Infernal punishments upon the living:
Plutarch, Lucretius, and tactics of underworld allegory

Plutarch ends the short treatise *An Recte Dictum Sit Latenter Esse Vivendum* with an image of an underworld where, granting to his Epicurean adversaries that an immolated or rotten corpse cannot endure traditional physical torments such as Sisyphus' rock, men become *unknown* after death, as if they sink to the bottom of the sea, dragging their ineffectuality and anonymity along with them (1130d-e). This fate after death is not a literal prediction, but an imagistic illustration of what Epicurus' followers willingly suffer now in the living world, as Plutarch has ridiculed throughout the treatise—useless, unpleasant obscurity. Their punishment after death metaphorically represents their moral ills in this life.

Plutarch's choice of this way to interpret underworld myths is pointed: it is a characteristically Epicurean form of argument. Although there is a similar sort of allegory in Plato's *Gorgias* (493a-c), Lactantius claims that Epicurus himself interpreted underworld myths thus (*Div. Inst.* VII.7), and Lucretius' third book contains several examples. There is no Sisyphus in the underworld shouldering the rock, for instance, but only the ambitious man always striving after empty power that tumbles back down (995-1002). This style of moralizing allegory can therefore be associated with Epicureans, perhaps not unlike Plutarch's association of physical allegories with Stoics (*De Is.* 367c-e). Plutarch chooses this specifically for his attack on Epicureans.

Scholars such as Brenk have taken the passage to indicate Plutarch's own eschatological beliefs (22-27). But the polemical context against Epicureans, I argue, motivates this argumentative style. This is part of a broader trend since, in dialect contexts, as Donini argues, Plutarch tends to attack a school "from inside and with its own weapons" (128). This characteristic attitude, I argue, prevails in his interpretations of myth as well: Plutarch furthers his own Platonizing arguments, after refuting rivals on their own terms.

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