

Biographical Details of Norman W. DeWitt

Post by "Cassius" of July 24, 2023 at 7:51 PM

Probably a good place for another general comment about DeWitt. It has been said at various times and places that the emphasis on DeWitt's book here at EpicureanFriends gives the group a "DeWittian" flavor. I don't really know what that would mean, but if it's in part true, in my mind it is not because there is any particular "DeWittian" spin on Epicurean philosophy.

To me, what really distinguishes DeWitt from other commentators is that he seems to have devoted almost his entire professional writing career to the study and exposition of Epicurean philosophy exclusively. So far as I know he never came right out and endorsed it beyond the praise that he gives it in passages such as his "[Philosophy for the Millions](#)" article, but it's unmistakable that he saw tremendous value in it and he thought the best way to understand and apply it was to work to get a comprehensive knowledge of the many aspects of it before becoming wedded to a particular interpretation.

There's pretty much something in DeWitt that can be used by almost anyone who has a particular interpretation of Epicurus that they want to advocate, even on issues like ataraxia and the highest good and katastematic and kinetic pleasure. In the end it's not so much the position that DeWitt takes on specific issues, but the way he digs into the material and looks for a "sympathetic" spin that gives effect to the widest sweep of the philosophy. It's that attitude that I admire about DeWitt and what I think makes him so valuable as an introduction to the philosophy.

Most of us will never approach the depth and sweep of learning that a classical scholar in the early 20th century could obtain. We have access to all sorts of manuscripts and resources that he did not have, but what I think the people of that period have over us is "time" -- a slower pace of life where they could devote huge blocks of time to studies with levels of attention that we can't hope to muster today. The chapter 14 of his book that we are going through now on the podcast puts this on display. DeWitt has this sweeping knowledge and absorption of the works of Virgil and Horace and all sorts of other ancient writers that can't be duplicated without huge amounts of time that few of us outside of academia (and maybe inside too) will ever duplicate -- certainly after a lifetime of effort as he devoted to it.

And that's also why I can laugh and forgive DeWitt's tendency to draw parallels to Christianity that I suspect most of us think are excessive. I doubt we will ever really know whether DeWitt considered himself a full Christian or whether his philosophy won out in the end, but even today many of us still labor under restraints that make the Christian-Epicurean dialogue still relevant.

DeWitt's pictures indicate to me that he had a lively and even impish kind of look in his eyes, and that kind of "let's stir the pot" attitude is something great to bring to the study of Epicurus. And as for courage even beyond the religious taboos, I suspect still in early 20th century

Canada the ingrained dismissive attitude of "Epicurus isn't worthy of study" was still present. Emily Austin mentions that this survives today; it had to be as strong or stronger in the first part of the 20th century. And yet DeWitt tied himself to the mast of Epicurus like Odysseus sailing past the sirens. That's something that we can work to emulate, but DeWitt succeeded in a way I suspect few others in Epicurean studies will be able to duplicate.