Academy) at the age of 40 (*Bis Accusatus* 32). James Francis carefully calls this change a move to "'philosophy'" because Lucian became a satirist not a philosopher (53). However, in "the only contemporary testimony about Lucian," Galen recounts a story about Lucian writing a "book containing 'dark sayings,' and present[ing] it as a book by Heraclitus. The book was taken to a famous philosopher who was asked to explain its meaning"

and was then ridiculed for his “sophisticated interpretations” of it (Schlapbach 251). As with Lucian’s writings, this story indicates an interest in philosophy but does not provide any evidence about the content of Lucian’s philosophical ideas. Interpreted in the context of Lucian’s corpus, however, the passage from Galen presents “the philosopher in a characteristically Lucianic setting, namely the philosopher talking to others, and in particular the philosopher expounding riddles” (Schlapbach 251). *Bis Accusatus* and Galen both present Lucian as a writer interested in philosophy rather than as a philosopher who writes.

In *Alexander*, Lucian portrays Epicureans as a positive alternative to the religious conman Alexander. At the request of his friend Celsus, the narrator of *Alexander*, who is called Lucian (55), grudgingly writes his history of the τρισκατάρατον (consummate rascal) Alexander, a false prophet (2). At the beginning of the work, the narrator tells Celsus:

αἰδοῦμαι μὲν οὖν ὑπὲρ ἀμφοῖν, ὑπὲρ τε σοῦ καὶ ἑμαυτοῦ σοῦ μὲν, ἄξιοντος μνήμη καὶ γραφῆ παραδοθῆναι ἄνδρα τρισκατάρατον, ἑμαυτοῦ δέ, σπουδῆν ποιουμένου ἐπὶ τοιαύτη ἱστορίᾳ καὶ πράξεσιν ἀνθρώπου, ὃν οὐκ ἀναγιγνώσκεισθαι πρὸς τῶν πεπαιδευμένων ἦν ἄξιον, ἀλλ’ ἐν πανδήμῳ τινὶ μεγίστῳ θεάτρῳ ὁρᾶσθαι ὑπὸ πιθήκων ἢ ἄλωπέκων σπαραττόμενον.

I blush for both of us, I confess, both for you and for myself—for you because you want a consummate rascal perpetuated in memory and in writing, and for myself because I am devoting my energy to such an end, to the exploits of a man who does not deserve to have polite people read about him, but rather to have the motley crowd in a vast amphitheatre see him being torn to pieces by foxes or apes (*Alexander* 2).

From this point on, the biography mocks Alexander for his religious quackery and contrasts Alexander with Epicurus several times. Finally, the narrator concludes, more positively than he began:

ἐνεκα γράψαι ἠξίωσα, καὶ σοὶ μὲν χαριζόμενος, ἀνδρὶ ἑταίρῳ καὶ φίλῳ [...] τὸ πλέον δέ, — ὅπερ καὶ σοὶ ἦδιον, — Ἐπικουρῷ τιμωρῶν.

I have thought fit to set it [the biography] down as a specimen, not only to pleasure you as an associate and friend [...] but mostly—and this will give greater pleasure to you also—to right the wrongs of Epicurus (*Alexander* 61).

From his conclusion and the numerous positive references that he makes to Epicurus throughout the text, it is evident that the

narrator is an Epicurean. Because of the narrator's Epicureanism, "it has occasionally been deduced [...] that Lucian was himself an Epicurean, or at least highly sympathetically disposed towards that school" (van Nuffelen 180). Although the narrator of *Alexander* is also called Lucian, readers must be careful about identifying Lucian the author too closely with his narrators, who, as I will show, are not restricted to a single philosophy (van Nuffelen 180). All the references to Epicureans in *Alexander* are positive: Epicureans ἐπεφώροτο ἡρέμα ἢ πᾶσα μαγγανεία καὶ συσκευὴ τοῦ δράματος (began gradually to detect all the trickery and buncombe of the show), and the narrator identifies Epicurus as the absolute opposite of Alexander when he says:

τίνοι γὰρ ἂν ἄλλω δικαιοτέρον προσεπολέμει γόγης ἄνθρωπος καὶ τερατεία φίλος, ἀληθεία δὲ ἔχθιστος, ἢ Ἐπικούρου ἀνδρὶ τὴν φύσιν τῶν πραγμάτων καθεωρακότη καὶ μόνῳ τὴν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀλήθειαν εἰδότη;

Upon whom else would a quack who loved humbug and bitterly hated truth more fittingly make war than upon Epicurus, who discerned the nature of things and alone knew the truth in them? (*Alexander* 25).

Given his positive portrayal of Epicureanism, if Lucian identifies himself with his narrator, Epicureanism is his philosophy. However, there are complications to this positive reading of Epicureanism in *Alexander*.

Although Lucian's treatment of Epicureanism is positive, it is stereotypical. Peter van Nuffelen identifies three instances in which Lucian uses apparently positive stereotypes of Epicureanism to mock the philosophy (187-88). The first is when Alexander proclaims:

Ἐἴ τις ἄθεος ἢ Χριστιανὸς ἢ Ἐπικούρειος ἤκει κατάσκοπος τῶν ὀργίων, φευγέτω: οἱ δὲ πιστεύοντες τῷ θεῷ τελείσθωσαν τύχη τῇ ἀγαθῇ.'

'If any atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy upon the rites, let him be off, and let those who believe in the god perform the mysteries, under the blessing of Heaven' (*Alexander* 38).

Because Alexander is portrayed as a corrupt religious figure, the Epicurean association with atheism is a positive trait in Lucian. However, Epicurean connections with atheism were usually made as part of an "anti-Epicurean polemic," as seen in Dio Chrysostom's and Aelian's writings (van Nuffelen 183). Lucian

therefore turns a negative stereotype into a positive one, but he still uses a stereotypical depiction of Epicureans. Van Nuffelen's other examples of stereotypes occur in chapters 55 and 60. In the former, the narrator recounts that at his meeting with Alexander,

καὶ ὁ μὲν προὔτεινέ μοι κύσαι τὴν δεξιάν, ὥσπερ εἰώθει τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐγὼ δὲ προσφύς ὡς φιλήσων, δῆγματι χρηστῶ πάνυ μικροῦ δεῖν χωλὴν αὐτῶ ἐποίησα τὴν χεῖρα

He extended me his right hand to kiss, as his custom was with the public; I clasped it as if to kiss it, and almost crippled it with a right good bite! (*Alexander* 55).

In this scene, the narrator falls short in his professed Epicureanism by “hardly liv[ing] up to the ideal of tranquility (*ataraxia*) professed by that school” (van Nuffelen 188).

Finally, when Alexander dies, the narrator says that Alexander's ending, ὡς εἰκάζειν προνοίας τινὸς τὸ τοιοῦτον, εἰ καὶ κατὰ τύχην συνέβη (resembled an act of Providence, although it came about by chance) (*Alexander* 60). Because the narrator mentions προνοία (Providence) before returning to his belief in τύχη (chance), “[h]is confidence in Epicurean doctrine [...] does not seem as firm as it should be” (van Nuffelen 188). Since Lucian consistently uses Epicurean stereotypes and the narrator seems uncertain in his supposed Epicurean beliefs, van Nuffelen considers *Alexander* “a superbly crafted masterpiece that constantly undermines its own apparent message” (189). Van Nuffelen is not the only scholar to notice problems with a positive reading of Epicureanism in *Alexander*. Commenting on the same passage about the death of Alexander, Bracht Branham says it “reveals a curious incongruity in the biographer's persona between the indignant and sometimes comical satirist and the serious would-be Epicurean” (*Comic* 161). While the narrator presents himself as an Epicurean and considers Epicureanism the rational counterbalance to Alexander's fake religion, he never argues for the superiority of Epicureanism. Rather, “[a]ttitudes are not developed or justified, but assumed and reasserted” (Branham *Comic* 157). Lucian uses Epicureanism as a tool in his attack on Alexander, but this usage does not make him an Epicurean. Lucian takes a similar approach of using Epicureanism as a means but not an end in *Zeus Tragodeus*, which questions the ordered world of the gods. Epicureanism is a useful tool for this questioning, but in the end, “Lucian breaks down traditional ideas and images but does not propose alternative ones” (van Nuffelen 198). Even though the “specific reference to

Epicureanism should not be pressed too far as an indication of Lucian's specific philosophical preferences" (Francis 73), his few stereotypical "jabs" at Epicureanism "are very gentle compared to his treatment of other schools" (Jones 27).

One such harsh treatment, against Cynicism, occurs in *De Morte Peregrini*. Peregrinus has many similarities to Alexander, with Lucian considering both of them religious shams worthy of nothing but ridicule. After a basic introduction of Peregrinus, Lucian tells his reader:

πολλὰ τοίνυν δοκῶ μοι ὄραν σε γελῶντα ἐπὶ τῇ κορούζῃ τοῦ γέροντος, μάλλον δὲ καὶ ἀκούω βοῶντος οἷά σε εἰκὸς βοᾶν, ὧ τῆς ἀβελτερίας, ὧ τῆς δοξοκοπίας, ὧ — τῶν ἄλλων ἃ λέγειν εἰώθαμεν περὶ αὐτῶν.

I think I can see you laughing heartily at the old man's drivelling idiocy — indeed, I hear you give tongue as you naturally would: 'Oh, the stupidity! Oh, the vainglory! Oh' — everything else that we are in the habit of saying about it all. (*Peregrini* 2).

Lucian's scorn focuses on Peregrinus' asceticism, which was a central part of Cynicism (Francis 64-65). In Lucian's work, the chief target of Peregrinus' asceticism is his self-immolation, although he targets other aspects as well, such as Peregrinus wearing ὀθόνη ὀυπῶση ἀκριβῶς (a shirt that was downright filthy) (*Peregrini* 36) and when his fellow Cynics περιστάντες τὴν πυρᾶν οὐκ ἐδάκρυον μὲν, σιωπῇ δὲ ἐνεδείκνυντο λύπην τινὰ εἰς τὸ πῦρ ὀρῶντες (stood about the pyre, not weeping, to be sure, but silently evincing a certain amount of grief as they gazed into the fire) (*Peregrini* 37). Because ascetics "posed a threat to Lucian's culture and society," *De Morte Peregrini* is less an attack on Cynicism than it is an attack on extreme asceticism and a defence of Classical Greek culture (Francis 80). Lucian therefore targets not only Peregrinus but contemporary culture as well (Fields 237). *De Morte Peregrini* is an intense polemic, and if it were Lucian's only writing on Cynicism, readers could easily consider Lucian opposed to Cynicism. However, this view is tempered by Lucian's *Demonax* and *Nigrinus*, which respectively depict Cynicism and asceticism positively.

Lucian is unreservedly positive about *Demonax*, ἄριστον ὧν οἶδα ἐγὼ φιλοσόφων (the best of all the philosophers whom I know about), even though *Demonax* is a Cynic (*Demonax* 2). *Demonax* is explicitly identified as a Cynic when Lucian says, τὸν Σίνωπέα ζηλοῦν ἔδοξεν (he seemed to follow the man of Sinope

[Diogenes]) (*Demonax* 5). However, prior to this statement, Lucian writes, φιλοσοφίας δὲ εἶδος οὐχ ἓν ἀποτεμόμενος, ἀλλὰ πολλὰς ἐς ταῦτό καταμίξας οὐ πάνυ τι ἐξέφαινε τίνι αὐτῶν ἔχαιρον (He did not mark out for himself a single form of philosophy but combined many of them, and never would quite reveal which one he favoured) (*Demonax* 5). If *Demonax* is a Cynic, he is a moderate one who willingly draws on other philosophies. *Demonax* is also moderately ascetic, but he is not austere like *Peregrinus*. Rather, *Demonax* is a joker who loves riddles and “uses wit Lucianically to provoke his interlocutors to consider themselves and their situations from unexpected and often incongruous positions” (Branham *Unruly* 62). *Demonax* is not Lucian, but as Branham observes, *Demonax*’s seriocomic style is Lucianic, and like Lucian, *Demonax* rejects extremist philosophies in favour of moderation. By praising *Demonax* and attacking *Peregrinus*, Lucian reveals his nuanced views on Cynicism.

Lucian’s opinion of asceticism is also varied, as evidenced by the moderate asceticism of *Nigrinus*. Lucian calls *Nigrinus* τὸν Πλατωνικὸν φιλόσοφον (the Platonic philosopher) (*Nigrinus* 2), but this designation “has puzzled scholars, since nothing in his discourse points in that direction” (Schlapbach 261). *Nigrinus* advocates a middle way between the excesses of wealth and leisure as seen in Rome (*Nigrinus* 16) and the life advocated by some ascetics οἱ ταύτην ἄσκησιν ἀρετῆς ὑπελάμβανον, ἣν πολλὰς ἀνάγκαις καὶ πόνοις τοὺς νέους ἀντέχειν καταγυμνάσωσιν (who think it a course in virtue if they train the young to endure ‘full many pains and toils’) (*Nigrinus* 27). *Nigrinus* is an ascetic, but he does not practice self-immolation like *Peregrinus* does. While *Peregrinus*’ asceticism is a threat to culture, *Nigrinus*’ is associated with Athens and the preservation of Classical culture ὅτι φιλοσοφία καὶ πενία σύντροφοί εἰσιν (because Philosophy and Poverty have ever been [...] foster-brothers) (*Nigrinus* 2). Therefore, Lucian supports asceticism as long as it is moderate and furthers the cultural values that he advocates.

Like *Demonax*, Lucian does not restrict himself to a single philosophy but uses many philosophical schools as tools for his satires. In addition to Epicureans and Cynics, he mentions Stoics, Peripatetics, Platonists, and Pythagoreans, but he does not provide a definitive stance on any of them (Jones 25-31). Although “Lucian’s attitude to philosophy is not simple, [...] neither is it incomprehensible” (Jones 32). Given his mockery of

the extremism of Alexander, Peregrinus, and even stereotypical Epicureanism contrasted with his praise for the moderation of Demonax and Nigrinus, Lucian favoured moderate philosophy. As a satirist, "Lucian's perspective [...] is that of a man of refined literary culture, a gentleman of *paideia* rather than an introspective moralizing philosopher" (Francis 54). Assigning a philosophy to Lucian would limit his satiric scope. As a Syrian Greek living in the Roman Empire, Lucian professes "allegiance to culture, rather than the norms of society," and this allegiance influences his philosophical leanings (Francis 54). Lucian's attacks on Alexander and Peregrinus are attacks on the broader culture of his time, in which these two self-appointed holy men were being canonized (Branham *Comic* 147-48). Epicureanism is a useful foil against Alexander, but that does not make it Lucian's philosophy. Lucian also sees positive and negative aspects of Cynicism, and his full opinion of Cynicism cannot be understood without reading *De Morte Peregrini* and *Demonax*. Lucian has philosophical preferences for Epicureanism and moderate Cynicism, but these preferences are not absolute beliefs.

WORKS CITED

- Branham, Bracht. "The Comic as Critic: Revenging Epicurus: A Study of Lucian's Art of Comic Narrative." *Classical Antiquity* 3.2 (1984): 143-63. Print.
- . *Unruly Eloquence: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.
- Fields, Dana. "The Reflections of Satire: Lucian and Peregrinus." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 143.1 (2013): 213-45. Print.
- Francis, James A. *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. Print.
- Jones, C.P. *Culture and Society in Lucian*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1986. Print.
- Lucian. *Alexander*. Trans. A.M. Harmon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Print.
- . *De Morte Peregrini*. Trans. A.M. Harmon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Print.
- . *Demonax*. Trans. A.M. Harmon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Print.
- . *Nigrinus*. Trans. A.M. Harmon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Print.
- Schlapbach, Karin. "The *Logoi* of Philosophers in Lucian of Samosata." *Classical Antiquity* 29.2 (2010): 250-77. Print.
- van Nuffelen, Peter. *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.