

## XII.—The Philosophy of the *Aetna*

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It is impossible to differentiate Stoic from Epicurean influence in the *Aetna* unless one has some sure criterion of the essential difference between Stoics and Epicureans. The mere search for parallels between the *Aetna* and philosophical writings is not sufficient to identify the philosophy of the poem. Three passages are considered which reveal that the author of the *Aetna* accepted the principles of Epicureanism.

The philosophy of the *Aetna* presents a problem familiar to the students of Latin literature. The problem arises from the fact that Latin authors, though greatly influenced by Hellenistic schools of philosophy, often hesitated to identify themselves completely with any one school. Hence it is comparatively easy to detect the influence of Greek philosophy on Latin literature, but at the same time it is often very difficult to determine exactly which school is responsible for any given philosophical element in a Latin work. Even the writings of Lucretius and Cicero, with their specific references to Greek antecedents, contain numerous passages whose philosophical parentage is obscure; how much greater is the difficulty in a work such as the *Aetna*, where no hints are given the reader other than those provided by the analysis of the poem itself.

There has been little agreement among commentators on the conclusions to be drawn from merely internal evidence regarding the philosophical affiliations of the *Aetna*. From the numerous discussions of this problem I wish to mention only two, which are conspicuous for the great disparity of their conclusions: Sudhaus' arguments to prove that the poem is Stoic, and Rostagni's arguments to prove that it is Epicurean.<sup>1</sup> This difference in conclusions does not result from a difference in their method of analysis; indeed, they both use exactly the same method, namely, the search for parallels. Sudhaus finds that many of the philosophical statements in the *Aetna* are closely similar to Stoic utterances; hence, he concludes, the poem is Stoic. Rostagni finds that many of these same

<sup>1</sup> *Aetna*, ed. S. Sudhaus (Leipzig, Teubner, 1898; hereafter referred to as Sudhaus); A. Rostagni, *Virgilio Minore* (Turin, Chiantore, 1933) 281–339 (hereafter referred to as Rostagni).

statements can be duplicated in Epicurean literature; hence the poem is Epicurean.

An example of the procedure of these two commentators may be found in their remarks on the passages where the author of the *Aetna* attacks the poets' explanations of natural phenomena. The mythological explanations of Mt. Aetna as the abode of Vulcan or the prison of the Giants are characterized, you will remember, as *fallacia vatum* (29) and *mendosa fama* (74). Sudhaus has no difficulty finding similar attacks on the credibility of the poets in Stoic teachings as presented by Cicero and Seneca<sup>2</sup>; Rostagni, on the other hand, detects a resemblance to Lucretius.<sup>3</sup>

The futility of such an approach is evident. These commentators, like the ancient doxographers, regard a philosophical system simply as a list of doctrines, which may be compared piecemeal to the doctrines found in any work which is to be subjected to examination. By thus dividing a philosophy into a multitude of doctrines, they lose sight of the basic principles from which these specific doctrines are derived. It is the acceptance of the principles of Stoicism which identifies a Stoic, not the fortuitous agreement on some belief which the Stoics may have shared with any number of other philosophers. If the *Aetna* contains only a collection of doctrines, and lacks the recognition of any principle behind them, then there is no philosophy at all in the *Aetna*, in any true sense of the word. If, on the other hand, any fundamental philosophical principles can be discovered in the *Aetna*, they can be fairly easily assigned to the appropriate philosophical school; for it is the disagreement on fundamental principles that differentiates rival philosophies.

Let us now re-examine the *Aetna's* statement that poetical explanations of natural phenomena are false. We have already seen that if this statement is regarded merely as a doctrine accepted by the author of the *Aetna*, it tells us nothing about the philosophical affiliations of that poem; for philosophers are for the most part skeptical of mythology. But if we ask the further question, "How do we know that the poetical explanations are false?" each philosopher will answer us in accordance with the basic principle by

<sup>2</sup> Sudhaus 101ff., 109 refers, for example, to Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.64, 70; *Tusc.* 1.36f.; Sen. *Nat. Quaes.* 6.3.1.

<sup>3</sup> Rostagni 293f.; though he cites no specific parallel, he might well have referred to Lucr. 2.600-45; 5.396-406; 6.749-55.

which he distinguishes the true from the false; and insofar as philosophical schools differ in respect to this principle, the answers that they give will differ. Plato, for instance, believes that the truth is to be found only in the realm of the Ideas; accordingly, he declares that poets, being ignorant of the Ideas, have no knowledge of the truth.<sup>4</sup> The Stoic and Epicurean views on poetry, also, are clearly differentiated in terms of the basic principles of those two philosophies. For the Stoics there is no clear cut demarcation between the false stories of the poets and the truths of philosophy. The test of truth is consistency,<sup>5</sup> and the poets' stories are true in so far as they are consistent with the Stoic *ratio physica*. They can be made consistent by the simple process of interpretation. Hence, as Cicero says of the Caelum-Saturn myth, *physica ratio non inelegans inclusa est in impiis fabulas*.<sup>6</sup> The attempts to make myths consistent with philosophy are a conspicuous feature of Stoic works on religion.<sup>7</sup> The Epicurean distinction between the *somnia* of the poets and the *rationes* of the philosophers differs from the Stoic in that it is much more sharply defined. According to the Epicureans the myths of the poets are absurdities which are harmful and dangerous because they are clothed in pleasing language.<sup>8</sup> The fame attained by great poets, such as Ennius, is accompanied by ignorance of philosophy; and the greatness of a poet is in no way dependent on the truth or falsity of what he says.<sup>9</sup> The reason that the poets do not know the truth is that they do not recognize the criterion by which truth may be distinguished from falsehood. This criterion is ultimately sense perception.<sup>10</sup> Since

<sup>4</sup> Plato *Rep.* 10.596-98.

<sup>5</sup> *Contradictio* (μάχη, ἀνασκενή) is the Stoic test of both perceptions and judgments; see Arr. *Epict.* 1.7.24; 2.26; Sex. Emp. *P.* 2.111; *M.* 7.248; D.L. 7.73; Phld. *Sign.* 7.3-5; 32.31-38. Sen. *Nat.* 1.5.10f. quotes an example of Posidonius' use of the test of *contradictio*.

<sup>6</sup> Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.64.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 1.39-41; 3.63; Sen. *Nat.* 2.44f.; 6.23.4; *Benef.* 1.3.

<sup>8</sup> Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 1.42 (the Epicurean Velleius is speaking): Nec enim multo absurdiora (Stoicorum somniis) sunt ea quae poetarum vocibus fusa ipsa suavitate nocuerunt, qui et ira inflammatis et libidine furentis induxerunt deos. . . . Cf. Lucr. 1.102-106.

<sup>9</sup> See Lucr. 1.112-26. Contrast the Stoic view that even *fabulae* must have some truth in them, Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.7: quos tamen augures ne ipsae quidem fabulae adscivissent, si res omnino repudiarent. . . .

<sup>10</sup> See Usener, *Epicurea* 179-87; C. Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1928) 237f.

the stories of the poets are not supported by sense perception, they are not true.<sup>11</sup>

The basic principle used by the Epicureans, then, in their rejection of poetic fables, is very different from the basic principle used by the Stoics; and this difference goes back to a fundamental difference between the two philosophies, the Stoics being essentially rationalistic and using the law of contradiction as the ultimate criterion of truth, the Epicureans being empirical and testing truth by reference to perception. It now remains to discover the grounds on which the author of the *Aetna* attacks the truth of poetic fables, in order to determine whether he employs a Stoic or an Epicurean principle. The problem, so stated, is easily solved. The author of the *Aetna* evaluates poetry in terms of an opposition between *pignus* (40) and *ingenium* (75). Famous poets are famous by virtue of their *ingenium*; but their poems are not trustworthy if they lack *pignus*. In other words, there is no correlation between the fame of a poet and the truth of his poem; and although a poet possesses *ingenium*, his poem may still be without *pignus*.

It is fortunate that the words *ingenium* and *pignus* are used several times in the *Aetna*, and that their meanings are fairly clear. *Ingenium* is contrasted twice with *oculi*, in a way that leaves no doubt that it refers to mental activity as opposed to mere sensation or perception. One of these passages, moreover, makes it clear that the *oculi* are a more satisfactory source of information than the *ingenium*:

Nec locus ingenio est, oculi te iudice vincent.<sup>12</sup>

The term *pignus*, on the other hand, is closely associated with perception. The term means, in the context of the poem, a sure proof, or guarantee,<sup>13</sup> and in lines 135–36 the author states that the earth will give *pignera* . . . oculis haesura tuis, guarantees that will hold fast to your eyes. In its three other occurrences, also, the term refers clearly to visible phenomena.<sup>14</sup> The falsity of poetic

<sup>11</sup> In Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 1.43ff., for instance, the stories about the gods are declared false by the criterion of *anticipatio*; for the derivation of *anticipatio* (πρόληψις) from sense perception see D.L. 10.33. Cf. also P. and E. De Lacy, *Philodemus: On Methods of Inference* (Philological Monograph X, Philadelphia, 1941) 151. Contrast the (probably) Stoic view that the myths are false because they are based on sense perception: Cic. *Tusc.* 1.37.

<sup>12</sup> *Aetna* 549 (I quote Vollmer's text); cf. 224–27 for a similar antithesis.

<sup>13</sup> Sudhaus 180 equates *pignus* with τεκμήριον βέβαιον.

<sup>14</sup> *Aetna* 191, 461, 520.

tales, therefore, is accounted for by means of the Epicurean principle that the criterion of truth is in perception. Not only is the *Aetna* dissimilar to Stoicism on this point; it is directly contradictory to Stoicism. For in the Stoic system it is a mental activity which distinguishes true from false; and only those perceptions can be accepted as true which pass a rational test.<sup>15</sup>

Another passage in the *Aetna* which seems at first to be commonplace, but which may be found to rest on a principle peculiar to only one school of philosophy, is the statement in lines 276–82 of the rewards of the study of philosophy:

scire quid occulto terrae natura coerces,  
nullum fallere opus, non mutum cernere sacros  
Aetnaei montis fremitus animosque furentis,  
non subito pallere sono, non credere sup̄  
caelestis migrasse minas aut Tartara rumpi,  
nosse quid intendat ventos, quid nutriet ignes,  
unde repente quies et iuncto foedere pax sit.

According to this passage the knowledge of natural science removes the fear of a natural phenomenon, such as the eruption of Mt. Aetna. Parallels to this statement were found by Sudhaus in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*<sup>16</sup> and by Rostagni in Lucretius and Epicurus.<sup>17</sup> It is evident that the simple doctrine that philosophy removes fear is too commonplace to throw any light on the philosophical affinities of the *Aetna*. But again we may ask a question involving a philosophical principle, namely, "How is it possible for a knowledge of philosophy to free us from fear?" Here again we shall receive fundamentally different answers from the two rival schools of philosophy. For the Epicureans it is the fear of the supernatural that obstructs the enjoyment of pleasure; natural philosophy removes this fear by demonstrating that there is nothing supernatural in the processes of nature.<sup>18</sup> The Stoics, on the other hand, believe that the fear of losing something which we value is

<sup>15</sup> The Stoic criterion of sense perception, *φαντασία καταληπτική*, requires, in addition to the perception, a judgment of the relation of the perception to an external object: Sex. Emp. *M.* 8.86. This judgment, in turn, is made on the rational ground of the law of contradiction: Sex. Emp. *M.* 7.248 and above, note 5.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Sudhaus 132, note, refers to Sen. *Nat.* 6.3.2: ignorantibus verum omnia terribiliora sunt. Cf. also Sudhaus 139f.

<sup>17</sup> Rostagni 292f. refers to Epicur. *Ep. ad Herod.* 78; *Ep. ad Pyth.* 85ff.; Lucr. 3.25ff.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lucr. 5.1194–1240.

the chief obstacle to the pursuit of the philosophic life. They remove this fear by establishing a new set of values, according to which nothing which is liable to loss has any real value. Since life may be lost, it falls in the class of valueless things; and if it has no value, the prospect of losing it arouses no fear. In this way philosophy frees us from fear of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, which threaten to take our lives.<sup>19</sup> The Stoics do not try to remove fear by denying the supernatural, for they scoff at the idea that the superstitions of mythology are believed by anyone,<sup>20</sup> and at the same time they themselves proclaim that natural processes are under the guidance of some divine agency. Nature actually does threaten man, and the gods must be appeased.<sup>21</sup> For the Stoics, then, fear is caused by a wrong sense of values, and is cured by the denial that anything liable to loss has any value; for the Epicureans fear is caused by a belief that the supernatural threatens man, and is cured by the proof that the processes of nature have entirely natural causes.

Does the author of the *Aetna* speak of the cause and cure of fear in terms comparable to the Stoic or the Epicurean view? Clearly he follows the Epicureans. The reason why we fear the eruption of Mt. Aetna, according to the passage quoted above, is that we believe the threats of heaven have gone underground, or that "hell is broken loose." The removal of this fear is accomplished simply by the knowledge of the real explanation of the volcano. Compare with this Lucretius' description in Book VI of the fear inspired by natural phenomena:

propterea quod  
ignorantia causarum conferre deorum  
cogit ad imperium res et concedere regnum;

and his cure:

est ratio caeli speciesque tenenda;  
sunt tempestates et fulmina clara canenda,  
quid faciant et qua de causa cumque ferantur—  
ne trepides. . . .<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Sen. *Nat.* 6.1–3 on the fear of earthquakes; also *Nat.* 2.59; 6.32; *Epist.* 104.22.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.10, cited by Sudhaus 102, 108f.; also Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.5 (the Stoic Lucilius is speaking).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Cic. *Div.* 1.6 and *passim*; also Seneca's explanation of divination and appeasement, *Nat.* 2.33ff.

<sup>22</sup> Lucr. 6.50–91.

In sharp contrast is Seneca's treatment of the fear of earthquakes. The cause of fear is the feeling of insecurity: *Quid enim cuiquam satis tutum videri potest, si mundus ipse concutitur et partes eius solidissimae labant?*<sup>23</sup> The cure is the realization that there is no security to be found anywhere, and that therefore no one thing should be feared any more than anything else. *Si vultis nihil timere, cogitate omnia esse metuenda.*<sup>24</sup> Indeed, death in an earthquake is to be desired rather than avoided; for since we have to die anyway, we might as well die in a big way: *quid habeo quod querar, si rerum natura me non vult iacere ignobili leto, si mihi inicit sui partem?* egregie Vagellius meus in illo inclito carmine, "*si cadendum est,*" inquit, "*e caelo cecidisse velim.*"<sup>25</sup> The conclusion, then, is plain, that in spite of a superficial similarity in the doctrine that philosophy removes fear, the Stoics differ fundamentally from the *Aetna* in their analysis of the cause and cure of fear; and the author of the *Aetna* presents an analysis which is identical with the Epicurean and widely divergent from the Stoic.

One more example from still another department of philosophy will be sufficient, I believe, to establish the distinction I am making between superficial similarities of doctrine and basic similarities of principle. One of the devices of argument used by the author of the *Aetna* is the distinction between common and particular signs:

sed signum commune leve est atque irrita causa  
quae trepidat: certo verum tibi pignore constat.<sup>26</sup>

This distinction is made by many ancient philosophers and rhetoricians. It is at least as old as Aristotle.<sup>27</sup> A common sign (*κοινὸν σημεῖον*) is one which signifies more than one object, so that it is not possible to make a valid inference from the sign to the thing signified. For instance, if one should say that wealth is a sign of virtue, he would be using a common sign; for some wealthy men are virtuous and some are not. Hence it is impossible to infer with certainty that if a man is wealthy he is virtuous. A particular sign (*ἰδιον σημεῖον*), however, signifies one thing only, as one might

<sup>23</sup> Sen. *Nat.* 6.1.4.

<sup>24</sup> Sen. *Nat.* 6.2.3.

<sup>25</sup> Sen. *Nat.* 6.2.8f.

<sup>26</sup> *Aetna* 519f.; cf. the mention of *signa*, *notae*, and *argumenta* in *Aetna* 143, 250, 428, 449f., 526.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1.1357a32-b36; *APr.* 2.70a3-b38. The distinction also appears in Quint. *Inst.* 5.9; Sex. Emp. *M.* 8.143.

say that a scar is the sign of a wound. Since scars occur only as the result of wounds, one may reliably infer that wherever there is a scar there must have been a wound.

The fact that this distinction between common and particular signs occurs in the *Aetna* was used by Sudhaus as evidence that the poem is Stoic. Sudhaus refers to a large number of passages in Stoic literature where inferences are made from signs; and he finds specific mention of particular signs in Cicero, *Academica Priora* II.103.<sup>28</sup> Rostagni does not try to find an Epicurean parallel; had he tried, he could have found it in the works of Philodemus.<sup>29</sup> It is clear, therefore, that the presence of this distinction between common and particular signs in the *Aetna* does not in itself commit the author of the poem to either the Stoic or the Epicurean school. But as soon as we go beyond the mere recognition that both Stoics and Epicureans had a theory of signs, and ask in what respects they differed in their analysis of the nature of sign relationships, then we have a significant criterion by which to judge whether the use of signs in the *Aetna* conforms to the Epicurean or the Stoic theory.

There is a basic difference between the Stoic and Epicurean theories of signs. For the Stoics signs are propositions (*ἀξιώματα*), and the relation between sign and thing signified is established by reason. A particular sign can be tested by the fact that a denial of the relation between sign and thing signified involves a violation of the law of contradiction.<sup>30</sup> But for the Epicureans signs are perceptible phenomena, and the relation of signs to things signified is established by sense perception. A particular sign can be tested by the fact that the sign has always been observed to accompany a certain thing which it may be said to signify.<sup>31</sup> The basic difference between the two schools can be seen in their treatment of sense perceptions. For the Stoics some perceptions are true and some are false, according as they measure up to a rational criterion.<sup>32</sup> For the Epicureans all perceptions are true, and opinions and judgments are tested by reference to perception.<sup>33</sup> There can no longer be any question, therefore, as to the affiliations of the *Aetna* on this

<sup>28</sup> Sudhaus 127; he quotes other parallels to the use of signs on pages 119, 165, 181.

<sup>29</sup> Phld. *Sign.* 14.2–27; *Rhet.* (ed. Sudhaus) 1.369.

<sup>30</sup> Phld. *Sign.* 1.12–19; 32.31–38; De Lacy, *Philodemus* 160f.

<sup>31</sup> Phld. *Sign.* 26.16–39; De Lacy, *Philodemus* 165–71.

<sup>32</sup> Attacks on perception occur regularly in Stoic texts; e.g. Sen. *Nat.* 1.3.9ff.; 1.6.5f. On the Stoic criterion of perception see above, notes 5 and 15.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Lucr. 4.379–521; Sex. Emp. *M.* 8.63.



point. The particular signs, or *pignora*, mentioned in the poem are perceptible phenomena, as was pointed out above; the validity of inference is tested by observation, not by reason; and repeatedly the author of the *Aetna* uses observation as the test of truth.<sup>34</sup> Thus we have found a third instance in which the author of the *Aetna* has accepted an Epicurean, as opposed to a Stoic, principle.

In conclusion I wish to make a few general remarks about the philosophy of the *Aetna*. First of all, I do not maintain that the poem is Epicurean through and through. The interaction of the philosophical schools was so extensive in the Roman period that practically all philosophical writers reveal the influence of more than one school. Certainly I know of no entirely orthodox Epicurean after 100 B.C., in spite of the handbook dictum that the Epicureans never deviated from their master's teachings. The *Aetna*, in particular, contains an explanation of volcanoes which was developed gradually by contributions from a number of sources, including Stoicism.<sup>35</sup> But even the occurrence of Stoic doctrines in the poem does not justify the conclusion that the poem is Stoic, unless it can be shown that the principles of Stoicism also appear. It is generally believed that there are Stoic doctrines in the sixth book of Lucretius,<sup>36</sup> but no one would for that reason call the *De Rerum Natura* a Stoic poem. The search for Stoic principles in the *Aetna* is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Another point that requires a word of explanation is Sudhaus' use of Posidonius. It is specifically Posidonius who, in Sudhaus' opinion, is the Stoic source of the *Aetna*. Here Sudhaus was undoubtedly influenced by the widespread tendency in German scholarship of his time to regard Posidonius as one of the main sources of later Greek and Roman philosophy. Sudhaus accepted Schmekel's reconstruction of Posidonius' philosophy;<sup>37</sup> and as there has been a succession of studies tearing down that reconstruction, it is not necessary to cover the same ground here. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to point out that although certain of Posidonius' doctrines may, and probably do, appear in the *Aetna*,

<sup>34</sup> *Aetna* 135f., 145, 179, 192, 332, 549.

<sup>35</sup> See Sudhaus' collection of ancient views on earthquakes and volcanoes, pages 51-59.

<sup>36</sup> See for example the notes to *Lucr.* 6.96, 585, 608, 639 in Leonard and Smith's recent edition (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1942).

<sup>37</sup> A. Schmekel, *Die Philosophie der Mittleren Stoa* (Berlin, Weidmann, 1892) is mentioned by Sudhaus with apparent approval on pages 72f., 101, 127, 177.

yet the principles of his philosophy differ from Epicurean principles as much as the conventional Stoic views do; and at least in those passages discussed in this paper the *Aetna* does not follow the principles of Posidonius.

Finally, a word about Rostagni. Although Rostagni's interpretation seems to agree with mine, yet his analysis is in no way better than Sudhaus'. Rostagni, like Sudhaus, rests his argument on similarities of doctrine, in spite of the fact that he talks about principles in a vague sort of way.<sup>38</sup> Having no sure test of philosophical affiliation, he is unable to show that the Epicurean elements he finds in the poem are exclusively Epicurean; hence he is forced to accept the cogency of Sudhaus' Stoic parallels, with the result that the *Aetna* turns out in his analysis to be an Epicurean poem overlaid with Neo-Stoicism.<sup>39</sup> He fails to produce a convincing statement of the philosophy of the *Aetna* because he has no sure criterion by which to differentiate the Stoic philosophy from the Epicurean.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rostagni 286, 293.

<sup>39</sup> Rostagni 294f., 304-309.