

Reading Recommendations for "Normies"

Post by "Cassius" of July 10, 2018 at 9:47 AM

A question was posed privately that would be good for group discussion. Let me summarize it this way. "Which of the ANCIENT TEXTS would you recommend first to NORMIES as an introduction to Epicurean philosophy?" The twist here is that we're talking about ancient texts rather than modern commentaries, and we're talking about recommendations to people who do not have a background in understanding issues in Greek philosophy in general, or Epicurus in particular. The obvious possibilities include the letters of Epicurus, Lucretius, selections of Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes of Oinoanda, and Cicero. Here are some initial thoughts carved out of a private conversation:

I would consider the Torquatus section of "On Ends" for that purpose almost as much as the Epicurus letters. It seems to me that the letters are so condensed and presume so much about background teaching that it can be dangerous to start with them, especially the letter to Menoeceus given the "absence of pain" passage. The Torquatus section does not have that issue, and it is really a more broad presentation.

Lucretius also has merits in that regard, as it doesn't have the "absence of pain" focus that people get caught on with Menoeceus. That problem is so big, and so pervasive right now, that it just about consumes the question and calls for another starting point than Menoeceus. I am completely convinced that a normie who is led to think that the goal of life is the "nothingness" implied in a typical discussion of "absence of pain" (without the technical background) is going to be turned off and lost at that moment (as he/she should be if he takes the presentation as emulating stoicism). {Also, see the nearby Michael Onfray discussion for an example of someone far smarter than a "normie" who found the interpretation of "absence of pain" so hard to swallow that he decided Lucretius was at odds with, rather than following, Epicurus.)

Diogenes Laertius himself might in some instances be a better choice but might be too detailed. We have a real problem here that needs to be addressed.

Just look at this page of the ancient texts on Epicurus.net -- <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...oQJ4PI5CEwEneJh> None of them really stand alone as being clear for us today. Torquatus explains the ethics well, and if you read that first then you aren't so tempted to get misled by the "absence of pain" passage in Menoeceus. The letter to Herodutus has a lot of good material, but doesn't read all that smoothly. The argument in Lucretius is more clear, but you first have to get past the flowery hymn to Venus and sacrifice of Iphigenia to give a normal modern reader a chance to get into the argument about eternal / infinite universe / atoms before he/she is totally turned off. Even then, the modern reader needs

to be told what is about to be discussed or else the detail about atoms and void can appear to be a total waste of time. There's still a lot more to be done to organize a good understandable presentation of Epicurean philosophy for normal people.

So what are your thoughts on this?

So the bottom line at this point is that if some normal person asked me "What ancient Epicurean text should I read first?" I really don't have a good answer. There is too much discontinuity of thought between the Epicurean age and today for a normie to pick up any existing ancient text and read it without serious risk of misunderstanding or turnoff. The optimum answer is something like "Read Torquatus first, but before you do that, read this brief essay on what you're about to read." But at this moment I cannot point to that brief essay either. The absence of that document (or that series of documents, each one of the series aimed at different sets of normies) is for me the crucial missing link. No doubt people could make suggestions on that introductory piece and we ought to discuss that too. There's always chapter 1 of DeWitt's book, but that's probably too long and not directed at this purpose.