

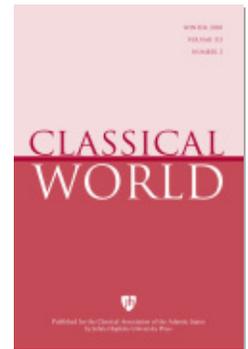


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Diogenes Laertius: Lives of the Eminent Philosophers by
Pamela Mensch (review)

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Classical World, Volume 113, Number 2, Winter 2020, pp. 235-236 (Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2020.0011>

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Pamela Mensch (tr.) and James Miller (ed.). *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xxi, 676. \$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-19-086217-6.

The high production quality here stands out: heavy, genuinely opaque paper; generous line spacing and margins; and, especially, more than 100 beautiful illustrations, drawn from all periods of (mostly, European) art. Together these make the volume seem more like a coffee-table book than a work of scholarship—a fact that presumably accounts for its being for sale in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its merits are, however, far from being confined to these immediately evident attractions. Mensch’s translation, based on T. Dorandi’s text (Cambridge 2013), is lively and engaging, and almost always superior to that of R. D. Hicks in the Loeb Classical Library series (Cambridge, MA, and London, England, 1925). But not everything Mensch does is an innovation, nor are all her innovations improvements.

Consider this, from book 7, on the Stoics:

[107] . . . They apply the term “duty” [καθήκον] to an action that, when done, can be defended on reasonable grounds, such as its consistency with life; and this extends to plants and animals as well. For “duties” [καθήκοντα] can also be discerned with respect to plants and animals.

[109] Actions belonging to duty are those that reason prescribes our doing, as is the case with honoring one’s parents, brothers, country, and spending time with one’s friends. Actions contrary to duty are those that reason forbids, for example, neglecting one’s parents, ignoring one’s brothers, being out of sympathy with one’s friends, disregarding one’s country, and the like. Actions neither belonging to duty, nor contrary to it, are those that reason neither prescribes our doing nor forbids, such as picking up a twig, holding a stylus or a scraper, and the like.

Here Mensch reasonably retains “duty,” the traditional translation (also Hicks’s) for *καθήκον*. Of course, her decision to use scare-quotes when speaking of the *duties of animals and plants* indicates the limitations of “duty.” Still, more recent choices, e.g., “proper function” or “appropriate action,” lose important connotations of the word, and so are not obviously improvements.

For the vexed Stoic term of art *φαντασία καταληπτική*, Mensch uses “comprehending impression.” On its own, this is fine. But is Mensch’s “Some impressions involve comprehension, others do not. The comprehending impression, which they say is the criterion of reality, is that which arises from an existing object and is imprinted and stamped in accordance with it. The uncomprehending impression is that which does not arise from an existing object, or, if it does, does not accord with it; it is neither clear nor distinct” (7.44) really better than either of the two following versions? First, B. Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (2nd edn, Indianapolis 1997): “Of presentations, some are graspable, some non-graspable. The graspable presentation, which they say is the criterion of facts [*pragmata*], is that which comes from an existing object, and is stamped and moulded in accordance with the existing object itself. The non-graspable presentation is either not from an existing object, or from an existing object but not in accordance with it; it is neither clear nor well-stamped [i.e., distinct];” secondly, A. A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge 1987): “(1) Of impressions, one kind is cognitive, the other incognitive. (2) The cognitive, which they [the Stoics]

say is the criterion of things, is that which arises from what is and is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is. (3) The incognitive is either that which does not arise from what is, or from that which is but not exactly in accordance with what is: one which is not clear or distinct.” Adding yet another option, as Mensch does, only muddies the waters for no real gain.

Now something from Epicurus. In 10.44, from the *Letter to Herodotus*, Dorandi prints: ἀρχὴ δὲ τούτων οὐκ ἔστιν, αἰτιῶν τῶν ἀτόμων οὐσῶν καὶ τοῦ κενοῦ. Mensch translates: “Of these motions there is no beginning, since they are caused by the atoms and the void.” Inwood and Gerson offer “There is no principle for these [entities], since the atoms and the void are eternal,” whereas Hicks has “Of all this there is no beginning, since both atoms and void exist from everlasting.” (Inwood and Gerson, like Hicks before them, evidently prefer Gassendi’s conjecture αἰδιῶν to the αἰτιῶν of the mss.; cf. Dorandi, *app. crit. ad loc.*) Hicks’s cautious “[o]f all this” (for τούτων) has the advantage of not settling whether “these” refers to atoms and the void (Inwood and Gerson), the subject of the earlier part of 10.44, or to the atomic motions in the void (Mensch). Here, I suspect Inwood and Gerson are correct as against Mensch. On the other hand, their “principle” for ἀρχή seems poorly chosen, especially given that they read αἰδιῶν: if the eternity of the entities is under discussion, saying that they have no beginning would be fine, whereas saying that they have no principle is a bit cryptic. ἀρχή of course has a wide semantic field. In a translation aimed at the more general public (rather than at students of ancient philosophy), “beginning” has the advantage of making good sense and not being technical. Still, “source” or “origin” might have been preferable: “Of these there is no origin, since the atoms and the void are causes [sc. the primary or basic causes].”

In addition, the seventeen short essays (on Diogenes, or on various of the thinkers and schools he treats), as well as the “Guide to Further Reading,” are of special value. It is these plus the very modest price that above all make this translation highly recommendable for classroom use, especially for those who would rather have their students read whole texts than draw on collections of testimonia and fragments.

Minor quibbles. The volume would have benefited from Greek-English, and English-Greek, glossaries; these would have allowed readers to check quickly how certain technical terms are translated, and to see which Greek expression corresponds to a given one of English. Also, while the copious footnotes give excellent guidance on the many figures mentioned, some sort of *Index nominum* or “List of Persons” (along the lines of the “Glossary of Ancient Sources”) would have been a helpful way of consolidating information that is at present dispersed.

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Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis and Matthew M. McGowan (eds.). *Classical New York: Discovering Greece and Rome in Gotham*. Empire State Editions. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Pp. xii, 284. \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-8232-8102-2.

Lamenting lost haunts is a regular past-time for long-time walkers in New York City. Favorite streets are palimpsests of personal reference and, often, of loss and commemoration: where once a favorite bar, now a frozen yogurt shop,