

Updated Thoughts on the Question of "Peace and Safety" in the Works of Norman Dewitt

Post by "Joshua" of June 6, 2025 at 10:55 PM

Introduction

Item number 6 on the [Getting Started](#) page here at the forum reads as follows;

Quote

Read The Two Books We Most Recommend - *Epicurus and His Philosophy* by Norman DeWitt, and *Living For Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* by Emily Austin. Austin's book provides an attractive and practical introduction geared toward those who are just starting with the philosophy, and DeWitt's book provides a sweeping overview of the philosophy with many additional details.

We continue to recommend Norman Dewitt's book on Epicurus for many reasons, not least among them being, first, his comprehensive, well-ordered, and systematic treatment of the subject at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels, and, second, his rare, early, sustained defense of Epicurean philosophy against a parade of hostile critics stretching back into antiquity. That he achieves this while remaining both accessible and *insightful* is something to be remarked upon, and he has earned a small but devoted readership among us.

Nevertheless, the text does have weaknesses.

"You are too timid in drawing your inferences," says the scolding Sherlock Holmes to friend Watson. This is a charge that will never be laid at the feet of Prof. Dewitt. I said that his work was insightful; the truth is that his work is insightful in part *because* he is not timid in drawing his inferences. This is a problem in places, and the problem is compounded when his endnotes are less fulsomely thorough than we might hope, which, for some of us, is frequently. One area of particular contention is on the question of 'Peace and Safety'.

Peace and Safety; The Dewitt Citations

Epicurus and His Philosophy contains 18 mentions of the phrase 'Peace and Safety', with salient examples on pages 85, 189, 190, 194, 285, 304, and 338. Here is the passage (and associated endnotes) from page 85 in Chapter IV, *Mytilene and Lampsacus*:

Quote

It was the mature judgment of Epicurus after his escape to Lampsacus that Peace and Safety were essential conditions not only for the tranquillity of the individual but also for the successful promulgation of a new philosophy. It was from this time that the word Safety, *asphaleia* [[ἄσφαλειᾶ](#)] in Greek, attained the status of a watchword. Eventually it conferred a new vogue upon *securitas* [[sēcūritās](#)] in Latin,⁶⁸ as also upon *praesidium* [[praesidium](#)]. When the poet Horace in his first ode hails Maecenas as his *praesidium*, he recognizes him as the assurance of his safety from attacks by enemies.

It may be observed in passing that St. Paul quoted the words Peace and Safety as catchwords of the Epicureans, to whom he refused the honor of mention by name.⁶⁹ In this collocation Peace signified harmonious relations with neighbors while Safety meant the security of the man as a citizen, the sort of safety that Paul himself enjoyed by virtue of Roman citizenship.

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⁶⁸ It may denote *akedia* [[ἀκηδία](#), [acēdia](#)], freedom from a feeling of responsibility; *aponia* [[ἀπονία](#)], exemption from responsibility; or ataraxy, freedom from turmoil of soul. See Latin lexicon.

⁶⁹ [I Thess. 5:3](#). [I link to the USCCB only because it is the least user-hostile Bible reference website I can find.]

For the sake of completeness, I will include the following passages with their endnotes. First, page 190 in Chapter X, *The New Freedom*.

Quote

It is also manifest that he looked chiefly to friendly diplomacy to keep the environment in control. Good will is a catchword of his creed no less than Peace and Safety. It is a precondition of Peace and Safety. He wrote, for instance: "A life of freedom cannot amass great wealth because of success in this being difficult apart from servitude to mobs or monarchs but it does enjoy all things in uninterrupted abundance; if, however, now and then great wealth does fall to its lot, it would gladly disburse this to win the good will of the neighbor."⁵³

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⁵³ Ibid. 67. [Ibid here refers back to "SV", *Sententiae Vaticanae* - That is, the [Vatican Sayings](#), number 67]

Next, page 194 in the same chapter.

Quote

It is easy also to find place in this context for the calculus of advantage. Anger is a turmoil in the soul and as such is destructive of serenity or ataraxy. There is more to be said, however: angry reprisals invite reprisals and would be destructive of that peace and safety which Epicureans raised to the rank of a practical objective. As a sect, Cicero informs us, "they were to the least degree malicious."⁶⁸ They were not revengeful; even while attacking them Plutarch ascribes to them the saying "Let this too meet with forgiveness."⁶⁹

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⁶⁸ [Tusc. Disp. 3.21.50.](#)

⁶⁹ [Adv. Colot. 1118e.](#)

Page 285 in Chapter XIII, *The True Piety*:

Quote

The followers of Epicurus after his death, though diligent cultivators of peace and safety, continued to display the same belligerency as their founder. According to Lucian it was chiefly the Epicureans who summoned up courage to defy Alexander the False Prophet, and the only man to accuse him to his face on a specific charge was an Epicurean, who almost paid for his daring by his life.¹¹⁷ Upward of a century before the date of this alleged occurrence it was the Epicureans in Thessalonica who by their derision aroused the indignation of St. Paul, then prophesying the second coming of Christ. In his retort he denied them the honor of mention by name but identified them adequately by those catchwords of their creed, "Peace and Safety."¹¹⁸ It may be added that the Epicureans, as usual, were in the right; the prophecy was not fulfilled.

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¹¹⁷ [Alexander 25,44-46.](#)

¹¹⁸ [1 Thess. 5:3.](#)

Page 304 in Chapter XIV, *The New Virtues*:

Quote

While this conjunction of faith in doctrine with faith in the leader introduces a dynamic emotional element, it still falls short of making a complete picture. The disciple cannot live to himself. Epicurus thought of his oracular teachings as "beneficial for all men," and he planned coherence for all the local brotherhoods in which his disciples were enrolled. All members depended upon one another for what St. Paul referred to as

Peace and Safety. This means that the Epicurean must not only feel faith in doctrine and leader but also in friends and friendship. The authority for this is Vatican Saying 34, which exhibits a play upon words that is characteristic of the master's style: "We do not so much have need of help from friends in time of need as faith in help in time of need." This is an excellent commentary upon the words of St. Paul, "faith which worketh by love."⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ [Gal. 5:6.](#)

Page 338 in Chapter XV, *Extension, Submergence, and Revival*:

Quote

Both Thessalonica and Corinth must have been strongholds of Epicureanism. We must learn to read between the lines. Paul had been preaching at Thessalonica about the second coming of Christ, and prophecy always aroused the scorn of the Epicureans, who denied all participation of the gods in the affairs of man. The answer of Paul to these scoffers is to condemn them to instant annihilation: "For when they shall say Peace and Safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape."³⁶ The Epicureans were not accorded the honor of mention by name, but Peace and Safety were catchwords of their sect. It was part of their ethics to live a retired life apart from the turmoil of the courts and the market place and so to seek security from the malice and injury of other men. Paul follows up the quarrel and predicts the coming of Antichrist, the model for which was Antiochus Epiphanes, the archenemy of his race and the patron of the hated Epicureans.³⁷

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³⁶ [I Thess. 5:3.](#)

³⁷ [II Thess. 2:3-4.](#)

It will be shown that none of the texts cited in the endnotes are sufficient to satisfy the claim that 'Peace and Safety' were watchwords or catchwords among Epicureans, and that Dewitt does not offer substantial evidence in support of this claim.

However, as we move forward in this analysis we will explore sources hitherto unexamined in connection with this question, and these sources might give us a hint as to why Dewitt makes this claim - and why we should dismiss it.