

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – Epicureanism

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: Epicureanism

Author name: Tim O'Keefe

Genre: Philosophy

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: The Epicurean school of philosophy

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epicurus_And_Epicureanism) was one of the dominant philosophies of the Hellenistic period. Founded by Epicurus of Samos (century 341-270 BCE) it was characterized by an empiricist epistemology and a hedonistic ethics. This helpful introduction to Epicurus offers readers clear exposition of the central tenets of Epicurus' philosophy, with particular stress placed on those features that have enduring philosophical interest and where parallels can be drawn with debates in contemporary analytic philosophy. Part 1 of the book examines the fundamentals of Epicurus' metaphysics, including atoms and the void, emergent and sensible properties, cosmology, mechanistic biology, the nature and functioning of the mind, death, and freedom of action. Part 2 explores Epicurus' epistemology, including his arguments against scepticism and his ideas on sensations, preconceptions and feelings. The final part deals with Epicurus' ethics, exploring his arguments for hedonism, his distinctive conceptions of types of pleasure and desire, his belief in virtue, his notions of justice, friendship and his theology. O'Keefe provides extended exegesis of the arguments supporting Epicurus' positions, indicating their strengths and weaknesses, while showing the connections between the various parts of his philosophy and how Epicureanism hangs together as a whole.

In my view Epicurus was the real deal among the ancient thinkers. He got more right than any other about the human condition and sits behind the great humanistic tradition in Western thought. First point to make is that Epicurus DOES NOT recommend a sybaritic excess of indulgence! Forget delicatessen jars full of fine and exotic foods. Although he is standardly described as a 'hedonist', that is not his idea of pleasure. Moderation, self-discipline, discussion, contemplation and the tranquil company of good friends were much more his line.

What you liked: Highly readable history of philosophy

Any additional comments?: For a 144 page quick introduction turn to the admirable Very Short Introductions series from Oxford where you will find Catherine Wilson's 'Epicureanism: A Very Short Introduction', 2015,

(http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/019968832X?colid=2UM7UCT97283H&coliid=IY4O16ZM11CAJ&ref=wl_it_dp_o_pC_nS_ttl)

Go on to read James Warren, 'Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics' (Oxford University Press, 2004) This is good on the argument of Epicurus that there is nothing to fear in death. Enquire at your local library or available at http://www.amazon.co.uk/Facing-Death-Epicurus-His-Critics/dp/0199252890/ref=sr_1_1_twi_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1418736397&sr=1-1&keywords=facing+death+warren.

Get to really grapple with this subject by reaching for James Warren (ed.), 'The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism' (Cambridge University Press, 2009) Enquire at your local library or available at http://www.amazon.co.uk/Cambridge-Companion-Epicureanism-Companions-Philosophy/dp/0521873479/ref=sr_1_1_tw_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1418736641&sr=1-1&keywords=cambridge+companion+epicureanism.

For a lifetime of study and thought on Epicurus and his influence follow the bibliography at the Stanford Encyclopedia here: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>.

Do listen to the excellent BBC Radio 4 'In Our Time' 45 minute episode on Epicurus available at the link <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01qf083>. With Angie Hobbs – Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield; David Sedley - Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge; and James Warren Reader in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. Chaired by Melvyn Bragg. First broadcast Thursday 7 Feb 2013.

256 pages in Routledge

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