



ASPECTS OF EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

AOIZ (J.), BOERI (M.D.) *Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy. Security, Justice and Tranquility*. Pp. x+242. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Cased, £85, US \$115. ISBN: 978-1-350-34654-3.

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Aoiz and Boeri (hereafter ‘A&B’) have written an important contribution to the study of Epicureanism and ancient political thought. Epicurean political theory has been a topic of increasing interest in recent years (see esp. G. Roskam, *Live Unnoticed* [2007]), and many scholars are increasingly inclined to reject interpretations of the school that rely on clichés paraded by hostile ancient commentators that portray Epicureans as apolitical, antisocial parasites. A&B not only summarise these scholarly trends but offer what is probably the most up-to-date and comprehensive interpretation of Epicurean political theory, along with discussions of the political activities of actual historical actors in Greece and Rome for whom there is evidence of Epicurean sympathies. The result is a monograph that will be required reading for specialists in Epicurean philosophy and of great interest to scholars of ancient philosophy and political thought more generally.

The book is well-documented and cites works published as late as 2022. Particularly laudable is the use of a wide range of Epicurean texts, some of which are occasionally overlooked even in specialist circles (e.g. Demetrius Laco, Polyaeus and the *Life of Philonides*). Also welcome is the engagement with material outside narrow conceptions of political philosophy: Chapter 3, for example, profitably deploys passages from Demosthenes, Isocrates and Thucydides to better situate Epicurean thought in its context. The book is furthermore very readable: the arguments are signposted with admirable clarity, and the main text proceeds briskly, with detailed endnotes for specialists. The only real concern I have is the authors’ concision. Although brevity is welcome in a world arguably oversaturated with monographs, aspects of A&B’s arguments are at several points a little underdeveloped. This, I think, is a result of the book’s high ambitions: while the discussions of anti-Epicurean polemics and cases studies of historical Epicureans are commendable, it is difficult to cover all this fully in a book whose main text is only 166 pages.

Chapters 1–3, which reconstruct a coherent Epicurean approach to political philosophy, are the core of the book and are, in my view, also the most successful. A&B set out not only the normative ideal of Epicurean politics but also flesh out life under an imperfect constitution or in prehistory (the latter a topic much discussed by ancient authors and early modern state of nature theorists). Chapter 1 outlines the Epicurean genealogy of justice and establishes several key aspects of the Epicurean approach to politics and philosophy more generally, including the importance of the study of nature (*physiologia*), knowledge of which can dispel false beliefs and enable a happy life; the essential role played in human society of a pact ‘to neither harm nor be harmed’, which depends upon the particular situation of a given community; and the critical role of friendship in human life. Chapter 2 establishes the concept of security (*asphaleia*) as a critical aspect of Epicurean political philosophy. Rejecting readings of Lucretian ‘primitivism’, A&B argue that a complete and maximally pleasurable life necessarily presupposes some form of society and thus political engagement. Security is therefore an essential component of the happy life as it provides safety, opportunities for friendship and confidence about the future. Chapter 3 offers an interpretation of the tricky epistemological concept of the

prolēpsis ('preconception') of 'the just', which A&B argue is the canon or yardstick by which an Epicurean knows what is just and is thereby able to effectively analyse political institutions and actions. The analysis here of several difficult passages, which discuss how 'the just' can change from time to time or community to community, is very helpful. The upshot is that A&B chart a course between positing a form of Epicurean natural law and adopting a purely conventional reading of justice. Instead, they argue that although there is no 'justice in itself', and indeed 'the just' may vary from community to community, natural human needs nevertheless entail that justice is not purely arbitrary: the essential importance of a compact for mutual protection, which reflects the *prolēpsis* of the just and is enabled through the development of a common language, is constant.

A few aspects of these chapters would have profited from more detailed analysis. A discussion of the question of Epicurus vs the Epicurean tradition would have been useful. For example, much emphasis is given to fragments/paraphrases of later Epicurean authors. Do their doctrines reflect Epicurus' original positions or rather innovations resulting from later Hellenistic debates? One could also ask whether Porphyry's account of Hermarchus is particularly reliable. After all, a recent commentator on *De abstinentia* highlights Porphyry's sometimes squirrely habits of 'quotation' (G. Clark, *Porphyry: On Abstinence from Killing Animals* [2000], p. 20). Finally, the discussion of Epicurean friendship in light of more general cultural assumptions in antiquity is promising but brief.

Chapters 4–6 offer a series of elaborations on the political theory reconstructed in the first half of the book. Chapter 4 uses case studies of Cicero, Plutarch and Lactantius to explore the motivations and argumentative tactics of ancient critics. Through readings of select polemical passages alongside more general reflections, A&B reasonably claim that these hostile, often vituperative critics did much to cement stereotypes of apolitical Epicureanism in the Western tradition. Chapter 5 tackles the life of the Epicurean Sage, starting with a contrast with the Stoic wise man. The bulk of the chapter is an analysis of how an Epicurean would respond to Plato's challenge of contractual theories of justice in his Ring of Gyges thought experiment (*Rep.* 2), along with later variants in Cicero and Plutarch. In other words, would an Epicurean act unjustly if he or she could get away with it? A&B suggest that the sage would not act unjustly, given his limited desires, lack of fear of death and a commitment to justice that goes over and above any written law. Chapter 6 offers a wide-ranging survey of Greeks and Romans of well-documented Epicurean sympathies, including coverage of inscriptional evidence and information drawn from Cicero's correspondence, alongside analysis of the political implications of Epicurus' will. The aim here is to show concrete evidence of Epicurean political activity as well as to drive a stake in the heart of hostile slogans claiming the school did not do politics.

A few issues in the second half are also underdeveloped. The 25 pages of Chapter 4 provide space for only the briefest outline of anti-Epicurean polemics in antiquity. A&B are also a little harsh on ancient critics, especially since Epicureans were guilty of violent polemic themselves (K. Kleve, 'The Philosophical Polemics in Lucretius', in: O. Gigon [ed.], *Lucretius* [1978], pp. 60–1, provides a handy list of terms of abuse; A&B themselves cite a passage where Epicurus' critics are called 'madmen'). Moreover, Cicero and Plutarch knew quite well that Epicureans had things to say about justice – their aim is to show that Epicurean statements about politics are inconsistent with, for example, their denial of natural sociability (cf. the argumentative approach of the Epicurean Colotes, parodied by Plutarch in *Adv. Col.*). At points A&B recognise this polemical intention, but it would have been better to grapple with these critiques head-on and in detail, rather than pointing out that, for example, such criticisms ignore the concept of security or Atticus' political activities. Finally, A&B are probably correct that slogans such as 'live unknown' were

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.