

INTRODUCING EPICUREANISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

[Penultimate draft. Final version is forthcoming in *The Classical Review*.
Please cite that version once it is published.]

SELLARS (J.) *The Pocket Epicurean*. Pp. vi + 126. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. Cased, US\$12.50. ISBN: 978-0-226-79864-6.

The Pocket Epicurean is a short book aimed at the general public that gives a well-written, sympathetic, and reasonably-priced introduction to the main ideas of Epicureanism considered as a way of life. Because of this purpose, *The Pocket Epicurean* concentrates on Epicurean ethics. It also talks a bit about Epicurus' biography and the history of Epicureanism, and it introduces enough Epicurean physics to make sense of their arguments against the fear of the gods and of death.

Most chapters of the book explain central topics of Epicurean ethics. These include (i) the Epicurean classification of types of pleasures, with the result that the goal of Epicurean hedonism is attaining tranquility; (ii) the Epicurean division of desires into natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and unnatural and unnecessary; (iii) the role friendship plays in attaining a happy life, (iv) how to banish the fear of gods by having a correct understanding of the working of the world, and (v) why we should not fear death, given that death is annihilation. On all of these topics, S. is a reliable and clear guide, and somebody with no background in philosophy could pick up this book and quickly come away with an accurate understanding of the main upshot of Epicurean ethics and its roots in Epicurean physics.

This book doesn't engage in scholarly disputes, and the main text contains no footnotes or textual references. (The end of the book contains references for each chapter and some suggestions for further reading.) *The Pocket Epicurean* is extremely short—the main text is 116 pages long, but with pages measuring only 4½ by 6 inches, and 4 pages separating each chapter, it's the equivalent of only about 50 pages. It is not a comprehensive introduction to Epicureanism, and it is not meant to be. It basically skips Epicurean epistemology, with no mention of the Epicurean criteria of knowledge or their arguments against skepticism, and it doesn't talk about the random atomic "swerve" that is supposed to secure our freedom of action or the Epicurean account of language, to list a few examples. Often, S. explains Epicurean positions but leaves out their arguments for them. Examples include the "cradle" argument for hedonism, the Epicurean arguments for why the *psyche* is a bodily organ and hence mortal, and their argument that the evils in the world show that it was not made for our benefit by the gods. And S. does not discuss ancient criticisms of Epicureanism, e.g., that it's misguided to treat virtue as valuable only for the sake of securing pleasure.

In noting these limitations, I don't mean to criticize the book, but simply to make clear what it does and doesn't do. With the recent boom in publications about Stoicism as a way of life, some members of the general public may be interested in learning about other ancient philosophers. I would recommend *The Pocket Epicurean* without reservation as a fast and effective introduction to what the Epicureans have to say about the good life.

