
Epicureanism by Tim O'Keefe

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I have been looking for a short introduction to Epicureanism to recommend to students in my upper-division Hellenistic Philosophy course at UC San Diego. The students are required to read, in addition to my own translation (with D. S. Hutchinson) of Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus*, the entirety of Cicero's *On Moral Ends* and several dialogues and essays of Seneca. But Cicero and Seneca are both hostile sources of information about Epicureanism; and the *Letter to Menoecus*, though a brilliantly concise summary, is an extremely brief and compact introduction to Epicureanism, which, of course, contains no indication of the subsequent importance of Epicureanism on the history of philosophy and science. And so one looks for a serviceable starting point for further consideration of the Epicurean position and, hopefully, deeper research into the arguments.

In the case of Stoicism, I have found a book in the same series (Ancient Philosophies) to be very useful for these purposes: John Sellars' *Stoicism* [2006]. Sellars' book is cheap, in print, and contains all of the following very useful tools: a list of abbreviations; a chronology; short accounts of all the leading Stoic figures (Zeno through Hierocles) and of the most important sources for reconstructing their philosophy (Cicero through Simplicius); an overview of the 'decline and loss of texts'; and chapters on the Stoic system, logic, physics, ethics, and also on the Stoic legacy (covering late antiquity through Deleuze, including many important points of detail in the early modern period). It also has a glossary of names and a separate glossary of terms (which includes transliterations of the Greek). It then has a 20-page guide to further reading that is broken down into primary and secondary sources, individual Stoics, and themes such

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as ‘epistemology’, ‘physics and cosmology’, ‘fate and determinism’, and so on. This is in addition to the bibliographic list of references. It also contains a general index and an index of passages. This is useful because the work contains several extended inset quotations freshly translated by the author from a variety of ancient sources. It is a great starting point for further understanding of Stoicism and research into it. As A. A. Long states in a blurb, ‘Stoicism needs a new work of this kind.’ I can assign students to read a part of or the whole thing and then to begin further research with a checklist of ancient sources (about whom they can easily learn more) and modern literature on the theme in which they are interested.

Epicureanism, arguably, is in even greater need of a work like this, at least in English—the situation is much better in French and Italian. One recommends, of course, the parts on Epicureanism in Long’s *Hellenistic Philosophy* [1974] and Sharples’ *Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics* [1996]. Oddly, these modern classics are never mentioned in O’Keefe’s book (even in the section ‘Further Reading’). But as for a dedicated monograph providing a thematic overview and starting point for further research, we are still largely dependent on Rist’s *Epicurus: An Introduction* [1972].¹ So it is this need for an up-to-date, compact introduction to Epicureanism that Tim O’Keefe nobly intends to fulfill, as he states in a section entitled ‘How to Use this Book’: ‘this book is intended as a standalone introduction’ [viii]. Although I do not think that it succeeds at this task, I must say at the outset that I have found it useful in some other ways and I have found myself recommending it to some kinds of students wanting to learn more about Epicureanism.

After stating that he intends the work to serve as a standalone introduction, O’Keefe says: ‘I do not include extended quotations from ancient sources; instead, I usually summarize matters in my own words’ [viii]. For my purposes, this policy renders it unserviceable as a *standalone* introduction, something O’Keefe almost immediately acknowledges when he points out that the student will need an additional compendium of translations of Epicurean philosophers. O’Keefe recommends either the second edition of Inwood and Gerson’s *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* [1997] or the first volume of Long and Sedley’s *The Hellenistic Philosophers* [1987].

¹ Also never mentioned in O’Keefe’s book.

Strangely, he does not (until the notes) mention Inwood and Gerson's *Epicurus Reader* [1994], although this is not only cheaper but also more comprehensive of integral Epicurean texts. The usefulness of that book may be inferred from its inclusion in both the 'Notes' and the bibliography.

O'Keefe's introduction contains a six-page biography of Epicurus and then three pages on sources of Epicureanism, including less than two pages on 'later Epicureans' (namely, Lucretius, Philodemus, Diogenes of Oenoanda, and Colotes) and then about a page on non-Epicurean sources. Many details are missing. For example, there is no biographical information provided about Hermarchus (who succeeded Epicurus as head of the school) or Metrodorus of Lampsacus, although Metrodorus' views about sex and convention are later discussed on page 146; similarly for Polyaeus of Lampsacus (whose rejection of geometry is mentioned on page 24). There is no mention whatsoever of Idomeneus of Lampsacus or of any other of the disciples and adherents of ancient Epicureanism.

The main part of the book is divided into three parts:

- (1) Metaphysics and Physics (which I would rather, following the sources, have referred to as 'Physics'),
- (2) Epistemology (which I would rather, following Epicurus, refer to as 'Canonic'), and
- (3) Ethics.

The sections are uneven: 72 pages on physics, 66 pages on ethics but just 21 pages on epistemology. The book also includes a glossary of terms but it consists of only 17 words, a confusing mixture of transliterated Greek terms,² a Latin term,³ English terms,⁴ and English phrases⁵ The foreign term is not always provided; and when it is, it is sometimes as the headword, sometimes as a parenthetical expression. By comparison, Sellars' glossary contains three times as many words and consistently gives the Greek terms for all of them.

² 'aponia', 'apraxia', 'ataraxia', 'eidola'.

³ 'minima'.

⁴ 'atom', 'canon', 'cosmos', 'physics', 'preconception', 'swerve', 'virtue', 'void'.

⁵ E.g., 'cradle argument', 'katastematic pleasures', 'kinetic pleasures', 'teleological explanation'.

The 10 pages of ‘Notes’ in O’Keefe’s book contain, for the most part, recommendations for further reading, which is awkward because they precede a five page chapter by chapter list of ‘Further Reading’ that is divided into ancient and contemporary sources and followed by a five page bibliography (presumably a list of references). One, therefore, has to look in three different places to follow up some point discussed in the book. But even then one is sometimes disappointed.

Consider, for example, a student looking for biographical information about Epicurus, the school of Epicureanism, and the sources for Epicurean philosophy. In the ‘Notes’, he or she is referred to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* edited by James Warren but not to his admirably concise monograph *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics* [2002],⁶ a work that firmly situates Epicureanism in the tradition of Democritus and provides much background information about the *milieu* of Epicurus’ education and predecessors. Several ways to follow up on the later Epicurean Philodemus are mentioned but nothing else. For non-Epicurean ancient sources, one is told next to nothing but advised to consult the index of sources in [Long and Sedley 1987](#), vol. 1. In the section ‘Further Reading’, the student is referred to Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 10.1–16 (but not given any bibliographic information about how to find that work or a translation of it) and to Lucretius, *De rerum nat.* 1.1–135 (which contains no biographical information about Epicurus or any Epicureans, and nothing about any sources). For secondary sources, the student is referred to Diskin Clay’s *Paradosis and Survival* [1988] and an important technical article by David Sedley. One could pick out relevant things from the bibliography, such as Bailey’s *Greek Atomists and Epicurus* [1928] or Festugière’s *Epicurus and his Gods* [1955], but one is not pointed to these in the ‘Further Reading’.

Similar problems could be pointed out for the other sections. For example, there is no reference to the most important monograph on Epicurean psychology, David Konstan’s *A Life Worthy of the Gods: The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* [2008]. This is in fact the book on Epicureanism that I most often recommend to advanced undergraduates and graduate students, and it is wonderful that it has been updated and reprinted. But there is no notice of this work

⁶ This is not even included in the bibliography.

in O'Keefe. In fact, the only reference to Konstan's extensive work on Epicureanism is to his translation of Philodemus (in the bibliography under the misspelling 'Kontan').

O'Keefe's book also contains no direction for investigating the importance and influence of Epicureanism on later philosophy and science. He briefly mentions the decline of Epicureanism in the Christian era; but in the same paragraph he refers to Gassendi, Newton, and Boyle, and their reviving 'versions of atomism directly based on Epicureanism' [5], yet fails to mention the circumstance that Gassendi was a member of the Catholic clergy and that Boyle and Newton were adherents of Christianity and proponents of natural theology, a philosophy completely at odds with Epicureanism. Similarly, O'Keefe in a different context compares an argument for the swerve to a '*kalam*-type cosmological argument for God's existence', with no further reflection on *kalam* atomism and how it adopted a version of atomism (perhaps directly indebted to Epicureanism) while at the same time embracing theological ideas diametrically opposed to Epicureanism. No mention is made of other philosophers who have made extensive use of Epicurean ideas and are interesting to students, such as Hobbes, Nietzsche, or Marx (who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the superiority of Epicurus' philosophy to that of Democritus). No mention is made of the topics covered by H. Jones' useful and interesting book *The Epicurean Tradition* [1989].

Almost all of my criticisms have been about things O'Keefe does not include that would make his book more viable as a standalone introduction and more useful to undergraduate and graduate students (things which Sellars' *Stoicism* did manage to accomplish). Despite this, there are certain strengths of O'Keefe's book and reasons why one might recommend it to certain kinds of students for certain purposes. Further research is not one of them. But O'Keefe's book is useful as an overview of Epicurean dogma and he makes a vigorous defense of the philosophy as a whole, including some of its least satisfactory parts. Although it contains very few examples of close readings of extended passages (since, as stated above, it does not translate or even quote any extended passages), it does provide an account of the various dialectical positions taken by Epicureans on a vast range of disputes, and a good number of examples which make many difficult positions much easier to follow. Occasionally, O'Keefe's prose is elegant and even seems to be inspired by a kind

of Epicurean conviction. For example, in a discussion of the primary impulse he writes:

A baby feels the pangs of hunger and cries out. She is picked up and sees the bottle nearby. She eagerly latches on and sucks, feeling the gratification of the milk rolling over her tongue, sliding down her throat and quieting her pangs, until she is content. [113]

It would be even more natural if the bottle were replaced by the mother's breast, as in Lucretius comparison of the milk provided by mother earth [*De rerum nat.* 5.810–815]. But here and elsewhere, O'Keefe writes admirably well in support of his points, as with these examples:

we can criticize my son's desire to play with matches by saying that, even though it is fun, it will lead to painful burns and possibly skin grafts. . . the pleasure of shooting up heroin is good, but not worth choosing, and the pain of getting an abscessed tooth drilled is bad but worth undergoing. [114]

I have found myself using these examples to illustrate the same points in the classroom, and O'Keefe's book appears to contain some nutritious fruit cultivated from his own teaching experiences. A small issue, however, on a related point. The cover of the book contains a detail from a slab of the Tomb of the Diver (produced 480–470 BC) which depicts two reclining and barely covered lovers drinking and playing *kottabos*. This is a very odd choice for a book about a philosopher who (generations later) took pains to stress that

it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying, or enjoying boys and women, or enjoying fish or the other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce the pleasant life; what produces this is sober calculation, which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for our souls. [Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 10.132]

This is a key text and I was surprised to not find it referenced in O'Keefe's book.

I have, nevertheless, recommended O'Keefe's book to two kinds of student. The first are students who need a more direct and easy exposition of Epicureanism than can easily be gotten out of Cicero.

O’Keefe shows how the Epicurean philosophy is divided and how its different parts relate to each other as well as to other dialectical options. The book is clear enough, comprehensive enough, and short enough, that such students can benefit easily and quickly from it. There is very little else—other than the primary sources such as the *Epicurus Reader* (a collection of translations of primary texts, mentioned above) or translations of Lucretius—that works as such an overview and nothing like a comprehensive monograph that is in print. That is an awkward fact if you think about it, since Epicureanism was designed to be a philosophy easy to access, understand, and propagate. Epicurus wrote his own summaries of the philosophy to serve the same kind of purpose that O’Keefe’s book does; and had those survived, we should probably need only translations to serve the purpose of grasping the outlines of Epicurean philosophy. But in the absence of such texts, O’Keefe’s work is a useful synthesis of the various logical, physical, and ethical commitments of the Epicureans.

The second kind of student to whom I have recommended the book are those hostile to Epicureanism, who reject it as a shallow kind of hedonism or as having ridiculous views about physics (e.g., the swerve) or epistemology (e.g., the Sun’s being as large as it appears). O’Keefe does an admirable job of defending Epicureanism against glib objections and often against more serious and difficult objections. He is effective at summarizing many of the attractive aspects of Epicureanism and at responding to the major objections. I am thankful for that and will continue to recommend his book for such purposes.

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