

Promising New Book ("Living For Pleasure") and Great New Article ("Are The Modern Stoics Really Epicurean?") Both By Emily Austin

Post by "Cassius" of November 14, 2022 at 8:32 PM

OK I have now finished reading the book. My basic opinion is unchanged: it is excellent. It's now probably first on my list of recommendations for a newer / younger reader who isn't really into philosophy at all and who might have an open mind about Epicurus. It's really targeted at a different audience than DeWitt's book, so I really don't see them in competition with each other. After you read "Living for Pleasure" you'll know the type person who will do best to start with one book versus the other. The type person who I might normally have suggested read one of Catherine Wilson's books I would definitely now refer the Austin book, to some extent because it gives a lot more "philosophy" and a lot less "political justification" than does Wilson's books. Wilson's work is good too, but if I recall correctly Austin's citations and examples from the text are much more detailed. (Now that I think about it I bet Austin read Wilson's book, and future writers can build on both of these as they extend the work in the same direction.)

Does it have shortcomings? In my humble view I would say yes, but they pale in comparison to the good work that the book achieves. Two things I would point out:

(1) The book is entirely devoid, if I read it correctly, of any discussion of canonic / epistemology. I think that's a significant omission, and I would love to have seen her intellect applied to that issue in the same way she attacked many others. Unfortunately I think the absence of that discussion plays into my point two:

(2) If she had taken to heart more of Epicurus' advise as to "waiting" and consideration of "multiple causes," she might not have been so quick to cite some of her contemporary examples on what she takes to be matters of "fact" that not everyone will agree with. The constant temptation of current writers seems to be to want to justify their interest in the subject by wrapping in contemporary political positions, and given the nature of these as controversial, I think the tactic detracts from the overall persuasiveness of the philosophy as a whole. I do agree with most of her example applications, but I wouldn't myself want to suggest that Epicurus would have had a specific position on the World Economic Forum, John McCain, John F. Kennedy, or many of the other contemporary hot-button examples she uses. I understand the desire to make books relevant, but sometimes getting too far into contemporary details can be off-putting, especially given Epicurus' own apparent disposition to keep his advice general rather than personally specific. No doubt there are Epicurean aspects to the World Economic forum and non-Epicurean aspects of the forum, but the political controversy that surrounds it tugs on the emotions and risks distortions in ways that less

political examples would not involve. If I recall correctly she does a lot less of this than does Catherine Wilson, but it's still a shame to risk diluting the attractiveness of Epicurus according to one's current political persuasion. Gosh knows my own views have changed over time but I've always tried to keep an open mind on the deepest philosophical ideas. At this point I no longer feel it's a good idea to label contemporary figures as "Epicurean" or "non-Epicurean" given how many factors are involved and how complicated situations can be. She's at her best when she cites "evergreen" examples like children or nature or other situations that really do speak for themselves.

And as per the comments already in this thread, I think Emily Austin is more "in tune" with Epicurus than most anyone else I have read in a very long time. Of course that comes across as implying that she's "in tune with Cassius" but I really don't mean to describe it that way. As I see it she takes a very DeWittian approach of looking at each of the major controversies about Epicurus (from marriage, children, gods, etc) and she finding a very reasonable and persuasive sympathetic position. Of course she fails my standard test of "if they don't cite DeWitt in the notes then they're probably no good!" but at this point in Academia that's par for the course, and if she cited him for anything she would probably get herself banned from polite academic company 😊

Anyway I look forward to the comments of others. This is a REALLY good book to use from here on out in reaching out to new people. And in terms of things like her suggestion as to what Lucretius intended for the end of book six, she's pointing in new directions that will be fascinating to explore.

When the day started I had no idea this book existed and found it by accident. It's been a great day reading it!

Addenda: In relation to the epistemology comment above, it occurs to me that might have been a good idea to include in the physics discussion the observations of her fellow North Carolina professor Gellar-Goad that we mentioned recently as to Epicurus' position on the size of the sun. That would have at least introduced the topic of Epicurus's hesitance to embrace theories that contradict appearances even when those theories end up being found to have merit when the technology to analyze appearances improves later. For reference that [is discussed here](#).