

Alan Watts

Post by "Don" of March 1, 2020 at 4:09 PM

I am not on Facebook so I missed this earlier discussion so if y'all would indulge me, I'd like to share a few thoughts.

I was a fan of Alan Watts (waay) back in high school and college. He was a pivotal author in the process of widening my perspectives. However, I grew out of him when I began looking at and reading his sources, but his importance to my early development (and *eventual* arrival at Epicureanism) make me feel obliged to "defend" his work... at least a little.

With that as context, let me first say that I fully agree that there are some VERY un-Epicurean parts to the lecture/video. I would NOT recommend this as an Introduction to Epicureanism in any way. The latter part on listening to the Godhead is WAY too deistic and supernatural for my tastes now and are completely incompatible with Epicurus. No question on that. That all grows out of Watts' Buddhist and Hindu proclivities which, in his idiosyncratic and syncretic style, wants us to listen to the Godhead, Buddha-nature, Brahman, etc., within ourselves. We are all One in the Great Ocean of Being. You are a unique manifestation of a way of the Universe (capital U) knowing itself. NOT Epicurean in any way, shape, or form. Plus, the "amor fati"-sounding portions do sound Stoic.

BUT there are some Epicurean-sounding *pieces* in that video. The metaphor of the education system as churning out cookie cutter results echoes Epicurus' indictment of παιδεία, the educational system and culture in his time, as indoctrination. One of my favorite fragments of Epicurus is:

*"Flee from all **indoctrination** [παιδείαν], O blessed one, and hoist the sail of your own boat."*

Another Epicurean bit is Watts' exposition of the limits of pleasure. In the lecture, he talks about the unsatisfactory nature of just accumulating wealth, power, sex, etc. That sounds a lot like Epicurus' indictment of the Cyrenaics and the decadent:

KD 10: If the things that produced the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires, then we would have no complaints against them, since they would be filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress (and that's what is bad).

Watts appears to me to be talking about this very thing. I would also say that I interpret his "We don't know what will give us pleasure" or "We don't know what we desire" as springing from this same context. When [Elayne](#) says she thinks she's a good judge of what will give her pleasure, I have no doubt that is true as she is mature in her ability to discern the limits of

pleasure and what she feels is natural and necessary for her. Watts is referring to people who are indoctrinated by society and culture to think they NEED as much power as possible, as much money as possible, as much (full in the blank) as possible, to be happy and fulfilled. Watts is saying we need to break out of that conditioning to understand the real "necessary and natural desires" to put Epicurean words in Watts' mouth. It's just that Watts believes what is "necessary and natural" is to listen to the Godhead inside you to free yourself.

Now, in the end, does he arrive at the same overall conclusions I would now or that I think are Epicurean? Oh, absolutely not!! I could see Epicurus engaging him in some frank speech and correction! However, I could also envision the two of them sitting in the Garden heatedly discussing philosophy and sharing some spring water (or tea if Watts brought some along) and cheese and Epicurus waving over Themista to the table saying, "You have to come over and listen to this gentleman. I've been trying to correct him all afternoon. He has glimmers of correct doctrine but way too many crazy gymnosophist ideas... but he is entertaining to listen to."