



An introduction to Epicurus's ethical thought

John Sellars: *The pocket Epicurean*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 126 pp, \$12.50 PB

Thomas A. Blackson¹

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John Sellars's *The Pocket Epicurean* is a pocket size book about Epicurus (341–270 BCE) and his school. The publisher's webpage says that the book is 4 ½" × 6" and 64 pages long (<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo127021770.html>). The size seems right by my rough measurement, but the page count is not. The last page of the book is 126.

I found no explanation for the size, but maybe the thought is that readers will carry the book in their pockets so that they may refer to it when they are looking for guidance from Epicurus about what they "need to feel satisfied" (1). I doubt many will do so.

Sellars himself tell his readers that "depending on [their] point of view, [his book is] either a companion or a competitor to [his] *Pocket Stoic*" (3). He explains that although the "traditional view" is that Epicureanism is incompatible with Stoicism, the modern "Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy" movement takes "Epicurus alongside the Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius as one of the ancient precursors of modern cognitive therapy" (5).

This raises the question of the primary intended audience for the book. Sellars does not say. He only says that "Epicureanism has much to teach us today" (4) and goes on to explain what that is, but the book is not a contribution to the scholarly literature about Epicurus. Further, my guess is that most instructors will not think Sellars's book is suitable for the history of Ancient philosophy survey course traditional in the philosophy major in many colleges and universities. It is not that what Sellars says about Epicurus and his school is inaccurate. Historians of Ancient philosophy will find the content of his discussion familiar, but Sellars does very little to explain how what Epicurus thought fits into this history.

Sellars does once briefly compare Epicurean and Stoic thought. Here, though, the comparison is pretty short on details. Sellars says that "both schools thought that all our knowledge comes via our senses" (4), but he does not take the opportunity to

✉ Thomas A. Blackson
tom.blackson@asu.edu

¹ Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

explain the deeper philosophical and scholarly point that this is not always thought to mean that the Epicureans and Stoics were in agreement in their epistemology and that both were empiricists.

Sellars also briefly notes that Epicurus follows in the tradition of “the Greek philosopher Democritus” (103). He does not, though, tell his readers that Democritus is a Presocratic philosopher or take the opportunity to explain that Epicurus looks back to Democritus as part of his critical reaction to the prior philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle.

Further, Sellars’s discussion of what Epicurus thought is itself incomplete. He concentrates primarily on Epicurus’s ethical thought in connection with happiness. Other than his passing comparison with Stoicism, he does not talk about Epicurus’s epistemology.

So I think Sellars’s book is most appropriate for the reader who comes to Epicurus with perhaps an interest in “modern cognitive therapy” but not much of a philosophical and historical interest in understanding Epicurus’s thought and its place in the history of Ancient philosophy. For such a reader, Sellars provides a nice description of Epicurus’s life and a straightforward introductory explanation of what he thought were the false beliefs that stand in the way of happiness.

Sellars does not say so explicitly, but he seems to structure his explanation in terms of the relatively well-known Epicurean *tetrapharmakos* (3). This italicized word is a transliteration of a Greek word traditionally translated into English as “fourfold remedy.” Although the idea is in Epicurus (*Letter to Menoecus*, Diogenes Laertius X.133), we get the use of the word to summarize Epicurean philosophy from Philodemus of Gadara (ca. 110–ca. 30 BCE). He was one of Epicurus’s interpreters and followers. As Sellars tells his readers (73), there is a text discovered in the eighteenth-century CE archeological excavations at Herculaneum, one of the towns buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, in which Philodemus summarizes what he calls the “fourfold remedy” Epicurus left for his followers: that “God presents no fears, death no worries, and while good is readily attainable, bad is readily enduring.”

In his explanation of Epicurus’s fourfold remedy, Sellars’s first and second chapters, “Philosophy as Therapy” and “The Path to Tranquility,” are preliminary. He explains that Epicurus thinks that philosophy can help us find happiness (15) and that what contributes to and detracts from happiness is pleasure and pain (26). Epicurus refers to the state of mind that characterizes the best life for a human being as *ataraxia*. The roughly literal meaning in Greek is “being without troubles.” Sellars uses a common translation: “tranquility” (32).

To become tranquil, Epicurus thinks that we need to engage in philosophy so that we can continuously remember the fourfold remedy. Sellars explains the parts of the remedy out of the order in which Philodemus summarized them (73–74). In his Chapters 3 and 4, “What Do You need?” and “The Pleasures of Friendship,” Sellars explains Epicurus’s understanding of “good is readily attainable, bad is readily enduring.” In Chapters 5 and 6, “Why Study Nature?” and “Don’t Fear Death,” he explains Epicurus’s understanding of “God presents no fears, death no worries.” In his last chapter, “Explaining Everything,” Sellars takes up some of what we know indirectly about Epicurus’s thought from his first-century BCE follower Lucretius

and his poem *On the Nature of Things*. Epicurus himself was a prolific writer. Diogenes Laertius lists the forty-one titles of Epicurus's "best" books (X. 27), but almost nothing of what Epicurus wrote survived. Sellars does not tell his readers why this extraordinary loss happened.

Sellars's book has no index, but it does include a list of "Further Reading." This reading seems directed primarily to those who have a beginning philosophical and historical interest in Epicurus and his school. To my mind, it should have included a reference to the *Perseus Digital Library*. This library has most of what survives of what Epicurus wrote: his three letters and key doctrines. Diogenes Laertius preserved them in Book X of his *Lives of the Philosophers*. A Greek text and English translation of this work was published in 1925 as part of the Loeb Classical Library, but now it is freely available in the *Perseus Digital Library*. This library also makes freely available a Latin text and English translation of Lucretius's poem.

The publisher lists *The Pocket Epicurean* for \$12.50 (US). This is relatively inexpensive, but it is not the public service Diogenes performed. In the second century CE, he had a long wall erected, of which fragments are still being discovered, in Oenoanda, in what is now southwest Turkey, on which he had Epicurus's philosophy inscribed for all passersby to read.

Even so, I recommend Sellars's book to anyone who wants a short, plainly stated introduction to Epicurus's primarily ethical thought but is not initially much interested in a philosophical and historical discussion of his thought and its connection to other Ancient philosophers. For someone with this desire, I know of no book more suitable than Sellars's *The Pocket Epicurean*. My only suggestion is about a problem I do not know how to solve. It would be better if, following the strategy Diogenes employed, Sellars's book were freely available as a resource on the Internet for anyone who is curious about Epicurus' fourfold remedy. Internet access, after all, not books, is what most people carry in their pockets these days.

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