

Swerve some luck my way.

Post by “Matthaios” of February 21, 2021 at 7:57 PM

I recently finished the book: "Epicurus, My Master" - by Max Radin

Written in 1949, Max puts himself into the shoes of Titus Pomponius Atticus; a wealthy Roman citizen and proclaimed Epicurean, who according to the author, had been friends with popular Romans such as: Sulla, Antony, Octavian, Cicero, Marius, Brutus, and Cicero etc. The book dives into his mind on how he successfully navigated a crashing Roman world unscathed, all while maintaining friendships with dangerous and opposing factions. There are several thought-provoking quotes from the book that I may make posts about in the future, but the one I am interested in today is around luck/chance. Comparing the quote from the book to some Epicurean quotes, and then my thoughts on it.

"I believe I have directed my life. It would be unspeakably silly for me to say that I have directed it successfully. I have been successful but most of that is due to chance. My wealth was the gift of chance. Doubtless I was more competent in keeping it and in increasing it than other men might have been. But most of the risks that beset it were the results of acts and events with which I had nothing to do, which I could not have prevented or [changed](#). Civil war and accidents, disease and calamities, all these I have known. Other men as wary and as skillful as I was, were destroyed or ruined by them. My success was as much due to chance as the successful resistance of one or two leaves that cling to a tree when a hurricane sweeps through it." - Atticus (Radin)

"The misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool."

"Chance seldom interferes with the wise man; his greatest and highest interests have been, are, and will be, directed by reason throughout his whole life."

It seems to me that the author gives much to "chance" as an important part of Atticus's life, all while praising the man's own competence and direction as major factors to his success. How does an Epicurean look at luck and chance in the world? Could the swerve be split into two types for conscious beings, such as "Directed Swerve", the act of for example, purchasing the lottery ticket, versus "Undirected Swerve" (luck/chance), the act of winning. (Natural phenomena is all classified as Undirected Swerve).

Or for another example, the fortune of luck that Epicurus was to be alive during a time of relative safety in Greece, with Alexander expanding battles to the frontiers, rather than being born several years prior during the Peloponnesian War and plague, of which his philosophy may never have taken root.

Seems that the swerve has worked immensely in our favor, without giving credit to Fortuna or Tyche.

I sometimes question my own successes in life. Certainly, I have made been successful due to my own competence and direction, but is my own competence and direction given up to the fortunate mindset I have been given (nature versus nurture) in this life, versus someone who does not have a fortunate mindset (non-Epicureans 😊).

Any thoughts would be appreciated, thank you for taking the time to read, and forgive me if my ideas are noob.

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2021 at 5:52 AM

Mattaios as in your other recent post I removed the fonts and colors for readability's sake.

I am going to have to wait to add other comments, but I do want to go ahead and say that I don't recall thinking that Max Radin's book was a particularly helpful interpretation of Epicurus. It has been a long time since I read it and I would have to go back and review before I could comment more directly, but in my early days of reading Epicurus I found that book to be something that I wouldn't recommend to anyone trying to understand Epicurus.

Your quote where Radin is putting so much emphasis on chance strikes me as an example why I didn't like the book. I had the same reaction as you are saying -- Radin is overstating the role of chance and seemingly approaching the issue in a way that I suspect Epicurus would strongly disagree. Certainly there are circumstances we do not have control over, but the perspective Epicurus stresses is that we can and should act to steer our lives as best we can, as stated in your quotes from Epicurus himself.

Since you have just read it please feel free to discuss any parts of Radin's book that you would like, and we'll probably set up a thread on that book if we don't have one already and move this discussion into it. The book is well known so it would be good to have a thread where we discuss its shortcomings (and any good aspects, few of which I can currently recall).