

BOOK REVIEW

The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life. By KURT LAMPE. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xvii + 257. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-691-16113-6.

The Cyrenaic philosophers are famous for being the earliest philosophical hedonists, but Cyrenaicism is a relatively understudied and underappreciated philosophical movement. Its founding figure was Aristippus of Cyrene (435-356 BC), who was a follower of Socrates, and a Cyrenaic 'school' persisted for a number of decades following his death. However, the evidence for the views of the Cyrenaic philosophers is scanty and problematic, their wider philosophical influence appears negligible, and their claims often appear tendentious and extreme. There has been little sympathy for the Cyrenaic philosophers, and they are perhaps remembered most affectionately as a colorful bunch of characters with entertainingly wacky views. This book demolishes such negative perceptions: it draws out the impressive scope and sophistication of Cyrenaic ethical thinking and offers a compelling case for why someone might reasonably choose to pursue the Cyrenaic life of pleasure.

On the one hand, the book is a comprehensive historical and philosophical account of Cyrenaic hedonist ethics: the key figures are examined, the key ancient evidence is analyzed, and the theoretical underpinnings of Cyrenaic ethics are assessed for cogency and consistency. On the other hand, Lampe is very careful not to be overly fixated on reconstructing theoretical postulates as if Cyrenaicism were a formalized ethical theory. He stresses that we should evaluate the Cyrenaic philosophers in their ancient cultural and intellectual context and take seriously their interest in the practicalities of 'living well': only then can we appreciate fully the attractions of Cyrenaic thought and what would make someone choose to pursue the Cyrenaic life of pleasure. A substantial amount of attention is thus given to the psychological, spiritual, therapeutic, and existential aspects of Cyrenaic philosophy as a way of life, as a lived practical ethics; and ultimately Lampe offers a sensitive and uplifting account of the continuing appeal of Cyrenaic hedonism.

The book contains ten chapters and two appendices, which deal in depth with some of the more rebarbative and technical philological issues pertaining to

key pieces of textual evidence. Chapter 1 provides an overview and explains the motives behind the book. Chapter 2 is a biographical survey of named Cyrenaic philosophers: the founder Aristippus of Cyrene, the various 'mainstream' Cyrenaics who essentially maintain his views, and then three key figures who introduce modifications: Hegesias, Anniceris, and Theodorus the Godless.

Chapters 3–5 explore fundamental philosophical issues. Chapter 3 focuses on the Cyrenaic treatment of the relationship between knowledge and pleasure. Lampe highlights the epistemological commitments behind positing pleasure as the good and pain as the bad and the subsequent motivational picture for choice and avoidance. The basic model is this: we have immediate access to the truth of pleasure and pain; pleasure is self-evidently choice-worthy and pain is self-evidently avoidance-worthy; and so it makes sense to structure one's life around experiencing pleasures and avoiding pains; indeed, pleasure is the end of good things and pain is the end of bad things, so the life of pleasure is the best life.

Chapter 4 then looks at the development of virtuous character and the sort of external goods that are requisite if one is to obtain pleasure and avoid pain. This involves an examination of Cyrenaic views on education, virtue, and wealth. Various philosophical problems are also assessed, in particular the problem of accounting for concerns about the future given the focus on the present experience of pleasure. Here Lampe makes a compelling case that the Cyrenaic philosophers engage in a form of therapeutic practice that focuses on the present but has ongoing application into the future as well: they offer an array of arguments that advocate being adaptable and enjoying what is here now, avoiding worries about what may or may not come later. Moreover, Anniceris is reported to have claimed that *eudaimonia* is not the final end since only pleasures themselves are ends in themselves. Lampe interprets this radical claim as a therapeutic ploy: do not be fixated on the (future) attainment of some grand final end, *eudaimonia*, that is above and beyond present experience, for that will only lead to pain and grief. This in practice requires a virtuous state of mind and the possession of a certain degree of wealth; but in so far as one has acquired such things one not only enjoys the results presently but into the future too. Focusing on the present is not at the expense of the future; it is simply the best means to experience pleasure and avoid pain.

Chapter 5 assesses some modern critics who wish to argue that the Cyrenaics have no valid concerns for the future and are in fact outliers in the Greek ethical tradition owing to their avid focus on the present rather than on a human life

as a whole. Lampe shows that the ancient evidence does not support such a view, and in fact the Cyrenaics do care about the future.

Chapters 6–8 shift the focus towards Hegesias and Theodorus the Godless. Chapter 6 traces the disparate Cyrenaic views on friendship and other forms of socio-political reciprocity. Chapter 7 concerns Hegesias, whose claim that human happiness is impossible betrays a deep philosophical pessimism in the Cyrenaic tradition. Lampe argues that we should understand this claim as life-affirming rather than as nihilistic. Hegesias is stating that a life of total pleasure or a life that is purely pleasurable is impossible. Thus, instead of pursuing a vain end, we should seek a life that is free from pain. Hegesias argues that this is best pursued through an attitude of total indifference (indifference to the sources of pleasure, to friendships, to resources, even to life itself), which involves taking things as they come. Lampe argues that this mode of life can be seen as heroic, for it involves the heroic virtue of greatness of soul (in particular, lofty indifference to both good and bad fortune). Hegesias himself emerges as a sort of philosopher-hero, perhaps surpassing even Socrates himself.

Chapter 8 concerns Theodorus and in particular his challenging of religious and sexual norms. Lampe suggests that Theodorus may have been influenced by exposure to the Cynics, but ultimately he extends earlier Cyrenaic views that stress the lofty and heroic indifference characterized by greatness of soul. Theodorus emerges as another Cyrenaic philosopher-hero.

Chapter 9 turns to the 'New Cyrenaicism' of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. This chapter helps illuminate further some of the themes in the earlier chapters, in particular the picture of what a Cyrenaic way of life would involve in practical terms, but it is more an entertaining account of the radical appeal of Cyrenaic ideas in the febrile social and intellectual environment of nineteenth century Oxford.

This fine book is the most comprehensive study of Cyrenaic hedonism in English. It will be the core resource on the Cyrenaics for anyone with a serious interest in ancient ethics. More than that, it ensures that the Cyrenaics (at last) have a place alongside the other great ancient philosophical schools, and it is a model for scholarship that seeks to affirm the continuing appeal and relevance of ancient philosophy.

SEAN MCCONNELL

University of Otago, sean.mcconnell@otago.ac.nz