

“Live Quietly”:  
Review of *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to to Life*  
(Good Guides to Life)”, by Emily A. Austin,  
Oxford University Press, 2023.

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And pray, don't forget the garden, the garden with the golden trel-  
lises! And have people around you who are like a garden—or as music  
on the waters at eventide, when already the day becomes a memory.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Book 2, §25)

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Philosophy has traditionally concerned itself with two main questions. What is the world like? And how ought we to live in it? The first is somewhat abstract, demanding a general inquiry into the nature of reality itself. But the second has a more practical bent, since it concerns what we must *do* if we wish to flourish.

Contemporary philosophy tends not to concern itself with this second question. This is unfortunate, especially because philosophy is meant to be precisely the discipline by means of which wisdom is acquired. (Etymologically, the word *philosophy* literally means the *love of wisdom*.) That said, the recent *Guides to the Good Life* series, edited by Stephen Grimm, stands as a welcome corrective to this trend. Each book is written by an expert in the field, albeit entirely accessibly, and explores the question *how to live* from a unique philosophical perspective. The series cannot be praised too highly, much like Emily Austin's contribution, which focuses on the ancient philosopher Epicurus and the philosophy of *Epicureanism* he founded.

Epicurus has a reputation as a radical hedonist, as if his whole philosophy consisted of promoting the virtues of expensive wine and fine dining. But this is very much a myth; a caricature that first crept into popular culture in Ancient Greece and which has survived to the present day. Epicurus *is* a hedonist, who thinks not only that human beings are wired so as to seek pleasure, but who also maintains that pleasure is the only good. Yet, his philosophy is much more sophisticated (and compelling) than the caricature-version that many of us are familiar with.

For Epicurus, the key to lasting happiness (*eudemonia*) is tranquillity (*ataraxia*); and his philosophy focuses on how this is to be achieved. This marks a notable point of contact between Epicureanism the rival philosophical schools of Stoicism and Pyrrhonism, all of which are concerned, in one way or another, with achieving tranquillity. However, Epicurus offers a distinctive conception of how this might be done. Whilst the Pyrrhonists advocate cultivating a sceptical outlook and the Stoics argue that one must focus on becoming virtuous, Epicurus insists instead that tranquillity is achieved by means of suitably regulating our desires.

Epicurus distinguishes three types of desires. There are *necessary* desires, which must be fulfilled if we are to be happy; these include, Epicurus thinks, things like the desire for adequate food, water, and shelter, but also, notably, the desire for friendship, free time, and knowledge of the workings of the natural world. There are also *extravagant* desires, such as the desire for gourmet food or fine wine, which

are admissible to pursue but unnecessary for happiness. And then there are *corrosive* desires, such as the desire for power, or fame, which, by their nature serve only to undermine tranquillity and happiness. One main piece of Epicurean advice, moreover, is to focus on satisfying the necessary desires, whilst not over-valuing the extravagant desires and avoiding the corrosive ones entirely.

But there is more to Epicurean philosophy than this. It is said that Epicurus, whilst sitting in the shade in his “Garden” in Athens, wrote over three-hundred books, as well as countless philosophical letters, and thereby covered an extremely wide variety of topics. It is, therefore, fitting that Austin’s book on Epicureanism is similarly expansive. There are chapters on the importance of friendship (a central theme in Epicurean thinking), the value of wealth, how to cope with our mortality, the pleasures of virtue, as well as discussions of sex, science, religion, and politics, among a whole range of further topics. Throughout, Austin does a fantastic job of making Epicurean philosophy relatable to the contemporary reader, in always readable, often comic, and highly accessible prose. Her book provides a fascinating Epicurean perspective on a wide variety of modern issues, ranging from imposter syndrome to Covid-19, as well as helpful Epicurean advice about how to engage healthily with social media, raise a psychologically healthy child, or even host a dinner party.

Of particular note are the two chapters exploring the enigmatic Epicurean dictum *live quietly or live unnoticed*. As Austin notes, whilst this dictum is somewhat hard to interpret, the core of the idea can be distilled as the guidance to ‘[ignore] status, refuse to clamber for personal attention, and [be] very careful around power’ (p.127). In an age obsessed with social media and status, there is something simultaneously refreshing and reassuring in this advice. If happiness and serenity are among the things you seek, you could do worse than mimic a good Epicurean in avoiding the corrosive desires for fame, ambition, power and attention, meanwhile seeking to form lasting close friendships with those around you and making time to enjoy the manifold tranquil pleasures that life has to offer.