taken out of context, but what was that original context? One also wonders about the reasons for Epicurus' sometimes provocative and bombastic language (e.g. fr. 512 Us.: 'I spit on *to kalon*'), which seems to have given his opponents rather easy targets to attack.

Despite these concerns with points of detail, this is an excellent volume which should whet the appetite of specialists of Epicurean philosophy and interest scholars of political thought or the social/cultural history of philosophy.

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ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY TODAY

WOODRUFF (P.) *Living Toward Virtue. Practical Ethics in the Spirit of Socrates*. Pp. xviii + 227. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £19.99, US$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-767212-9.

AUSTIN (E.A.) *Living for Pleasure. An Epicurean Guide to Life*. Pp. x + 307. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £14.99, US $18.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-755832-4.

GILL (C.) *Learning to Live Naturally. Stoic Ethics and its Modern Significance*. Pp. xii + 365. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Cased, £90, US$115. ISBN: 978-0-19-886616-9.

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The books under review bring out the recent trend towards exploring ancient philosophy as a source of practical life-guidance and towards making ancient ethics both relevant and accessible to a broader, non-academic audience. Being written by specialists in ancient philosophy, all three books succeed to some degree in combining the wider appeal with good scholarship, but the balance is different in each case: whereas Austin's book on the Epicureans is closest among all three to a self-help book, Gill's monograph is aimed primarily at academics.

These works also display a programmatic interest in ancient ethical approaches that provide an alternative to that of Aristotle; in this case, Socratic, Epicurean and Stoic modes. In modern ethical thought Aristotle's ethics was for a long time the focal ancient reference point, and this dominance has only been reinforced by the canonical status of Aristotle as the alleged founding father of contemporary 'virtue ethics'. It is not a coincidence that shifting the focus away from Aristotle goes hand in hand with an interest in life-guidance and life-long self-shaping: Aristotle's ethics, according to which moral education is irreversibly concluded in early adulthood, offers only limited help. Woodruff and Gill explicitly contend that the ethical outlooks they explore, and indeed profess, are superior to the Aristotelian way both theoretically and practically.

Here I will not summarise the content of each book, nor will I offer a comprehensive assessment of their arguments. Instead, I will briefly characterise the overall approach of each work and then zoom in on selected themes and contentions that deserve closer attention.

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At the centre of Woodruff's 'neo-Socratic' ethical approach is the programme of 'self-care of our soul' (*epimeleisthai tes psyches*). The emphasis on caring for one's soul goes hand in hand with embracing imperfection and vulnerability as the defining features of the human condition. Since perfection is beyond human reach, the activity of soul-care is not a means for perfection but rather 'an intrinsic good' (p. 50): it brings out our 'commitment to trying to get things right'. It is this commitment that ultimately matters in life, rather than whether or not we get things right on every occasion (p. 89). At the same time soul-care also has instrumental value as it helps us not only to approximate to virtue but also, and perhaps more importantly, to fend off 'moral injury' (p. 32), defined as a conflict or 'war' within the soul (p. 27). The emphasis on the soul's vulnerability makes Woodruff's neo-Socratic ethical project distinctively (and to my mind attractively) minimalistic and defensive: given the combination of human imperfection and the world's ruthlessness, which jointly make some form of moral failure in every life very likely, the best we should realistically hope for is to get through life morally unscathed – but not necessarily to achieve perfection and happiness.

This minimalism is one of several attributes that distinguish the neo-Socratic approach from – and in Woodruff's view makes it superior to – neo-Aristotelian perfectionism. Another such attribute is an absence of a robust, positive ethical theory of the sort that we find in Aristotle. Woodruff contends that such an absence can be an advantage; at any rate, we find this absence right at the heart of the Socratic approach, which professes the acknowledgement of one's ignorance as the necessary condition for any ethical progress and puts the continuous and open-ended practice of Socratic self-examination, which purges the soul of ungrounded beliefs, at the centre of soul-care.

Woodruff shows that the so-called Socratic ethics, as represented in Plato's early dialogues, is not just a sketchy prolegomenon to the more fully fleshed-out theory of moral cultivation that we find in Plato's later works, but a *sui generis* approach to self-shaping and the good life. Perhaps the most attractive – but also controversial – aspect of this approach is the notion of 'moral injury'. The intuitive appeal of this notion derives from parallels with bodily illness, recurrent in Plato's early dialogues. The philosophically attractive implication of this notion is a link between moral badness and subjective ill-being: when you act badly, your action has a damaging impact on your soul and often leads to psychological distress. Woodruff suggests that war veterans are clear instances of such distress; he himself belongs to this group. War veterans may be haunted by atrocities they committed while on duty, and in that sense are 'at war with themselves'. This example helps to draw an important practical lesson about moral injury: even the best people do bad things under duress; and when you are caught in a moral dilemma, having to choose between committing one of two evils, moral injury is inevitable even if you manage to do the right thing, i.e. to choose the lesser evil. Hence the maxim: 'Avoid circumstances that are morally dangerous' (p. 204).

But the notion of 'moral injury' in general and Woodruff's concept of it in particular are somewhat vague and unstable. First, without an account of the soul's structure it is not clear whether psychological injury is more than a metaphor. On one such account familiar from Plato's *Republic*, the injury amounts to the soul's dysfunction. This dysfunction is caused by a perversion of the natural hierarchy within the soul, so that reason comes to be tyrannised by non-rational elements instead of ruling them. But this is not a psychological account that Woodruff can adopt; instead, he seems to understand moral injury simply as latent 'bad conscience'. This notion captures the idea that some forms of wrongdoing can be traumatic for the agent. However, trauma does not always entail a moral dysfunction: psychological well-being and moral corruption often come separately.

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The trauma may stem from having committed something bad in the past, perhaps because I had no other choice, but that does not make me morally corrupt. In turn, there are arguably humans who habitually commit atrocities without feeling any distress: are they morally injured? On Plato's view, certainly; on the 'bad conscience' view, presumably not – but surely that is an unattractive upshot for a Socratic.

The possibility of un-distressed moral monsters raises doubts about Woodruff's definition of moral injury in terms of psychological or moral conflict: moral injury does not always entail moral conflict, and moral conflict does not always entail moral injury. Moreover, the neo-Socratic account even suggests that moral conflict could indicate a degree of moral health. Woodruff notes that virtues can conflict (p. 197) and that we are the more susceptible to being caught in a moral dilemma the more virtuous we are. But if it is virtue that makes us susceptible to moral conflict, should neo-Socratics not welcome moral conflict, at least in its conscious and painful forms, as befits their practice of self-examination and elenctic reasoning? After all, it is characteristic of Woodruff's Socrates that he was not tranquil: 'Human wisdom is active and upsetting and so does not allow for much tranquility. Socrates was not tranquil' (p. 111).

In contrast to Woodruff's neo-Socratics, the Epicureans do strive for 'tranquillity' (*ataraxia*), which is another word for the most important kind of pleasure, i.e. the freedom from psychological pain. 'Pleasure' is, of course, the keyword of Epicurean ethics, as reflected in the title of Austin's engaging volume. Strikingly, however, pleasure does not figure as the central theoretical concept in her exposition of Epicurean ethics; it is only in endnotes (p. 270) that she mentions what is presumably the most often debated distinction within Epicurean ethics, i.e. the distinction between static and kinetic pleasures. This omission reflects Austin's effort to keep the presentation free of technical jargon, and it does not lead to a distortion or oversimplification of Epicurean theory. For while pleasure is regarded as the end of human life, it is another philosophical concept that does most of the philosophical heavy lifting in the Epicurean account: desire. Whether or not we achieve tranquillity depends on whether we fulfil our desires, which again depends on what kinds of desires we have in the first place. On Austin's account, Epicurean happiness is ultimately a state of 'satisfaction' (p. 140), which results from catering to 'necessary' desires that can be fully satisfied by reaching a certain threshold of saturation, and eliminating 'corrosive' desires, which inevitably lead to a state of chronic dissatisfaction. Austin does an excellent job in showing how this principle of satisfaction can be applied to the challenges of everyday life, including eating habits, social media or parenting.

Casting Epicurean ethics as a philosophy of achieving satisfaction, rather than pursuing pleasure, is an attractive move: it captures the crucial link between pleasure and desire, while helping to characterise Epicurean happiness in psychologically positive terms – for it feels good to be satisfied – rather than as the mere absence of distress. At the same time it raises concerns as to whether Epicureans have a positive life project to offer. When a modern audience reads about a 'guide to life', they might understand it as a guide to well-being but also as a guide to a meaningful life. While it is attractive to say that well-being consists in long-term overall satisfaction, it seems odd to say that reaching and maintaining the state of my personal satisfaction is what makes my life meaningful. When asked 'what do you live for?', it is acceptable to say 'I live for pleasure' but less so 'I live to be satisfied' – just satisfied with what, one might wonder? This is perhaps more an objection to Epicurean ethics than to Austin's presentation of it, but it seems that Epicurean ethics will have difficulty preserving some important intuitions about what it takes to live a good life. One way to get around this objection would be to say that the way of life that guarantees satisfaction necessarily prioritises activities

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and projects that are meaningful; in the Epicurean case, they have to do with cultivating friendships and communal life. Friendship is the most important and recurrent theme in Austin's book, precisely because it could protect the Epicurean project from the charge of meaninglessness. Some of the things that make life meaningful are those that we would die for; and Epicurus says that the sage would die for a friend.

Austin's account attests that it is possible to go a long way towards offering a highly accessible discussion of a philosophical theory without compromising scholarly rigour, but also that there is always some price to pay. An example is the recurrent contrast between the Epicureans and their main philosophical rivals, the Stoics. Throughout, Austin tends to portray Stoics uncharitably, but not always on good grounds. For instance, in the discussion of coping with grief, she notes that 'Epicurus, unlike the Stoics, suggests strategies for coping with and counteracting grief rather than encouraging its elimination' (p. 159). As far as the Stoics are concerned, this seems off the mark. Some Stoic sources, such as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* or Seneca's consolations, developed an elaborate and psychologically compelling account of grief and its management. This account rests on a distinction between natural and inevitable grief, which is temporally limited and must be allowed to run its course, and a perverted emotional response, grief proper, which consists in a judgement 'added' to the natural response. More generally, Austin's recurrent contrasts between the Epicureans and the Stoics tend to eclipse the importance of the shared Hellenistic context, as reflected, for instance, in the common emphasis in both these schools on the central role of intellectual cognition in philosophical therapy.

The scholarly attention to historical context and the range of textual sources is one of the virtues of Gill's volume about Stoic ethics. Since the reviews of this work have so far been overwhelmingly positive (J. Sellars, *NDPR* [July 2023] or R. Woolf, *Mind* [September 2023]) – and for the most part deservedly so –, I will complement them with a set of more critical remarks. The book consists of a detailed interpretation of the central themes and theses of Stoic ethics (Parts 1 and 2), and an exploration of the potential of Stoic ethics to inspire debates about contemporary ethics in general and about virtue ethics in particular (Part 3). I find the third part, and particularly Gill's systematic and spirited defence of the superiority of Stoic ethics to its Aristotelian rival, to be the most engaging part of the book, both for specialists in ancient philosophy and for ethicists. In contrast, the lengthy exposition in the first two exegetical parts seems to me to make a relatively limited contribution to the scholarship on Stoicism. Gill intervenes at length into long-running debates, for example on the foundational role of Stoic physics for their ethics or on the Stoic account of practical deliberation, and his interventions bring results that tend to be too fine-grained to be of real relevance for the intended audience of non-historical philosophers. Their attention will be challenged to survive the first two exegetical parts.

At times I found it difficult to locate where precisely G.'s contribution lies. I was puzzled, in particular, by his account of practical deliberation espoused in Chapter 2. This account is offered as an alternative to proposals by R. Barney and T. Brennan. Some of Gill's formulations (e.g. at pp. 95 and 318) might suggest that Barney is the chief proponent of a maximising model of deliberation, which consists fully in choosing the course of action that maximises preferred indifferents for the agent. So it should be made clear here, for the record, that Barney does not endorse the maximising model in her aporetic article; in fact, she rejects it as a viable Stoic account (it 'goes off the rails', R. Barney, *OSAP* 24 [2003], 324). An account that she finds more promising – though also problematic – in contrast is what she calls the 'Degrees of Nature' model, on which 'preferred indifferents are a subset of the "things in accordance with nature"' (ibid., p. 333), where the latter is a broader category, which includes both preferred

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indifferents and other-regarding actions, including noble self-sacrifice; and the latter can be assessed as being 'more' in accordance with nature and therefore worth choosing. But this sounds strikingly similar to the account at which Gill arrives at the end of Chapter 2: 'But this motive [of selecting preferable indifferents] is subsumed under the broader desire to lead the life according to nature ... This point is, presumably ... that acting in line with nature (meaning acting in line with human fellowship) is *more* natural than acting in a way that (simply) secures preferable indifferents for oneself' (Gill, p. 96). At this point of the discussion one would like to hear how, precisely, his version of the 'Degrees of Nature' model differs from that entertained by Barney, and whether it stands a better chance of withstanding the weighty objections raised against this model by Barney herself. Thus, while the chapter contains worthwhile close readings of important passages, it does not really change the contours of the current understanding of the Stoic practical deliberation.

Even when Gill's discussions in other chapters are more rewarding, there is a tendency to get bogged down in the details of existing scholarly debates at the expense of pursuing genuinely new lines of inquiry. Yet the book has a clear rationale of and potential for scholarly innovation. For instance, Gill's commendable emphasis on the Stoic conception of human nature as rational *and* social would deserve a more systematic exploration, particularly concerning the precise nature of connection between rationality and sociability. One wonders whether one could conceive of rationality in the absence of sociability at all or whether rationality is inherently social. Could we perhaps find the root of the social character of rationality in the distinctively Stoic conception of human rationality in terms of self-awareness and self-reflectivity? Some Stoics, such as Epictetus, explicitly articulate the act of assenting to one's thoughts, i.e. the starting point of action, as a kind of inner dialogue in which one examines one's own thoughts. Could it be that human sociability ultimately derives from this inevitable companionship of each of us with ourselves? This is just one line of inquiry that Gill's proposal opens, and which might be worth pursuing on a different occasion.

When it comes to the third, non-exegetical part, one wonders whether Gill does not unnecessarily foreclose his options by insisting on Stoicism being primarily a kind of 'virtue ethics'. On the one hand, virtue ethics does have a claim on Stoic ethics, for it is virtue – a state of the agent's character – that makes an action morally 'right' (a *katorthoma*). On the other hand, insofar as an action is 'appropriate' (a *kathekon* or *officium*), it has moral value even though it falls short of being 'right' in the sense of emerging from virtue. The value of *kathekonta*, occasionally (though controversially) also translated as 'duties', does not derive from the virtuous disposition of the agent but from the reasons one has for doing these actions, which again depends on one's natural constitution, rules within one's community or one's social roles. In the ancient context this was an important innovation and a main reason why a number of modern scholars regarded the Stoics as predecessors of deontological or, more specifically, Kantian ethics. Two recent books that emphasise the proto-deontological and role-ethical orientation of Stoic thought, J. Visnjic's *The Invention of Duty* (2021) and B. Johnson's *The Role Ethics of Epictetus* (2014), are missing from Gill's rather extensive bibliography.

If there is a single most distinctive feature of ancient Stoic ethical theory that is worth exploring in a study that speaks to modern ethicists, it might be the peculiar way in which it combines elements of ethical theories that appear, from the contemporary perspective, as competing or even incompatible. Some modern commentators have suggested that the increasing emphasis on *kathekonta* or *officia* in later Stoicism goes hand in hand with a diminished role of virtue and a decreasing commitment to eudaemonism. But does this view truly reflect the development of Stoic thought, or is it a conclusion largely driven

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by the modern presumption that there is necessarily a tension between pursuing happiness and fulfilling obligations? If the latter, could we draw lessons from the Stoic texts about how eudaemonism and virtue ethics can be integrated with deontology? Or, rather, is the lesson that we should not anachronistically insist on aligning the Stoic position with our modern templates for moral theory? Gill's main achievement in the third part consists in showing that the Stoic version of 'virtue ethics' is at least as promising as or even superior to its older and more famous Aristotelian sister. But this still leaves ample scope for another study of Stoic ethics for contemporary philosophers, one which starts with a less constrained conception of what kind of ethical theory Stoic ethics amounts to.

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THE WORTHWHILE LIFE IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

MACHEK (D.) *The Life Worth Living in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Pp. xiv + 257. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £75, US$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-009-25787-9.
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This book is about conceptions of life and its worth as they were developed in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. There are chapters on Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, ancient hedonists, the Peripatetics and Plotinus. The chapter on Plato incorporates discussion of Socrates; it does not attempt to distinguish a separate Socratic view on life. The chapter on the Stoics mostly concerns Roman Stoicism, though there is some discussion of Chrysippus. The chapter on hedonism includes both Cyrenaics and Epicureans, with the focus mainly on the latter. There is no dedicated discussion of Scepticism. The overall approach is interpretative, rather than evaluative; M. delineates the perspectives on life held by these various philosophers and compares them only insofar as that sharpens our understanding of each. The interpretations are nevertheless charitable, and they are set out in an engaging way, without much intrusion of scholarship or philology.

There are, of course, many books on similar topics, with some of them covering almost exactly the same historical ground. It would be good, then, to identify what sets *The Life Worth Living* apart from other works. In this respect, it helps to note how the title is slightly misleading. The book is not an examination of the life worth living as *distinct* from, say, the pursuit of wisdom. That is good, because in most ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, the philosophical life turns out to *be* the life worth living or at least the life *most* worth living. What sets M.'s book apart is how it focuses on the concept of worth itself. For each philosophical perspective, M. asks: (i) what is the worth of just being alive, (ii) what is the worth of lives that are sub-optimal, and (iii) what is the life *most* worth living. Other works consider almost exclusively the third question and rarely make comparisons between all three. The originality of the volume lies primarily in its discussions of the first two questions. In the first case M. discovers intriguing tensions within Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy. In the second M. reveals unexpected differences between ancient philosophies. For example, Aristotelian and

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