

Alan Watts

Post by "Cassius" of March 1, 2020 at 8:49 AM

[Admin Edit: This is a post from outside the forum being pasted here to preserve the information. I had never heard of Alan Watts til reading this thread, so I advise caution, especially with the video, which starts out well enough but ends up being significantly anti-Epicurean in its conclusions. See Elayne's comments below, as she is much more familiar with Watts than am I.]

Is anyone in the group familiar with Alan Watts? His philosophies seem to line up decently well with Epicureanism, although with a lot more Eastern/Zen influence. He was mentored by Francis Croshaw, a self proclaimed Epicurean, and In his obituary, it contains a quote from him saying he was "an intellectual, a Brahmin, a mystic and also somewhat of a disreputable epicurean who has three wives, seven children and five grandchildren". This comes off as kind of a joke, but I think he meant it more than he lead on. Despite the somewhat misleading title, I think this video does a decent job of showing that, but I'd love to know your thoughts!

https://youtu.be/qOZqGUCrje8?fbclid=IwAR35vcajhiv6nAPLBv3Kkf1bI3uok8U8kW9jsBFjbVGxSGzgZjjW-z_0jG0

Post by "Cassius" of March 1, 2020 at 8:49 AM

I have reviewed that video and I do not recommend it to the members of the group. The main question in my mind is whether it deserves the time for an elaborate refutation or is so clearly essentially stoic and theistic in nature as to write off the discussion as unproductive. There are parts in the beginning that are ok, it seems to me, so you may be sincerely thinking that there are Epicurean aspects to this, but by the end it is very clear that this has little if anything to do with an Epicurean view of the universe and the goal of life. And of course as the title suggests, the video comes down against "only pursuing pleasure" before it ends up in a Stoic / Divine fire extravaganza.

I think this may be one of your first posts here (maybe the first) and so I don't mean this to be harsh. What I would like to point out more than anything else is that if you can find the time to read Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" you'll have no trouble seeing how utterly incompatible these ideas are with what Epicurus taught. However I am well aware that lots of people who fancy themselves Epicurean follow almost all the views stated in this video, so all

sorts of mistakes are understandable. But the way out of this confusion is available for those who desire to look for it.

I note that this video does not in any way represent itself to be Epicurean, so the video itself is not the source of any misunderstanding. The source of the problem is the superficial view of Epicurus promoted so many places - but not in this Facebook group 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 1, 2020 at 8:50 AM

ELAYNE's Post Responding To The Original Outside Post:

Watts died of alcoholism... my take on him (having read him in my 20's) is that he was a somewhat pretentious person with a superficial understanding of Buddhism who enjoyed playing the guru role and maybe damaged his brain with various drugs. He was in that wave of westerners who got dazzled by the eastern philosophies and made more of them than was there. It was exotic and exciting-- I can understand how people got sucked in.

Ask yourself if it is really true that your desires for pleasure can't be satisfied. Is it? That's not true for me. I desired and got several intense pleasures today, as I described in another thread, including good food, a hike to a gorgeous creek, and time with my family. I couldn't have been happier, and I don't get bored. It is simply not true that enjoying life leads one to want pain or to want to watch girls being eaten by lions. Perhaps at 56, I am too young to say that... but I have many older friends, some in their 80's, who enjoy life very much and have not yet started clamoring that they are tired of pleasures and want to be miserable!

Watts is using suggestion in a vile way, getting people to agree that they don't know what they want and can't enjoy pleasure-- that they couldn't possibly prefer to make their own choices. Is that true for you? Sometimes what I thought I wanted hasn't been as I expected, but by paying attention, now that I am older I am pretty reliable at choosing what I enjoy. There's some trial and error, but he's promoting a sort of learned helplessness where you just give up and follow fate like a Stoic dog!

That is not anything like what Epicurus advised.

The way to decide if what Watts says is true is to use your senses and feelings-- observe what happens in your own life. What works, what doesn't? Please don't let people like Watts bamboozle you out of your choices.

Post by “Cassius” of March 1, 2020 at 8:51 AM

Another outside poster, responding to the original post:

Thank you, Elayne. I, too, read Watts in my youth and your opinion of him corresponds with mine. I went through a very long period of being enthralled with Eastern philosophy and Buddhism before I finally wised up and gave up such idealistic philosophies. I'm glad that Epicurus taught us to base our lives on pleasure and not ideals! I never could manage to live up to the ideals of letting go of my ego or reaching a state of desirelessness that Buddhism and other philosophies teach are the purpose of life.

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 to 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."

Post by "Cassius" of March 1, 2020 at 5:15 PM

Yes, Eugenios, I see your points. I come at Watts as someone totally unfamiliar with him, and when I watched the video I definitely saw aspects that I applauded. I made a couple of screen clips which I don't have access to now which I was going to post in appreciation. No doubt about it.

But in the end the turns that he made toward deprecation of pleasure, and the other issues you mention, indicate deeper flaws in his methodology and thinking which are definitely worthy of discussion in that they reveal problems that "new" people will tend to make and repeat. So it's worth analysing where he goes wrong and why. By the end of the video I was so turned off that I definitely would not recommend him or anything he wrote to a person new to Epicurus, but on the other hand, we who are better read on the issues are in a position to deal with his problems

and produce helpful material that will prevent others from wasting time on his path, before they themselves are able to understand the reasons why it is false.

I see that as one of the major ways we need to emulate the patterns set by the early Epicureans. When we come across people and positions like this which are superficially attractive but ultimately badly damaging, I think it is would only be natural that we would/should derive great pleasure from producing our own material in response and reply which will benefit both ourselves and our friends in showing the errors in Watts' approach and his conclusions.

There are tremendous numbers of people and positions out there in this category, and I think it's natural and helpful that we devote ourselves to producing the material that's needed in response to this. Many very good people waste tremendous amounts of time, and thereby as Lucretius might say deprive us of the benefits of their friendship, that can be avoided if we put in the work to produce the material that's needed.

Post by “Cassius” of March 2, 2020 at 4:57 PM

This is a post by Elli in the corresponding thread at FB which I also want to be preserved in the context of this discussion:

Diachronically the only we see/realize is that there is always an invention with new cunning tricks on how the people would live a life in the situation of Anesthesia/Apathy/Nirvana just for the purpose to abandon all the pleasures of life, searching ideal worlds and in the end to die totally empty-handed. The manipulation of masses keeps well till our days and the fact is that all these idealistic obsessions are based on empty imagined ideas for producing more and more andrapoda (slaves).

Epicurus philosophy produces MEGA FRONOUNTES which means : serious, self-sufficient - free persons that have high self-esteem and being proud of whatever they achieve. Epicureans do not need mystic gurus. They do not need drugs, alcohol and all these substitutes to enjoy the pleasures of life. Eudaemonia/Pleasure, for epicureans, springs from their inner self and are able to share it with their outside like-minded friends.