

Thoughts and Criticism of Chapter 1

Post by "Don" of April 13, 2020 at 1:09 AM

This is my second reading through DeWitt, but, admittedly, the first was several years ago and I did not have a firm recollection. I'm currently through Chapter 2 on this reading.

It is valuable that DeWitt has undertaken a comprehensive look at Epicureanism, both in synopsis and in detail. Additionally, his scholarship is obviously deep, and [he taught in a number of schools in North America](#). I also find it interesting that he uses the terms *Epicureanism* and *Epicurean philosophy* somewhat interchangeably. I will say that I like his line "the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world." This is actually a good line and some clever wordplay on DeWitt's part.

However, I find DeWitt has the habit of often asserting certain things with no context or citations which, with a little digging, turn up to be much less definitive or under debate or to be taken out of context. The items I've found just through Chapter 2 give me pause and make me feel that I can't quite take what he writes at face value.

As stated elsewhere on this forum, he also seems to have an agenda in seeing Epicureanism around every Christian corner. His book on Paul delved deeper into that (and I need to re-read that one as well), but he seems to go out of his way to show Epicurus and his philosophy as being incorporated into Christianity albeit hidden until he came along to shine a light on these hidden threads. He reminds me of Gassendi in some respects that way.

Again, I realize I'm only through Chapter 2 and hope these concerns recede into the background, but, right now when they pop up, they serve as barriers to my reading DeWitt with an entirely open mind. The following are illustrative examples from Chapter 1. I'll post other assertions that concern me in the Chapter 2 thread.

Quote

P. 8 Quote: "The mistake is to overlook the terminology and ideology of Epicureanism in the New Testament and to think of its founder as an enemy of religion."

On the idea that Epicurus was not an "enemy of religion," it does seem that Epicurus allowed - even encouraged - participation in the festivals of pagan Greece. He did not want to be seen as an atheist. But to see *Epicurean philosophy* as not an "enemy of religion," I'd just point to

Lucretius' "Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum."

Quote

P. 28: Quote: "As a missionary enterprise the activity of Epicureanism was not confined to the school premises. Every convert everywhere became a missionary. In the view of Epicurus philosophy should begin at home and be disseminated from the home. It was his injunction to his disciples "to apply it in their own households, to take advantage of all other intimacies and under no circumstances to slacken in proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy." This feature of the creed possessed the advantage of rendering it independent of schools and tutors; it was able to infiltrate itself into small towns and villages where no schools existed and even into rural areas. It was capable also of winning adherents in social groups untouched by more strictly intellectual systems."

DeWitt is quoting VS 41, but the saying, from my perspective, doesn't seem to sound entirely like what DeWitt says it does:

Quote

VS 41. One must laugh and seek wisdom and tend to one's home life and use one's other goods, and always recount the pronouncements of true philosophy. (γελᾶν ἅμα [simultaneously, together with, at the same time] δεῖ [one must] καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ μηδαμῆ λήγειν τὰς ἐκ τῆς ὀρθῆς φιλοσοφίας φωνὰς ἀφιέντας.)

To me, the saying appears to be instructing us to "to love wisdom" (philosophize) while we do everything in our daily lives. Don't let up! Do all these things simultaneously (ἅμα). Note that several of the alternative translations below put philosophize first when the first word in the original Greek is actually γελᾶν, the infinitive of γελᾶω "laugh." So the emphasis first in the phrase is on the laughing. The translations should really be something like: "*One must laugh and - at the same time - pursue the love of wisdom, administer the rest of one's household affairs, etc.*" Additionally, I interpret the "never ceasing to proclaim the words of true philosophy" in the sense of "walking the talk." Let others see the true philosophy living through your actions. Proclaim it through the conduct of your life. I don't think this necessarily means you don't also share it verbally with people, but it seemed to me that DeWitt was making more of the "proclaim" part than is necessary. I realize this witnessing theme is **my** interpretation and certainly open to criticism.

Alternative Translations of VS 41:

Quote

[Translation 1](#): At one and the same time we must philosophize, laugh, and manage our household and other business, while never ceasing to proclaim the words of true philosophy.

[Translation 2](#): One must philosophize and at the same time laugh and take care of one's household and use the rest of our personal goods, and never stop proclaiming the utterances of correct philosophy.

[Translation 3](#): We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

DeWitt also has this to say about Stoicism:

Quote

P. 29: "The battle is not always to the strong. Inherent in Epicureanism was a quiet crusading spirit which quickly extended it over the contemporary world and endowed it with a tenacity unequaled by rival creeds; it flourished for almost seven centuries. The vogue of Stoicism as a militant creed lasted a mere two centuries."

This is one of the assertions just thrown in with no context with which I have problems. I'm no fan of the Stoics but saying they lasted "a mere two centuries" is specious at best. Zeno taught around the 300s BCE, and Marcus Aurelius was a firm adherent of Stoic philosophy in the mid-2nd century CE. That's **at least four centuries** right there. Additionally, [Stoicism may possibly have even influenced the concept of Christ as the Logos in the Gospel of John](#).

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2020 at 8:16 AM

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

The items I've found just through Chapter 2 give me pause and make me feel that I can't quite take what he writes at face value.

As general comments on all of the post, until I have time to come back to the details - it is certainly true that no reader should take any commentator on Epicurus at face value without reading into the details and judging for himself. The allusions to Christianity in DeWitt are a

direction I personally would not have gone, but no one who understands Epicurus is going to be confused about Epicurus' attitude toward supernatural religion, which is the ultimate point. The references I remember from deWitt relate mainly to issues of social relationships and interactions and those strike me as at least partially true, but ultimately largely irrelevant to the big picture. The ultimate question in evaluating DeWitt is whether he gives the reader the broader understanding that people are just not going to get if they fixate on the ethics of "absence of pain" and ignore the rest of the philosophy and the history.

As to "enemy of religion" I would have to look at particular passages but as a general rule I think DeWitt was making an important point - the Epicureans viewed "religion" as differently as they viewed "gods" and within their context they were devoutly religious. We may have difficulty explaining that to modern ears but that's not necessarily a fault of the Epicureans.

As far as the comments on the missionary / evangelizing aspect, I find DeWitt's comments to be generally consistent with what I read in other commentators, as there seems to be a general consensus that Epicureans were very interested in spreading the word to others, not the least of the evidence in support of which appears to be the many books of Epicurus and Lucretius' poem itself. To me, it is natural that this perspective creates in the person who digs into it a desire to talk about it to others, obviously not indiscriminately, but to anyone you are seriously concerned about as a friend.

And as to Stoicism, I think DeWitt is primarily referring to it as an organized school consistent with the founding. Modern Stoics hardly deserve the name at all, and even Marcus Aurelius was a hodgepodge of conflicting ideas. In fairness to DeWitt I would interpret his comments as referring to the end of the organized school coinciding with the emergence of Christianity or whatever period seems consistent with the end of its pure form. As to Epicurean philosophy one could also take the position that the essence of Epicurus is found in the atomistic non-supernatural universe, which was not so amenable to being melded in with the emergence of Christianity. What came afterward in the vague adoption of "happiness" as the goal of life hardly deserves the name of Epicurean philosophy any more than does the modern version of Stoicism deserve the name Stoic.

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2020 at 1:13 PM

Edit: I first added this as a comment in the thread on Chapter 2, but I see it needs to be here on Chapter One more so than on Chapter two:

I now realize that part of what we may be observing here is that DeWitt wrote the early chapters, as he says, following the model of Epicurus himself, starting with a synopsis of the

whole, at a higher level of outline, while reserving the details of his analysis for later chapters. So DeWitt's reasoning on "sound mind - sound body" takes place much later in the book, under Chapter TWELVE - "The New Hedonism" - rather than in the highest-level outline, which is Chapter One. He makes the assertion in Chapter one, but reserves the backup detail for Chapter twelve.

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Rather than being a defect this is intentional and I think beneficial. The Epicurean model was to make sure that the final conclusions were not buried under mounds of notes and academic verbiage. You play fair with the reader by telling him very early where you are going. Then if the reader wants to stick around for the evidence that supports the detail, he can do so, but the primary outline of Epicurean philosophy is not buried under tons of words that only the hard-core academic is going to dig out. That's the way life is - we only get a short time to engage with any one person before they tend to move along to something else, so you need to tell them as quickly as possible what is important about the detail, so they can choose whether they want to pursue it.

So that's the most general answer to this comment:

Quote

[110-59a66b31898734ea03fed25bdb3b61f4bee9ca39.jpg](#)

[Quote](#)

[from Eugenios](#) DeWitt's penchant for making assertions with no context or citations or context.

- Yes, I can see how what you observe in Chapter one could be confusing when contrasted with the academic approach, but this is the "multi-level outline" model as suggested by Epicurus himself in the letter to Herodotus:

Quote

But those also who have made considerable progress in the survey of the main principles ought to bear in mind the scheme of the whole system set forth in its essentials. For we have frequent need of the general view, but not so often of the detailed exposition. Indeed it is necessary to go back on the main principles, and constantly to fix in one's memory enough to give one the most essential comprehension of the truth. And in fact the accurate knowledge of details will be fully discovered, if the general principles in the various departments are thoroughly grasped and borne in mind; for even in the case of one fully initiated the most essential feature in all accurate knowledge is the capacity to make a rapid use of observation and mental apprehension, and this can be done if everything is summed up in elementary principles and formulae. For it is not possible for anyone to abbreviate the complete

course through the whole system, if he cannot embrace in his own mind by means of short formulae all that might be set out with accuracy in detail.

Post by “Don” of April 13, 2020 at 3:47 PM

Your comments were very helpful here!! I think I see the synopsis vs detail approach now. Maybe I'm just getting ahead of myself on that one. I'll definitely be sticking with DeWitt and am looking forward to forging ahead.