Hobbes, Gassendi and the tradition of political Epicureanism*

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1. ‘Christian’ Epicureanism? Hobbes’ “worst of all natural ills”

Hobbes, like the Epicurean philosophy of law and of politics, assigned to the State the primary role of freeing man from the dread of violent death caused by other men. As far as Hobbes is concerned, this assumption does not even need to be argued, so strong and so pervasive is the theme of self-preservation in all aspects of his thinking. The link with the Epicurean tradition, however, does require some clarification, since neither the question of fact of Hobbes’ relation with the texts of Kepos, nor the question of principle about the centrality of interhuman aggressiveness within the Epicurean philosophy, are so self-evident. I will deal with the first order of problems later on; but I will immediately spend some time on the second order of problems, since the cardinal texts of Epicurean wisdom are directed towards freedom from the fear of death through “therapy” in the form of philosophy. Indeed, three of the four precepts that make up the tetrapharmakon are dedicated to combatting the fear of death, of dissolution and of physical pain, whereas, as is well known, in Hobbes’ view the impulse to constitute a political society arises from the elementary stimulus provided by the primary passion, the dread of death. It is true that Hobbes’ political philosophy also ultimately freed the citizen from fear; but it achieved this on the plane of a concrete and collective rationality (a true “public reason”) incarnated in the State, and certainly not at the level of the “private” reason of the sage, as in the case of the Epicurean philosophy, which addresses first and foremost the indi-


3 Ratae Sententiae (= R. S.), II-IV: the first precept of tetrapharmakon, as is well known, concerns liberation from the superstitious terror of the gods.


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individual separate from the public sphere. Furthermore, Hobbes’ strategy implies the full recognition of the validity of that fear and not (as in the doctrine of Kepos) the pure and simple dissolution of fear through rational and highly theoretical syllogisms (like those in R.S. II) whose abstraction has been universally criticized, from Plutarch and Cicero to Bayle. These critics observed that, if the absolute division between life and death theorized by Epicurus succeeds in offering a logical response to the fear of death, it fails to dissipate the dread of the physical suffering linked to the process of dying. And, on the contrary, the true Epicurean sage would have branded the Hobbesian individual’s extreme preoccupation with self-preservation as a pathological form of that «numquam desinendi libido», the “strongest and oldest of all desires”, but not for this also the most rational, indeed the worst breeding ground of irrational fears that bar the road to happiness.

In stressing this split, a distinguished scholar like Arrigo Pacchi blurred the picture of an “Epicurean” Hobbes: in reality, as we will see later, the comparison regains all its relevance if, instead of looking at the moral doctrine, we look at the juridical and political aspects of the Epicurean tradition. But before examining this point, it will be useful to add some further considerations on the idea on which Pacchi concentrated: that common horizon of earthly mortality, which affected both the subjects of Leviathan and the inhabitants of the Garden.

4 R.S. II: «For us death is nothing...» ; to be compared with Lucretius, III, 380: «Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum».
6 Cfr. for example Plutarch, Suav. Viv. Epic., 1104 C, which speaks of ό πάθος τού τίνα, πάντων ἐρίτων πρεσβύτατος ὀν καὶ μέγιστος. The theme of premature death recurs in Lucretius, in connection with diseases or animal attack: «quare mors immatura vagatur?» (De rerum natura V, 221).