

Question From Chapter 1 on "Altruism"

Post by "Cassius" of August 3, 2019 at 2:44 PM

I completely agree with E1's interpretations, and this can be cited in the future as an example of how I (and others here) do not worship DeWitt as infallible.

Jordan as you read DeWitt you will see repeated references to connections between Epicurean views and Christianity, and you may know that DeWitt wrote a second book called "St Paul and Epicurus." In my view DeWitt's points are generally good but sometimes go to far on this relationship. Whether that's a result of his own disposition to build more link than is there, I can't say. I do think that many of DeWitt's explanations of New Testament passages as relating to Epicurus do make sense, however.

But to the main point, DeWitt stresses throughout the book that Epicurus placed pleasure at the center of his philosophy, and that even in the issue of friends the instigating factor is still the pleasure of the person being considered. I don't believe DeWitt ever defines what he means by "altruism" and if he had meant it as a rule that the interests of other people ****always**** be placed first, that definitely could not be reconciled, any more than any other kind of "virtue" could be explained.

As you read further into the book and see how DeWitt constructs the big picture, I bet your concern about this (which is valid) will recede in significance. Because once you get a grip on how uniform and connected the big picture is in focusing on the feeling of pleasure (very broadly understood as including all mental and bodily pleasures), it becomes very easy to see how any competing "ism" (such as altruism or egoism for that matter) will fall to the wayside.

The issue with "altruism" is much the same issue as with "egoism" -- the real issue is whether and how the "interests" of people are defined. And with Epicurus the issue always comes back to a calculus of pleasure and pain, with the interests of other people factored in for the result that it causes to us and to those of our friends who we value as much as we do ourselves. The "interests" of some people are going to be of vital importance to us, while the interests of some other people are going to be largely irrelevant. And that is why "the greatest good of the greatest number" is eliminated.

[PD28](#) rules "egoism" out of the picture just as much as [PD39](#) and similar very clear doctrines rule "altruism" out of the picture, and DeWitt knows that very well and presents it all very clearly.

28. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that in the limited evils of this life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

39. The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.