

PERSONAL ESSAY

Directed Studies (the sparknotes version)

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

I think about Epicurus at least once a week.

I do not say this to suggest I am some esoteric intellectual with the time to ponder the philosophical musings of a man who lived over 2,000 years ago. Nor do I say it in the attempt to market Directed Studies and espouse the utility of taking on such an intensive program that spans much of the Near Eastern and Western canon, despite the fact that I am currently spending much of my time fielding questions from first years about the nightmarish workload that DS offers as one of two Undergraduate Teaching Assistants for the program.

On the contrary, I mean it sincerely. I really do think about Epicurus at least once a week.

I will admit — the week in Directed Studies when we studied Epicurus, I had fallen behind on my readings. The DS slog had hit, and I was skimming the selected passages and flailing through my classes. As a side note, I would like to profess that this time of floundering is a near rite of passage in DS. Nobody manages to finish everything. I have yet to meet anyone who perfectly meets the schedule of essays, readings, seminars and lectures, and if there is such a person, I will happily applaud them.

In any case, I had skimmed the selected passages and marched into seminar slightly nervous — as one is when grossly underprepared — and yet nevertheless intent on gaining something from the 75 minutes before me. I would listen, learn, attempt to contribute and go on with my day.

That is, until we reached Epicurus’ ethics.

The good will be a form of pleasure, professor Paul Grimstad — a subtle shout-out to one of my favorite professors from my first year at Yale — explained. What is good is easy to get. You shouldn’t worry, because this will lower your pleasure and the happiness you will gain from life as a rational hedonist.

My mind began to whirl.

The goal of this rational hedonism is ataraxia, he continued. Ataraxia can be translated to denote a lack of disturbance. Tranquility and serenity.

“So, the good life is the life free from disturbance.”

It was as if a lighthouse in the distance had shone its light on a dark evening.

Ludicrously, hearing those words fundamentally changed my worldview. I was an anxious person — I had always been deemed an “overthinker,” and I would admit to it, too. Yet Epicurus’ argument for a life vehemently averse to unpleasant worry seemed to provide a guide to the antithesis of my typical mindset. Maybe, my sleep-deprived brain offhandedly wondered, this could be the good life. Had DS unlocked a new version of myself?

No. I remained a largely high-strung individual. No zenness overcame my body. But a new voice had been planted in my head — one that said that I should slow down and let things go, for such is a life free from disturbance. Ataraxia.

DS is marketed as a master’s in intellectualism and cocktail talk. You’ll spend a year in constant distress and emerge able to discuss Plato’s “Republic” and Aristotle’s four categories. You’ll have read Shelley and the Romantics, the “Iliad” and the Greek dramas, Nietzsche and Machiavelli. You will become the epitome of what Yale promises to every student that walks through its doors — a true learner with a firm grasp on the intellectual tradition upon which the edifice of education is built.

This is true, to an extent. But that is not the real value of DS.

DS forces you to adopt manners of thinking entirely disparate to your own. Whether that is Epicurus for the stress-prone or Kant for the dishonest, you engage with writers and intellectuals even if you disagree with them. That is the beauty of the program — you absorb the knowledge of those who contributed to this vast canon and begin to orient yourself within it, utilizing their texts as anchorage points for your own process of becoming an independent thinker and citizen of society.

Not to mention that, you venture into such an endeavour with over 100 other first years willingly in the same boat as you. Those who wish to understand and spar through seminar contributions and whose ideas widen with delight as you run your essay idea by them.

DS truly epitomises the “liberal arts” ethos of a university like Yale. Though a marathon, it is one well worth it. One that introduces you to worlds unlike those you know and people who happily join you for the journey.