Dimitriadis (Haris) - "Epicurus And The Pleasant Life"

Post by “Martin” of May 25, 2020 at 1:56 PM

Haris Dimitriadis' book "Epicurus And The Pleasant Life" covers Epicurus' philosophy in depth and detail with a lot of references to results of modern science (but unfortunately without the page number in most cases, which makes it difficult to address the "mistakes" listed below).

It is one of the few books which correctly explain Epicurus' philosophy as you get it when combining Epicurus' extant texts by resolving apparent contradictions between the parts in a way that the result is a consistent whole and makes sense.

One topic where I interpret Epicurus differently in several sections of the book concerns greatest pleasures and the classification of desires. That classification may be useful as input to hedonic calculus but the result is given by the expected net pleasure and not by that classification. When fulfilling a desire, our feelings tell whether it is pleasurable, not that classification.

Other than this topic, there seem to be only minor differences on Epicurus' philosophy between the book and my understanding.

However, many details on science and history appear to be wrong, misleading or uncertain. The discrepancies do not affect the philosophy. The following list of discrepancies is not complete but may be helpful to prevent misunderstandings and for a new edition:

"..., neurons may be re-programmed when circumstances warrant the change. For example, they can change their path to activate a part of the brain that was destroyed by a stroke." (p. 78)

It should not be possible to activate a part of the brain that was destroyed by a stroke.

What is meant is probably to replace a previous path with a new path through a part of the brain that was not destroyed by the stroke.

Epicurus' philosophy postulates the existence of free will in the sense of agency and not in the sense of the will of a supernatural soul. However, the scientific explanation in chapter 4 (FREE WILL) is not convincing because some of the scientific results appear to be overinterpreted. The value of the flawed scientific explanation in the book is that it outlines an example of a mechanism which could create free will.

"Will is that which distinguishes humans from the other living beings. It is a capacity that was added in the last stage of the evolutionary process." (p. 82)

This is unlikely. At least, there seems to be no broad consensus among researchers on will in animals.

"It was discovered that in the universe, the laws of gravity divert micro particles from their straight motion and cause collisions among them. In the same vein, the innate power of will in humans can empower people to deviate from the course that has been programmed by their character and the environment." (p. 83)

Gravity diverting micro particles from their straight motion does neither cause collisions nor defeat determinism. The innate power of will must have more subtle origins than what is expressed by this misleading analogy. The reference to quantum mechanics later on is a more convincing path because its mainstream interpretation refutes hard determinism and thereby supports the possibility of free will. Mechanisms of how free will arises from the uncertainty principle are very speculative as of now.

"The unconscious mind works with given fixed mechanisms so as to produce consistent choices, unaffected by uncertainties, or personal or foreign interference. Otherwise, the available options will be uncontrollable and unpredictable, and therefore, there would be no scope for learning and improving ourselves." (p. 91)

The same basic mechanism which allows for free will for conscious choices should introduce uncertainties in the subconscious mind and its production of options as well. It seems rather that association works independently of logic and works as well while we are asleep as indicated by our dreams. Systematic learning and improving happen when the conscious mind uses reason to choose among options.

"This risk of failure creates fears which paralyze the will and leads to inaction." (p. 94)

This is not necessarily so. Even if we tend to blame others for unfavorable results, we are still likely to get blamed for failure on commitments/duties and suffer negative consequences.

The fear of failure is likely to make us think before action. The delay could resemble inaction from the perspective of an impatient observer. Once the conclusion is reached, the fear of failure motivates us to exert our free will toward action for success.

"All philosophies of thought are based on the philosophy that was perfected by Plato. He preceded Pythagoras and Socrates, ..." (p. 97)

Socrates (477 - 399 B.C.) preceded Plato (428/427 - 348/347 B.C.). Plato was Socrates' student. Pythagoras (580/570 - 510/500 B.C.) preceded both of them.

"The German philosopher of the 20th century, Arthur Schopenhauer, proclaimed that life lacks meaning because we are always unsatisfied, either because we do not get what we are seeking, or we do get it and then get bored of it." (p. 107)

Schopenhauer lived 1788 - 1860. Therefore, if he was the German philosopher of any century, it would be the 19th, not 20th. However, by impact, the philosopher of the 19th century would

rather be Karl Marx, or as is stated later Friedrich Nietzsche.

Some claims in chapter 10 (THE PLEASURE OF FOOD) appear to be baseless or exaggerated, e.g.:

"Hundreds of chemical changes occur in the body as stress hormones absorb important nutrients such as magnesium, carbohydrates and vitamins B, C, and D." (p. 166)

"... neurotoxins, which modern chemistry utilizes for coloring and preservation of foods, ... " (p. 167)

"Worries affect the nutritional balance of the body as stress hormones absorb important nutrients, such as carbohydrates." (p. 168)

"The Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, in the early 1930’s, argued that science is erroneous and has no validity. He argued that the most reliable method for finding the truth is the empiricism of trial and error." (p. 223)

This is most likely a false interpretation of Popper. Popper's take was rather:

- Science does have validity, is about creating and testing theories and is not about truth.

- Once a theory has been refuted by empirical tests, that theory is erroneous and has no validity.

- Scientific theories can be refuted but not proven.

Scientists with interest in the philosophy of science seem to agree more or less with Popper but might add other aspects:

- Obsolete theories may be rather abandoned than refuted.

- The usage of the word "proven" by a scientist may be different from the meaning used by Popper.

In chapter 22 (THE WORRY OF CONSUMERISM AND WEALTH), the word "materialism" is used in the sense of consumerism as a consequence of idealism, not in distinction to idealism. In a philosophical context, the terminology should not be confused the way non-philosophers sometimes apply the word "materialism".

"Emmanuel Kant ..." (p. 296)

That should be Immanuel Kant, not Emmanuel.

"So in line with established beliefs, Epicurus accepted the truthfulness of dreams, and consequently the existence of the gods, since he used to see them in his sleep." (p. 299)

Epicurus denied truthfulness of dreams under the aspect that they create fear in the letter to his mother.

"According to the prevailing scientific model of the creation of the universe, known as the "Big Bang," the universe expanded from an extremely hot, dense phase, named "Planck time." At that time, all the matter and energy of the observable universe was concentrated to an infinite degree, to the size of no more than a grain of sand. The explosion that followed expanded the universe to its present form in an infinitesimal period of time, estimated at less than 10-32 seconds. Recent observations indicate that this expansion of the cosmos is not only continuing, but is accelerating due to the black holes that cover most of the universe. According to Einstein's theory of general relativity, space expands faster than the speed of light and as we cannot observe movements that exceed the boundaries of the speed of light, we are unable to determine whether the universe is finite or infinite." (p. 307)

The Planck time is not the phase of the early universe but the hypothetical quantum of time.

The apparent expansion of space would be caused by the presence of dark energy and not by black holes.

"The global warming that followed revived the frozen fossils ..." (p. 309)

The fossils were unlikely to be revived because multicellular organisms with different types of tissue do not survive freezing because some types of tissue are disrupted during thawing by still frozen other types of tissue which thaw at slightly higher temperature. Moreover, radioactivity destroys the DNA during the typically length of a glacial period.

Instead of revival, the warming enabled further evolution of lifeforms from those species which survived.

"These views were subsequently refuted by the observations of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, which prove that the universe is heliocentric." (p. 313)

Our solar system was shown to be heliocentric, not the universe.

"Logic, which contributes to the instant feedback it gets, alters the truth. Its natural role is instead constrained to evaluating the natural desires, and making decisions on which of these to satisfy." (p. 319)

Logic may reveal truth but does not alter the truth.

"One unnatural desire is the need to be the focus of attention and admiration. In the Epicurean model, this desire is classified as neither natural nor necessary and is rejected. Normally it should not be included in the desires of the unconscious mind. If it has, nevertheless, crept into it, this is due to the perceptions of logic that suggest that fame contributes to well-being." (p. 342)

The desire to be the focus of attention and admiration may very well be a natural desire but is not necessary and should typically be rejected but not necessarily under all circumstances because it may help to motivate us in efforts which increase pleasure.

As written further down: "Nevertheless, for those people that enjoy publicity, Epicurus would advise them to follow their natural inclination for as long as they feel happy." (p. 343)

"Some worries are both unnatural and unnecessary, for instance, worrying about whether or not one will do well in school or athletics or be promoted at work. These concerns usually come out of a desire for fame and prestige, which in turn originate from groundless perceptions about what really matters in life." (p. 344)

The desire to win in competition seems to be common among children, which indicates that it is natural, probably because of an evolutionary advantage of this desire.

"In exceptional cases, reason may opt for painful experiences if the returns will be higher in the future." (p. 344)

This seems to be the case way too often to call it exceptional.

"Indeed, urban life is not conducive to intimate friendships." (p. 356)

Urban life may actually make it easier to cultivate intimate friendships because we have more choice than in a village or in a community and less pressure to conform. It is up to us und our friends to make use of the advantages of urban life.