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The Rehabilitation of Epicurus

Review of 'Epicurus and the pleasant life:
A philosophy of nature'
by Haris Dimitriadis

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“The main obstacles to happiness are, firstly, desire for recognition, rank, wealth, power and sex. Second is fear of death. Third is the fear of hell fire threatened by organised religion.”

– Michel de Montaigne, summarizing Epicurus

<https://epicurus.today/montaigne-words-from-an-epicurean/>

“I too am an Epicurean.” – Thomas Jefferson

A review of a book on the philosopher Epicurus and his teachings in the pages of the *American Journal of Psychology* needs a justification, a defense actually. The book is self-published, that is, it did not go through the conventional vetting process a reputable publishing house would muster, questionable as that itself might be. The author is not a psychologist and his academic credentials are uncertain. In his autobiographical sketch, Mr. Haris Dimitriadis notes that he studied mathematics at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and economics at the London School of that. These are fine institutions, and we assume they granted Mr. Dimitriadis degrees. He then “climbed the corporate ladder” of unnamed corporations, and eventually found himself retiring to Athens, the city where Epicurus lived and taught during his mature years. Dimitriadis came home, as it were, to the Garden of Epicurus, He connected with the master’s wisdom, studied up, and wrote this book. The book is a partial, in the sense of ‘interested’ – I’d rather not call it ‘biased’ – introduction to Epicurus’s science and ethics, and particularly the latter, which inspired this review.

I would normally not consider reviewing a book written by a nonscientist in these pages, but Epicurus needs a champion in the psychological community, and Dimitriadis has taken up the mantle. In my estimation, Epicurus is shockingly neglected by those you’d think would care the most, that is, the students of happiness. And when he is not ignored, he is misunderstood and maligned. This, we learn from Dimitriadis, is an ancient drift. The Stoics, with Cicero leading the charge, accused the Epicureans of moral laxity and irresponsibility, a

charge better lobbed at the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, but they were gone by that time. The Christian take-over of the Roman Empire put an end to most classic and Hellenistic philosophy, except those bits that could be reconciled with the dogma. This saved some of Aristotle's ideas and scraps of Stoicism. The Epicureans were to be smashed and forgotten, a project that succeeded all too well, considering how little we remember about Epicurus and his teachings. Dimitriadis does a service to psychology by reintroducing him.

It is also worth explaining why I in particular chose to review this book. The philosophy of Epicurus does not seem to fall into a psychologist's wheelhouse. But then, I teach a course on "The Psychology and Philosophy of Happiness" with a philosopher friend, where the similarities or and differences between ancient thought and contemporary data drive much of the discourse (Krueger, 2016). My reading of the literature suggests that most contemporary psychological theories respect subjective reports of experienced pleasures and pains as input to the assessment of happiness (e.g., Diener, 2013; Kahneman, 1999). In contrast, much of the philosophical work concerns itself with conceptual analysis, seeking a normative understanding of what 'happiness truly is' (Haybron, 2008). This normative project decouples the intellectual understanding of happiness from its lived experience. With a normative theory in hand, a philosopher can then detect type I and type II errors of self-perception. Ludwig may have thought himself happy, but he was not; or *vice versa*. There is a whiff of elitism in this attitude.

The normative approach to happiness is hostile to hedonism; it does not trust people to distinguish what *is* good from what *feels* good. In the course of my teaching, I have come to ask what kind of case can be made for hedonism and the autonomy of the experiencing subject that withstands normative challenges. Some psychologists simply declare that the

assessment buck stops with the individual. According to this view, individuals are the experts on their own hedonic states (Gilbert, 2006). This argument is a bit of a cop-out as it ends rather than invites discussion. The search for a defensible theory of hedonism led me to Epicurus, and ultimately to Dimitriadis's book.

Dimitriadis is not the first author trying to rehabilitate Epicurus, but he confronts the psychological issues squarely. A few years ago, Greenblatt (2011) told the story of how an Italian adventurer and Renaissance man tracked down one of the few surviving copies of Lucretius's poem *De Rerum Natura*, which puts Epicurus's *Weltanschauung* to verse. Greenblatt's best-selling and prize-winning book is full of drama and strong claims about how Epicurus's ideas, as conveyed by Lucretius, came to be the midwife of modernity. Yet, it remains less clear why Epicurus faced so much opposition and continues to do so. As well, why, with all this modernity all around us, is Epicurus still misunderstood and undervalued?

Dimitriadis is clearer than Greenblatt. He explains why the ancient enemies of Epicureanism *de chaque couleur*, had much to complain about, which helps explain Epicurus's tepid reception down to the present day. We shall postpone a discussion of the claims of laxity and irresponsibility because they do not hit the metaphysical core. Epicurus taught what one might today call naturalism. He did acknowledge the gods, but probably just to appease the bureaucrats and officers of state religion. In his view, the gods take no interest in human affairs, and are thus irrelevant. The bone of contention was his rejection of Plato's *Theory of Forms* (Dancy, 2004). Dimitriadis uses this theme of disagreement throughout his book, in an admittedly repetitive and simplistic manner. But he makes sure that we get it. Epicurus trusted sense perception perhaps naively, and had no use for metaphysical categories. Bureaucrats and religious functionaries rarely find their passions inflamed when

someone fails to accept Platonic metaphysics, but they do react allergically to a failure to endorse certain particular dogmas.

The particular idea that put Epicurus out of step with the spirit of his time, and which continues to make him unpopular today, is his insistence on the materiality and mortality of the mind. Psychologists familiar with basic biology and neuroscience should be firmly in Epicurus's camp. Recognizing that death is final and that the dead cannot be happy or unhappy, as even the great Aristotle thought they might be, is not the end but the beginning of psychology. To Epicurus, the dread of death brings forth many of the most interesting psychological phenomena (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Only humans are aware, as far as we know, of their own mortality, and only humans can drive themselves crazy with attempts to manage this terror. Epicurus expresses what any sane person ought to understand, namely that one's state after death is much like one's state before birth. As one did not mind the latter, one need not mind the former.

When the dread of being dead is conquered, there is still the dread of old age, pain, disease, and being the witness of one's own decline. Epicurus focuses on the conquest of pain, perhaps because it is the common denominator. He distinguishes between physical pain and perturbations of the mind, or what we might call agitation, anxiety, or 'freaking out.' There are precautions to reduce the probability of pain occurring in the first place, but a pain-free life is unattainable. This means that the psychological management of physical pain is paramount, and this falls into the domain of diminishing the 'perturbations of the mind.' The state in which these perturbations are calmed Epicurus calls '*ataraxia*,' a term invoking the image of a tranquil sea.

The emphasis on ataraxia limits the scope of happiness Epicurus considers essential. He knows that humans seek pleasures of excitement, and that they can be tempted to pursue extreme versions of these (Mogilner, Kamvar, & Aaker, 2011). Epicurus, however, cautions that chasing the best sex or the fanciest meal causes more distress, regret, and disappointment than is worth the trouble. This skepticism with regard to the utility of peak experiences is well justified by empirical research (Parducci, 1965). Epicurus considers such pleasures not only unnecessary from his naturalistic point of view but also psychologically entrapping and dangerous. A third kind of pleasure is even more dangerous because it translates into desires that are both acquired and unquenchable, where ‘acquired’ means they are not natural and ‘unquenchable’ means they move body and mind away from equilibrium and towards pain and distress. Arguably, the thirsts for money and fame fall into this category. Unfortunately, the empirical situation is unclear. Money may not directly beget unhappiness, and it can increase happiness to a point if spent wisely, that is, if it is spent prosocially and on experiences and not on things to keep (Mogilner & Norton, 2016). The desire for fame, it is easy to see, entails self-absorption, which undermines authenticity and thereby reduces happiness (Russell, 1930). Amazingly, however, this idea is little more than an hypothesis. Neither Gilbert (2006) when *Stumbling on happiness*, nor Lyubomirsky (2013; reviewed by Heck & Krueger, 2016) in her debunkment of *The Myths of Happiness* mention fame and its effects. A search on google scholar turns up an unpublished paper without conclusive results.

Dimitriadis lingers on Epicurus’s emphasis of desires that are both natural and necessary. He shows that this emphasis makes Epicurus, his detractors’ claims notwithstanding, a hedonistic conservative. The advocacy of the pursuit of pleasures a healthy mind and body require and whose attainment is sustainable puts Epicurus in the

company of enlightened utilitarians such as Mill or Bentham. Which of these natural desires are best? Epicurus's favorites are simple and nourishing foods and the company of open-minded, compassionate, and sociable friends. What more does one want? This simplicity of desire makes Epicurus's hedonism conservative by answering the charge of moral laxity and irresponsibility. For his part, when Epicurus counsels against excess, he does so without being moralistic. He advises, but he does not command. And he shows no interest in inducing guilt. Not finding ataraxia may be a pity, but it is not a moral failure.

Epicurus's hedonistic conservatism also disarms Thomas Carlyle's characterization of hedonism as a "philosophy of swine" (Crisp, 2017). Mill tried to meet this argument by introducing a distinction between base and noble pleasures (e.g., appreciating the fine arts or a subtle syllogism), which opens him up to the charge of elitism. Epicurus evades this charge. What is elitist about enjoying the company of friends, a glass of *Malagouziá*, and a slice of *Graviera*? What is elitist about *not* getting married or not entering politics? None of this is to say that Epicurus anticipated all empirical discoveries regarding happiness and well-being. Bergsma, Poot, and Liefboer (2008) present a careful review how Epicurus's advice for the happy life stack up to contemporary research results. Dimitriadis would have done well to note some of the limitations of the Epicurean approach.

Epicurus practiced what he preached. He bought a place in Athens that became known as 'The Garden,' perhaps because he and his friends grew some of their foodstuffs there. The garden was not unlike a commune – and here we see how easily our contemporary lexicon gives a suspicious spin to the tale. If philosophy is to the mind what medicine is to the body, we must measure the man by his deeds. Did Epicurus's philosophy help him die in a state of ataraxia? According to tradition it did. His imperturbability in his final hours, when

the pains of his terminal bladder disease must have been excruciating, he demonstrates, as Russell (1945) points out, that “it was he, not a Stoic, who first maintained that a man could be happy on the rack” (p. 242). What we like the most about the Stoics, their cheerfulness in the face of hardship, was really Epicurus’s contribution.

But here’s the hitch. Much as I applaud Dimitriadis’s rehabilitation of Epicurus, I submit that he gets carried away by what he takes to be Epicurus’s endorsement of the doctrine of free will. Epicurus was a materialist and a determinist in the tradition of Democritus. Puzzled by the complexity of nature, Democritus conjectured that the paths of atoms are affected by tiny and unpredictable “swerves.” Along the Epicurus-Lucretius-Greenblatt-Dimitriadis axis, this chaotic swerve morphs into a proof of free will. Of course, this will not do (Krueger, 2018). Dimitriadis, who keeps hammering away at the claim that Epicurus was a free-will libertarian does not do justice to the difficulty of the topic. In this context, it is worth mentioning Frith’s (2013) neuropsychological reconstruction of Epicurean free will. Frith argues that Epicurus accepted the intuition that we could have acted differently. This intuition gives rise to regret when things go badly, and it can affect future behavior. However, the ability to perform counterfactual reasoning is one thing, and actual freedom at the time of choice is another. Indeed, Frith argues convincingly there is no such freedom. I suspect that Epicurus was more impressed by the swerves that Nature dealt him, than by his ability to control them. It is this magnanimous and liberal attitude, I think, that made his reputation as much as the contents of his teachings. “Diogenes [Laertius . . .] affirms that Epicurus was of an extraordinarily humane disposition; this was the prevailing view, shared even by hostile witnesses to Epicureanism” (Konstan, 2018). Why not introduce Epicurus to the psychology curriculum? Would his attitude and teachings not be a salutary?

Montaigne and Jefferson followed Epicurus respectively in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Now the Postmodern world might be ready for some ataraxia.

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