BOOK REVIEWS

Where is philosophy when we really need it? Why is it so elusive? The last year has seen two important votes; the UK referendum and the US presidential election, and philosophically both had some alarming similarities. They, as if we need reminding, were both characterised by substituting the clarity of a discussion of policy and strategy for the mystification of serial lying, xenophobia, and blatantly undeliverable promises where the ambiguity of reality was reduced to fake news and soundbites, and legitimate questioning was reframed as fear-mongering and whinging. Perhaps Hegel was right when he described the universal human conflict as when, 'each consciousness seeks the death of the other'. The trading of personal insults is certainly not what is meant by the phrase 'the personal is political'.

The so-called debate was also aided and abetted by a press drunk on a heady cocktail of power without responsibility that reinforced the demand that the knowledge of 'experts' be rejected in favour of, what exactly? The rhetoric of 'freedom' and 'taking back control' undoubtedly has great appeal. And why not; who in their right mind would actually want less freedom and control? Except that the freedom on offer was a freedom from 'them'; the Other, that 'we'; the Subject, are alleged to be under attack from. And the 'control' promised is control over their freedom. Mexicans, Moslems, Jews, Romanians, homosexuals, trade unions – you name it – everyone is a possible target and as a result hate crime is becoming normalised. History shows us that this is how dictators get and retain power.

Terror Management Theory formalises what we all intuitively know; that defensive reactions like paranoia result when an objectified Other is seen as increasing our awareness of death; our fear of loss of a way of life. The Other, the *en-soi*, is as we know, the enemy of the *pour-soi*.

Both campaigns also invoked the myth of a secure, predictable past that we can and should return to. But Simone de Beauvoir tells us that this nostalgia for a simpler, trouble-free past is about the wish to return to an era of freedom without responsibility and the hope that more powerful others will benevolently manage our lives and protect us from randomness and chance. In other words, the security of childhood. In adults this is bad faith. She also differed with Hegel saying that because we are permanently bound up with other people the death of the other means the death of oneself. As she said, 'To will oneself free is also to will others free'; freedom is how we are with each other and is therefore a collective responsibility, and although situational it is not a commodity. Beware of people who say they can give you more freedom. We live, we are told, in a post-truth era, but unless the nature of human Being changes, we will never be in a post-existential–truth era.

This is why it is so elusive: truth is hard work and we all have to work at it, perhaps even fight for it, all the time. But like all such things it is ultimately worth it. Why do we do this? This is where faith comes in.

Existentially, philosophy is about reflecting on the way we live and all those involved in the elections votes could perhaps have benefited from going back to the works of Epicurus and Lucretius, which is where we start this issue's book reviews. We stay with our relationship with death and the way it can give meaning to life for the next three books and then move on to the important, unavoidable and rarely examined relationship between the personal and political in psychotherapy practice and then to a reflection on the role of the media in the construction of our hopes and fears. The next book looks at the boundaries of philosophy and how it can change the way we look at the world. Children are the future – they certainly change the way we think about life – but exactly what the relationship is, existentially, between childhood and adulthood is more difficult to say, and the next book argues for the value of an existential understanding of childhood. The final book reviewed in this issue is a return to theme of the conduct of the votes and is a meditation on the nature of sanity, this time from a mindfulness perspective.

Martin Adams

The Art of Happiness

Epicurus (2012). London: Penguin.

In recent years, Irvin D. Yalom has introduced existential therapy to the ancient school of Epicurean philosophy. Thus, in his book *Staring at the Sun*: *Overcoming the Dread of Death*, Yalom makes frequent references to the relevance of Epicurus to the therapeutic aim of tackling the fear of death. In addition, Emmy van Deurzen (2006) has drawn attention to the relationship and between existential therapy and ancient philosophy as arts of living. However, many existential therapists are not very familiar with the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy, including the philosophy of Epicurus.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher as well as the founder of the philosophical movement known as Epicureanism. Epicurus' school of philosophy was a clinic of the soul (*psûche*), based in his own garden. Simply called 'the Garden', Epicurus admitted women and slaves into this school. For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy as an art of living was to achieve *Eudaimonia*. The Greek word *Eudaimonia* is often translated as 'happiness' but it literally means 'to live with one's good spirit', and 'human flourishing' has been proposed as a more precise translation (cf. Nussbaum, 1994). Although Epicurus declares human flourishing to be a

kind of pleasure, it is a mistake to conceive of him as a pure hedonist. The Epicurean notion of human flourishing rather has a distinctly Buddhist quality to it, characterized by the absence of physical pain (*aponia*) as well as by tranquility (*ataraxia*), requiring freedom from mental fear and disturbance. Thus, Epicurus asks how we can live with the most joy and wellbeing and the least suffering, but rather than advocating for a libertine life, he proposes an ascetic practice of self-control and abstention from all forms of indulgence.

The recent volume from Penguin Classics contains all Epicurus, extant writings. Unfortunately, the volume includes a traditional translation of *Eudaimonia* as 'happiness'. Despite this slightly inaccurate translation, the volume succeeds in showing how this Epicurean notion of happiness requires freedom from fear. Thus, the Epicurean art of living is based on a materialist philosophy of nature, serving the purpose of freeing human beings from god-fearing superstition and god-worshiping religiosity:

> *It is impossible to get rid of our anxieties about essentials if we do not understand the nature of the universe and are apprehensive about some of the theological accounts. Hence it is impossible to enjoy our pleasures unadulterated without natural science*
>
> (Epicurus, 2012: p 175)

In his recent book *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* from 2016, Tim Whitmarsh describes how Epicurus and his followers thought that gods could not intervene in human affairs. Even though the Epicurean art of living fulfills all the criteria of a highly spiritual practice, the ancients referred to the Epicureans as ungodly (*atheoi*), and their ideas inspired later attacks on popular superstition and religious institutions. Karl Marx's (1902) doctoral thesis was on the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature, and the teachings of Epicurus had a profound impact on Marx's idea that all criticism begins with the criticism of religion.

In particular, existential therapists will find interest in Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeccus* and *Leading Doctrines*. In these texts, Epicurus outlines an understanding of the art of living as an attempt to heal people's maladies of the soul and mind by assessing the beliefs, values and meanings by which they live. According to Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry's (1989) letter to his wife Marcella, Epicurus holds that that argument of the philosopher is empty if it does not therapeutically treat any human suffering. Thus, the primary purpose of philosophy is to serve as a kind of spiritual therapy that aims at healing the spiritual problems of human beings by freeing them from pain and fear. Ultimately, this involves freeing human beings from the fear of death, because we do not experience anything when we

have died. Thus, Epicurus is referring to being dead, not to dying:

> *Death means nothing to us, because that which has been broken down into atoms has no sensation and that which has no sensation is no concern of ours*
>
> (Epicurus, 2012: p 173)

At the end of his career, French philosopher Michel Foucault (2005) became preoccupied with Epicurean, Stoic, Cynic and Sceptic arts of living. He conceived these arts of living as therapeutic technologies of the self, aiming at creating a beautiful self in a Nietzschean way. However, French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot (1995) found that Foucault misinterpreted the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, wishing to reunite the self with the world. Following Epicurus, the cause of spiritual problems are unnatural and unnecessary desires, being part of conventional culture. Spiritual healing consists in training human beings to detach themselves from these desires by relying on the healing powers of reason. According to Epicurus, human beings must free themselves of their ignorance about the natural world and lead a virtuous life as a means to gain tranquility and human flourishing.

> *It is impossible to live the pleasant life without also living sensibly, nobly, and justly*
>
> (Epicurus, 2012: p 172)

At this stage, human beings will only tend to their natural desires and they are in a position to centre in themselves and fence off the demands of conventional culture. However, being in the world and having relationships are important aspects of living a good life, meaning that human beings must also be in a position to re-unite their spirit with other people and the world:

> *The person who is the most successful in controlling the disturbing elements that come from the outside world has assimilated to himself what he could, and what he could not assimilate he has at least not alienated[…]. All who have the capacity to gain security, especially from those who live around them, live a most agreeable life together, since they have the firm assurance of friendship*
>
> (Epicurus, 2012: p 179)

Epicurus and existential therapy are both dealing with lived philosophy rather than mere speculation, and they both emphasize the therapeutic value of living in the moment. Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeccus* and *Leading Doctrines* are fascinating reading to any existential therapist, who is interested in a secular perspective on the spiritual dimension of existence. Furthermore,