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

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St. Paul and Epicurus

Prof. Dewitt cites the scriptures of the Christians many times in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, but a longer and more focused treatment is in another work entitled *St. Paul and Epicurus*. Both were published in 1954, and, while a thorough critique of either text is well outside the scope of this investigation, it is clear that he must have had the latter text in mind while researching the former. His study of the 'Peace and Safety' question is in the section of that text entitled *Thessalonians*. The plain fact is that he does not substantiate his claim anywhere in these books; nevertheless, I include this here for those who wish to read further into his thoughts. Here is the passage in which he again asserts that Peace and Safety were catchwords;

> Quote
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> By good luck [Epicurus] arrived safely at the refuge of his choice, the city of Lampsacus on the Hellespont, now the Dardanelles; but on the way he was in danger of death by exposure or of capture by pirates, and he narrowly escaped shipwreck. This painful experience was taken to heart. Never again did he invite persecution.
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> Instead he took the determination to confine himself to peaceful methods and even prescribed rules of safety for his followers in his Authorized Doctrines. Thus the words Peace and Safety became catchwords of his sect and unless we are aware of this fact we shall fail to recognize the meaning of Paul in First Thessalonians 5:3: "For when they shall say Peace and Safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them." This version, however, leaves something to be desired; it would be more accurate to read: "For at the very time that the words Peace and Safety are on their lips, sudden destruction is hanging over them."

And here, a further claim is used to justify his work to 'correct the translation'. If you read *St. Paul and Epicurus*, you will find a lot of correcting, emending, and substituting. I leave it to others to judge his translations of the New Testament; I pause only to note that there is again no evidence furnished to support the claim that Peace and Safety were catchwords.

> Quote
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> No person of ordinary intelligence at the date when the letter was written would have been ignorant that peace and safety were objectives of the Epicurean way of life.

> Recognition of this fact will enable us to correct the translation. To this end it must be remembered that the second coming and the destruction of unbelievers are events in the future but the threat is present and perpetual. With this knowledge kept well in mind we shall be able to set the tenses to rights: "At the very moment that they are saying 'peace and safety' sudden destruction is hanging over them."

First Epistle to the Thessalonians

Five of the ten endnotes cited above reference the New Testament, and three of the five cite St. Paul's *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, chapter 5, verse 3:

- Society of Bible Literature Greek New Testament
  - ὅταν λέγωσιν · Εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὄλεθρος ὥσπερ ἡ ὠδὶν τῇ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ, καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐκφύγωσιν.
- Latin Vulgate
  - cum enim dixerint pax et securitas tunc repentinus eis superveniet interitus sicut dolor in utero habenti et non effugient
- King James Version
  - 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.
- New International Version
  - While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, pax et securitas, peace and safety. This is the verse on which Dewitt hangs his argument, and it is worth seeing where it leads. The *Epistle* does not contain any mention of Epicureanism, though there are references which might be taken as allusions; Dewitt has his own list, but these are mine. Chapter 2, verse 4 has Paul writing "*not as trying to please human beings, but rather God, who judges our hearts.*" Chapter 4, verses 3-5 constitutes an exhortation for the readers to be chaste and take a wife, "*not in the passion of lust like heathen.*" Verse 11 in the same chapter instructs the readers to "*aspire to live a tranquil life* [ἡσυχάζειν]*, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your [own] hands, as we instructed you,*" and verse 12, "*conduct yourselves properly toward outsiders and not depend on anyone.*"

The problem with trying to connect any one of these to Epicureanism is that they are commonplaces in the writings of St. Paul, and only one of them (4:11, *live quietly*) is remotely specific enough even to explore further. Here is that full passage:

- Greek New Testament
    - καὶ φιλοτιμεῖσθαι ἡσυχάζειν καὶ πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια καὶ ἐργάζεσθαι ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσὶν ὑμῶν, καθὼς ὑμῖν παρηγγείλαμεν,
- Latin Vulgate
    - et operam detis ut quieti sitis, et ut vestrum negotium agatis, et operemini manibus vestris, sicut praecepimus vobis:
- King James Version
    - And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you;
- New International Version
    - and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you,

As you will perceive, there are superficial similarities between Paul's injunction to 'live quietly (ἡσυχάζειν)' and the Epicurean dictum 'live unknown (λάθε βιώσας)', as salvaged for us by Plutarch in fragment U551. The really striking thing about Dewitt's commentary on this verse is the total absence of *any* commentary on this verse. In *St. Paul and Epicurus* he writes the following, not in connection with this citation, but in general;

> Quote
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> The courts of law, [Epicurus] well knew, though ostensibly existing for the sake of justice, were only too often employed as an agency of envy to rob the rich of their wealth, politicians of their power, and famous men of their prestige. The obscure citizen was the safest. It was consequently his general advice "to live and die unknown," and in particular "to shun the political career."

So Dewitt does not claim that St. Paul instructed his readers to 'live unknown', and the reason, I think, is clear. Had St. Paul done so, it would seem to have been advised in open contradiction of the Great Commission, enshrined in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16-20;

> 16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
> 17 When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
> 18 Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
> 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,
> 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Is the advice of Epicurus to 'live unknown' in open contradiction of his own desire to bring the fruits of the philosophy to others? That question, too, is outside the scope of this investigation.

The Noonday Demon

It will be enough to say here that neither *Vatican Saying* 67, nor Lucian's *Alexander the Oracle-Monger*, nor the remaining scriptural citations are of any real relevance to our main question. Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* are quoted by Dewitt. Cicero he uses to demonstrate that even hostile critics of Epicureanism could not, with reason or justice, admonish the *behavior* of the Epicureans, though they admonished the philosophy. Cicero is a reliable authority on this question, and he speaks against self-interest; I have no quarrel with Dewitt on this point.

His citation to Plutarch on forgiveness is confirmed by the Loeb edition of *Adversus Colotem*, edited and translated by Benedict Einarson and Philip Howard De Lacy, where a footnote in that text on page 259 in volume XIV suggests that Plutarch is indeed echoing Epicurus himself. The citation there is to *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, book 10, 118. This passage in *Lives* is on forgiving or excusing the mistakes or trespasses of slaves.

There is, I think, only one of the remaining endnotes meriting detailed exposition, and that is endnote 68 in Chapter IV. Here is the passage again:

> Quote
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> It was from this time that the word Safety, *asphaleia* [ἀσφάλεια] 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.
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> 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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> * * *
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> [68] It may denote *akedia* [ἀκηδία, acēdia], freedom from a feeling of responsibility; *aponia* [ἀπονῖᾱ], exemption from responsibility; or ataraxy, freedom from turmoil of soul. See Latin lexicon.

I claim the following insight as original, but concede that without Stephen Greenblatt's work in his book *The Swerve* I would not have hit upon it. *Acedia*, a kind of cabin fever, sometimes described as a state of listlessness or torpor, is a sin in the Christian religion, and connected

with the sin of sloth. Why is Dewitt mentioning it here, as if it were a synonym of *securitas* or ἀσφάλεια? My answer; he is calling to mind *this word specifically* because it serves his purpose of delineating the boundary between Epicureanism and Christianity on the subject of safety, and between Epicureanism and Stoicism on the use of the word ataraxia (ἀταραξία). In *acedia*, he finds a word, in both Greek and Latin, that *no one else will ever claim*. This is not the eternal peace of the Christians which they claim is only found in Christ. It is not the *apatheia* of the Stoics, who will never tolerate idleness, nor is it the *otium* of the Roman elite, a kind of healthful leisure focused on restorative cultural pursuits. Neither does Dewitt mean to remind us of the negative meaning of *acedia*; he doesn't even mention that there is any other meaning.

Greenblatt touches on *acedia* in chapter 2 of *The Swerve*, which I think is worth quoting at length:

> Quote
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> Though in the most influential of all the monastic rules, written in the sixth century, St. Benedict did not similarly specify an explicit literacy requirement, he provided the equivalent of one by including a period each day for reading—"prayerful reading," as he put it—as well as manual labor. "Idleness is the enemy of the soul," the saint wrote, and he made certain that the hours would be filled up. Monks would be permitted to read at certain other times as well, though such voluntary reading would have to be conducted in strict silence. (In Benedict's time, as throughout antiquity, reading was ordinarily performed audibly.) But about the prescribed reading times there was nothing voluntary.
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> The monks were to read, whether they felt like it or not, and the Rule called for careful supervision:
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> - Above all, one or two seniors must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the brothers are reading. Their duty is to see that no brother is so acediosus as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others. (49:17–18)
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> Acediosus, sometimes translated as "apathetic," refers to an illness, specific to monastic communities, which had already been brilliantly diagnosed in the late fourth century by the Desert Father John Cassian. The monk in the grip of acedia would find it difficult or impossible to read. Looking away from his book, he might try to distract himself with gossip but would more likely glance in disgust at his surroundings and at his fellow monks. He would feel that things were better somewhere else, that he was wasting his life, that everything was stale and pointless, that he was suffocating.
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> - He looks about anxiously this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come to see him, and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion

> of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness.
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> Such a monk—and there were evidently many of them—had succumbed to what we would call a clinical state of depression.
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> Cassian called the disease “the noonday demon,” and the Benedictine Rule set a careful watch, especially at reading times, to detect anyone manifesting its symptoms.
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> - If such a monk is found—God forbid—he should be reproved a first and a second time. If he does not amend, he must be subjected to the punishment of the rule so that the others may have fear.
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> A refusal to read at the prescribed time—whether because of distraction, boredom, or despair—would thus be visited first by public criticism and then, if the refusal continued, by blows. The symptoms of psychic pain would be driven out by physical pain. And, suitably chastened, the distressed monk would return—in principle at least—to his “prayerful reading.”
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> Display More

There is another passage which is of interest here, and it comes from the rediscovered library of Philodemus in Herculaneum. On a charred papyrus scroll, *PHerc*. 1005 Col. 4.2-18, he writes;

> Quote
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> He who claims to know us and to be instructed by us, who claims to be a genuine reader of various writings and of complete books, even if he says something correctly, he has only memorized various quotations and does not know the multitude of our thoughts. What he has to do, he looks up in summeries, like people who believe that they [can learn to be] steersman from books and [can cross every ocean].

In Dewitt's translation of *acedia*, it is a virtue, not a vice or sin. It becomes a state of mind and body uniquely Epicurean, where freedom from responsibility gives one time enough, room enough, and leisure enough to pursue pleasure and happiness according to the *vera ratio* or *true philosophy*, and where the best mode of life is most assuredly available to us.

So much for the endnotes. There is one mountain still unmined in the Bibliography to Dewitt's book, and after that I will present my own discoveries and, at last, reach a verdict and conclusion.