

Catherine Wilson Interviewed By Robert Wright

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Catherine Wilson Interview on "The Wright Show" (Robert Wright)

I wish she had not deferred so strongly to the interviewer. If you let a standard Stoic/Utilitarian moralist totally steer the conversation you will get a discussion of stoicism and utilitarianism. However in fairness to the interviewer, he is asking good and in many cases open-ended questions, but Ms. Willson does not follow up as aggressively as she could to drive home the Epicurean conclusions.

Still, and regardless of her obvious political partisanship (she says she is not a card-carrying Epicurean, but a card-carrying "Pacifist," and her enthusiasm seems to be for economic issues in the modern world) her approach to Epicurus is much better than most other academics. In my view she puts too much emphasis on avoiding pain, and she does not really embrace pleasure as the goal with enthusiasm, but - she is clearly not in the "tranquillist" camp.

I don't recommend this interview for someone trying to learn about Epicurus, but I do recommend it for someone who understands the basic issues and wants to think about tips on how not to get led around and painted into a corner by a modern moralist. She doesn't succeed nearly as well as she could, but still this is useful to think about how a more enthusiastic Epicurean could have replied.

At the end she says her next book is on Kant. 😊

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_sBCyqu710&feature=youtu.be

Notes:

2:00 She is not card-carrying anything except card-carrying Pacifist.

3:28 - Interviewer: Let's start out by talking about Pleasure.

4:07 Hedonism is pleasure taken to extremes and no Epicurean ever recommended that. 1 it gets you into trouble to do that and 2) there are ethical limits. Epicureanism gives you permission to enjoy "innocent pleasures." Don't see opposition between pleasure and virtue.

6:00 -7:00 Wilson said Stoics magnified difference between animals and humans; Epicureans think of emotions as like perceptions. IF you could take a pill to make yourself completely numb, then life would seem boring. Stoics go further than suppressing painful emotions and Seneca says that all emotions are diseases.

8:45 Interviewer wants to talk about tradeoff between your own and others' happiness. Relationship to Utilitarianism? She says Bentham and Mill refer to Epicurus. Original Epicureans did not think in terms of measurements of

9:46 - Epicureans thought in terms of interactions between people who knew each other well.

10:17 Inter. says according to Utilitarianism no one person's happiness is more important than any other's happiness.

11:26 Utilitarianism leads to sainthood that you would spend all your time on other people's happiness. She says this is not Epicureanism.

13:12 Ethics says not to harm another, but that doesn't mean go along with Peter Singer Utilitarianism and give away all your money.

14:56 Epicureans did not teach vegetarianism.

16:10 Latter day Epicurean would be critical of prisons and slums and tenements especially because someone else is getting an advantage from it.

18:50 - Atoms and void came together randomly. No creationism and no intelligent design. Lucretius has natural selection theory.

20:20 Erasmus Darwin was a reader of Lucretius. Says it frustrates her how museums say that Darwin was the start of natural selection etc.

21:52 He asks about "soul atoms" distributed

through the body. He says there is no afterlife. Was it atheistic?

23:00 She says Lucretius is different from Epicurus on the nature of the gods ?!?!??? She is saying that Lucretius is more hostile to religion than was Epicurus.

24:50 She says morality is a convention set by society. "A social instrument for avoiding harm." Avoiding advantage-taking and avoiding exploitation.

26:00 Says she thinks the Epicureans supported central authority (???) but they saw potential for abuse... "labor slavery that we still have today..."

28:00 Morality is a set of beliefs in people's heads.

28:30 Compare and contrast Epicurus with Stoicism:

Epicureans atoms - Stoics have pneuma; a rational principle.

Stoics like Plato tended to see in the regularity of the heavens a pattern as to how things should be.

32:00 She contrasts Epicureans to Marcus Aurelius as Stoics being an impregnable citadel and Epicureans part of world. Epicureans considered Stoics barbaric.

33:50 Were stoics and Epicureans considered rivals? She says yes, and Cicero shows this by setting them against each other.

35:00 Stoics focused on virtue. He asks a good question and she hesitates and does not IMHO give a clear answer. This is possibly this is the least effective part of her responses. ... Epicurus did not speak on war (?) Epicureans said don't join the army... Find your happiness at home....

39:00 One reason we don't have much left is that Epicureanism could not be reconciled with Christianity. He asks what made it incompatible?! He realizes his question is foolish...

40:19 She says no such thing as natural law; law is human convention and agreement. No natural rights either! (Very good analysis here!) There is regularity (sheep give birth to sheep) but this is not "law."

42:00 (He says) Stoicism is deterministic and Epicureanism is less so - chance - He doesn't understand why Epicureans were not deterministic. He says this is quirky; She cites the swerve as the basis of free will but says he does not explain this. They do believe in free will. She does not seem enthusiastic.

44:00 Stoic Universalism vs Epicurean relativism. Stoics saw extension of roman system to the whole world.

44:45 He asks about family life. She thinks Lucretius is different from Epicurus?! Epicurus thought free love was the ideal situation and marriage and children would just bring vexation. She says Lucretius is more friendly to family and children.

46:08 Suicide. Epicureans dubious of political reasons for suicide. Cites Seneca as committing suicide. Epicureans say get mixed up in politics and you are asking for trouble.

48:00 Stoics saw suffering as inevitable; Epicureans saw suffering as minimizable. He cites Buddhism and mental attitude toward pain. She distinguishes. Says stoics cannot avoid troubles but can avoid suffering through willpower. Epicureans say you can do a lot of things to avoid or get out of trouble and that is more important than rearranging your head.

50:00 He says she thinks Epicureans are skeptical of nationalism and would have liked international law (central authority to prevent people from harm) Epicureans would like the UN if it were more effective. As to Patriotism Epicureans would say "What is a country?" It's atoms! It's arbitrary! Why would you have emotional attachment to such a thing! (This is her opinion and not necessarily accurate. We have emotional attachments to lots of things.)

52:00 Death: Epicureans think everything has limits and will pass away. She thinks trying to live extended / prolonged lives is unEpicurean.

53:30 17th century thought influenced by Epicureans - Galileo Descartes Newton; they add to that "laws of nature" which is not Epicurean.

54:30 Also utilitarianism in 19th century were influenced. Morality based on human agreement. Also evolution theory.

56:30 Trying to write a book now on KANT against materialism.