

2024 Discussion Of Current Books On Epicurus

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2024 at 9:46 AM

By Zeus, this thread along with the thread on VS47 makes me think a systematic review of Usener's "fragments" would turn up multiple problematic Epicurean attributions. It seems to me he and his colleagues may have been playing fast and loose. I have no doubts about Usener's scholarship and erudition (just as I respect DeWitt's qualities), but it seems to me he may have got a little full of himself that led to some hubris.

(PS: Some may say that I have hubris to even question Usener or Bailey or even DeWitt, and maybe that's true. I would defend myself by saying that I'm not questioning Usener, Bailey, etc al. on a whim. I find a troubling number of their citations lacking in relevance to their assertions. I find their "corrections" and "reconstructions" to be more flights of fancy in some places than reasoned well-founded scholarship. All this might mean that we have less extant Epicurean texts than we're led to believe, but maybe we need to concentrate on what we clearly have than what we like to have.)

Post by “TauPhi” of May 26, 2024 at 1:44 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

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You're not alone, [Don](#) . I think DeWitt's book is a good introductory book that can spark the interest in Epicureanism in people. At least that seems to be the idea behind the book and Dewitt accomplished what he aimed for. However, when someone invests any time in the study of Epicureanism, it becomes very clear very quickly that DeWitt wrote his book not as a scholar but more as an enthusiast *[originally I used word 'fanboy' which may suggest derogatory intentions which is not what I intended - TauPhi]* of Epicurus. With all due respect to his work, he doesn't seem to have problems drawing conclusions out of thin air to make Epicureanism what he wants Epicureanism to be instead of presenting it for what it was, to the best of available resources.

As far as Bailey and Usener are concerned, their work is not perfect either but I'm very grateful for the amount of work they put in their research and publications.

One way or the other, it's great all these people decided to pursue their interests and now we can benefit from their beautiful, imperfect work and try to make more sense where possible by making our own mistakes on the way. Hubris or no hubris, studying stuff is so much fun, isn't it?

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2024 at 2:08 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

However, when someone invests any time in the study of Epicureanism, it becomes very clear very quickly that DeWitt wrote his book not as a scholar but more as a fanboy of Epicurus. With all due respect to his work, he doesn't seem to have problems drawing conclusions out of thin air to make Epicureanism what he wants Epicureanism to be instead of presenting it for what it was, to the best of available resources.

There's no need for us to "take a poll" or line up likes and dislikes on this point, but since I have and will continue to recommend "Epicurus and His Philosophy" as one of the two best starting points for someone who wants to get an overview of the entire philosophy, I don't want people reading this thread in the future to see it without a response from me, because I strongly disagree with this characterization of the DeWitt book. No other academic writer has had the courage to break from the negative prevailing consensus about Epicurus as thoroughly as DeWitt, and no one else comes close to presenting the entire sweep of the philosophy in a sympathetic and approachable way. Some may disagree with some of these conclusions, but he deserves a lot of credit for what he accomplished, and indeed his attitude that the prevailing texts have been mistranslated and unappreciated is very close to the same observation that brought up the subject in this thread.

The other book I rank at the same level of usefulness is "Living for Pleasure," but that has a different target market, and makes no effort to cover many of the details that you will find brought together in one place only in DeWitt.

The two books go well together, with "Living for Pleasure" as a very well written "self-help" book to get people who might not otherwise think about Epicurus started in reading about him, and "Epicurus and His Philosophy" providing many additional background details and explanatory analysis about many other important aspects of his philosophy.

Thanks for the opportunity to repeat this because I fully recognize, and it's important to understand, that DeWitt's book is not universally appreciated in the world of Epicurean writing, the best evidence of which is that it is rarely if ever cited as a source in most Epicurean commentary over the last 50 years.

Regardless of how opinions divide, one fact I can state with confidence is that were it not for DeWitt's interpretations and explanations, which cast Epicurus in an entirely different light than most, this forum would not exist.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 27, 2024 at 12:39 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

one of the two best starting points for someone who wants to get an overview of the entire philosophy,

I recommend reading the Letter to Menoeceus and the [Principal Doctrines](#) as a starting point.

DeWitt is an "intermediate-advanced" level, and is good for the "non-academic philosophy student" (i.e. those who enjoy studying all aspects philosophy as a hobby).

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2024 at 3:17 PM

I am glad you posted further to give me a chance to clarify a few things:

[Quote from Don](#)

I agree that Dewitt was a "fanboy" of Epicurus, but I don't see that as necessarily a negative.

Actually i predicted to someone else here on the forum that that would be exactly your take on it! 😊 And of course I agree. "Reverence" for the sage is of great help to those during the "reverencing."

[Quote from Don](#)

He obviously gave them lots of thought, but it seems he didn't feel her could write them as part of his academic career.

It occurs to me that that observation applies not only to DeWitt, but I suspect it has very personal application to someone we've had the privilege to interact with on the podcast - Emily Austin - who may undertake other work on Epicurus in the future. Becoming known as a defender of Epicurus could get your head chopped off some recent centuries ago, it was a guaranteed way to fail to win friends and influence people in the last century, and it's entirely unclear to me what the future holds. Anyone who undertakes that job could be forgiven for thinking that have decided to emulate Don Quixote.

[Quote from Don](#)

To TauPhi 's assertions...

There's always some tension between what needs to be said in context and what might be misunderstood by new readers who skim over threads. TauPhi is a longstanding and respected member of the forum who attends many of our zoom meetings, and as a result those of us who know him know him to be extremely constructive and helpful. I would not normally have responded quite so directly, but we just had an exchange with recent member @Josh about books to read, so I wanted to make an important point.

Since writing that post, I've thought of a better way to make the point.

Here's one way to decide whether someone should read "Living for Pleasure" first or DeWitt's book first (in my estimation anyway).

Below is the first paragraph from the first chapter of both books, and the difference gives you an excellent hint of what to expect:

Living For Pleasure, Chapter One, Paragraph One: "Imagine yourself on vacation. Not everyone enjoys beaches, and some people would rather eat sand than sleep in the woods. Maybe you prefer to vacation in your living room. Now that you've figured out where you are, who's there? You, obviously, but people rarely want to be entirely alone for all that long because we're social creatures. You might be with your romantic partner, or maybe your children or some close friends. Maybe you're there with George Clooney because why not?"

Epicurus And His Philosophy, Chapter One, Paragraph One: "This book attempts to present for the first time a fairly complete account of the life and teachings of Epicurus. At the very outset the reader should be prepared to think of him at one and the same time as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world."

If that doesn't help someone pick which book to start first, I don't know what will.

BOTH approaches are legitimate and important, but they appeal to two entirely different segments of readers. BOTH segments are important to and well represented on this forum, and we want to be responsive to the interests and friendship desires of both. And i have both books and recommend them both, sometimes in one order and sometimes in another, depending on what I know about the person who is asking for a place to start.

I would say both are "best in class" for (1) the generalist reader who may be entirely new to Epicurus, and (2) the reader who probably already knows a considerable amount about Epicureanism, Stoicism, and other classical philosophy, and who wants to begin to learn more about where Epicurus fits into that picture.

Post by “TauPhi” of May 27, 2024 at 4:11 PM

After reading Don's and Cassius' posts I started to suspect there was something wrong with my post #18. And now I think I know what went wrong.

It looks like I made a serious blunder by calling DeWitt a fanboy. By 'fanboy' I meant 'someone who is very enthusiastic' but now after short investigation I realised 'fanboy' is often used in a derogatory way (which I was not aware of). It was absolutely not my intention to offend or ridicule DeWitt and his book. I only wanted to point out that his book should not be taken for granted as it's not always a reliable source of information due to his sometimes far-fetched conclusions which are the result of him being very enthusiastic about Epicurus.

English is not my first language so I don't have a perfect command of it and boo-boos like that happen sometimes. I apologise for that. I have edited my post #18 and changed 'fanboy' to 'enthusiast' and have left a short explanation for the change. I would never deliberately belittle anyone who puts hard work in sharing his passions with others and I hope the rest of my post #18 shows clearly that I'm grateful for the work of all the people mentioned there.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 27, 2024 at 4:23 PM

Is there some reason why Haris Dimitriadis' book generally seems to get left out of these discussions? I really like it, and would surely recommend it, at least after (1) Austin and (2)

DeWitt as a next-step presentation for modern readers. But maybe I'm missing something ...

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2024 at 4:28 PM

Yes I agree Pacatus - of the books I recommend I would probably rank his as third as well.

I know in my case you are pointing out an oversight I am making personally. I have a copy of Harris' first edition, but I understand it has been updated and improved significantly since that edition. When the upgrade came out, for some reason my Kindle edition did not update, and I don't think I have seen the new edition.

Your post is going to motivate me to fix that.

Even given my current memory, I do agree that I would rate this highly. How would you compare it to the Catherine Wilson books?

Post by "Pacatus" of May 27, 2024 at 4:44 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

How would you compare it to the Catherine Wilson books?

Although I enjoy and appreciate Wilson, I would likely not include her in the top half-dozen. For example, I would put Crespo ahead of her, and Frances Wright's fictionalization, *A Few Days in Athens*. And also *Epicurean Philosophy An introduction from the "Garden of Athens"*, Christos Yapijakis Editor (maybe ahead of Crespo).

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2024 at 4:50 PM

Very interesting Pacatus! To extend my comparison from post 22 above, here is the first paragraph from Chapter one of "Epicurus and the Pleasant Life." I note that this is a total rewrite from the first edition"

"If we were to describe the Epicurean Philosophy in a single word, it would be "pleasure." And if we were to sum it up in a sentence, it would be this excerpt from the letter of Epicurus to Menoecus: "Pleasure is the beginning and the end of the happy life." With this simple statement, Epicurus establishes the emotion of pleasure as both the means and the purpose of life, in contrast to all other philosophies that introduce rational means and ends such as achievement, success, wealth, morality, social justice, and so on."

From here I am going to move or copy these over into a thread on Haris' book so we can continue this. Based on what I am seeing I might want to affirm that this would be my third suggestion for new readers.

I'll combine it with this thread too:

Thread

[Second Edition of Haris Dimitriadis' "Epicurus And the Pleasant Life" Now Released](#)

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3135/

It has just come to my attention that Haris has released a second edition of his "Epicurus and the Pleasant Life." His detailed preface is available on his website [here](#). The following is an excerpt:

[...]

I have been an appreciative fan of Haris for the many years that I have been in (unfortunately sporadic) communication with him over at Facebook. In fact we have at least one article from him featured here on Epicureanfriends:



Cassius

December 15, 2022 at 9:13 AM

Post by "Don" of May 27, 2024 at 4:52 PM

I need to read Wilson's *Epicureanism: A Very Short Introduction* separate from her *How to be an Epicurean*. Not necessarily endorsing; placing here for future reference and comment.

[Human Verification](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of May 27, 2024 at 5:07 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I need to read Wilson's *Epicureanism: A Very Short Introduction* separate from her *How to be an Epicurean*.

Good catch! I was really thinking of her *How to be an Epicurean*.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 28, 2024 at 7:12 PM

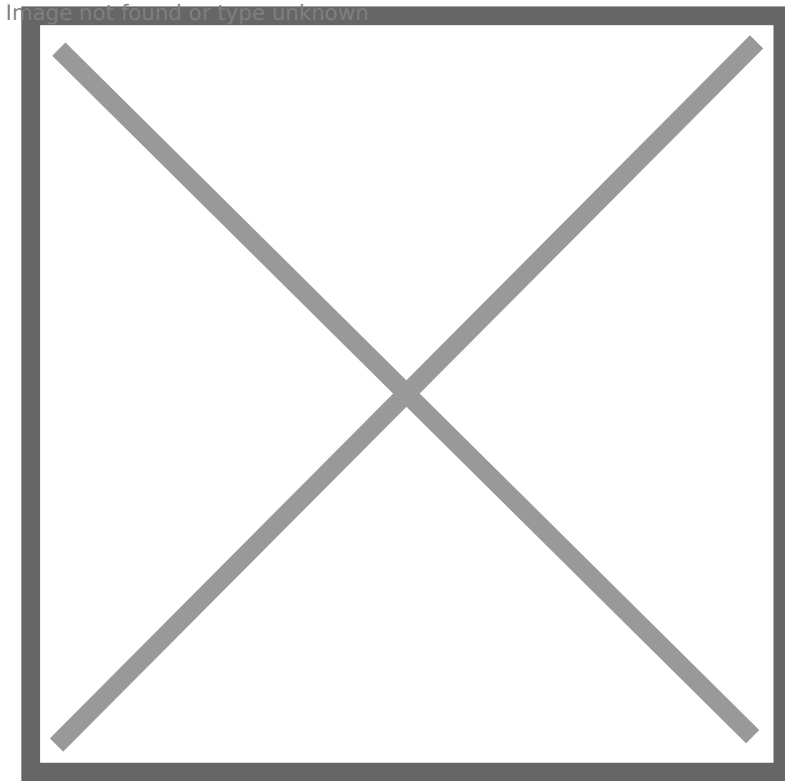
[Quote from Don](#)

I need to read Wilson's *Epicureanism: A Very Short Introduction* separate from her *How to be an Epicurean*.

I've just started it. I've always liked that Oxford University Press series.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2024 at 5:45 PM

I just discovered there's a Very Short Introductions podcast. Here's the Epicurean episode (13 min)



[Epicureanism - The Very Short Introductions Podcast - Episode 48 - The Very Short Introductions Podcast](#)

In this episode, Catherine Wilson introduces Epicureanism, a school of thought based on the teachings of Epicurus, that promotes modest pleasure and a simple...
pca.st

Full disclosure, I have not listened to it yet.

PS... Listened. Fine as far as it goes. No major issues with it. Just not especially noteworthy.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2024 at 6:34 PM

Listening now. I am hoping for the best and will report back - but I always find Catherine Wilson's voice and method of presentation to be attractive - and she's usually pretty negative about the Stoics too.

Interesting to hear her say that she's more into the history of science than in general classical philosophy - not sure i have heard her say that before.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2024 at 6:47 PM

I listened and found it to be fine. A VERY short introduction 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2024 at 6:50 PM

I could find ways to nitpick, especially in the area of where she is more willing to link Epicurus to current politics in ways that could be argued in multiple ways, but yes I agree it is up to her normal standards of very pleasant and interesting delivery.

Post by “Pacatus” of June 4, 2024 at 5:41 PM

I have just finished Wilson’s *Epicureanism: A Very Brief Introduction*. It is, indeed, very brief: the text being 120 pages.

As I read, I realized that the books we talk about here fall generally into two categories (though one might often “bleed” into the other): (1) the pragmatic – in terms of how one might live as an Epicurean in our modern times (and why that is worthy of consideration); and (2) the more straightforwardly “philosophical” – in the contemporary sense of that term. In the first category are such as Emily Austin, Hiram Crespo, Haris Dimitriadis and Wilson’s *How to Live as an Epicurean* (which I need to revisit). In the second category are DeWitt’s *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, *Epicurean Philosophy: An introduction from the “Garden of Athens”* (Christos Yapijakis Editor) – and Wilson’s *Very Brief Introduction*.

What one might recommend as an introduction thus ought to consider where a given person’s interest and prior exposure might be. (I tend to return more to those in the first category.) With that said, Wilson’s *Very Brief Introduction* might be considered as a sort of “outline primer” to, say, DeWitt.

Her treatment of Epicureanism is what I might call “critically fair” (fair as in evenhanded). She often skillfully sets up the arguments of Epicurus’ critics (such as the Stoics and – especially -- the Christians and Kant), only to effectively dismantle (or at least diminish) them. Where she herself offers criticism (or affirms those of others), it was generally in the manner of “it seems” – to her, or to majority contemporary thought. In other words, she seems to leave room (at least implicitly) for cogent criticism of her criticism. [And that has been accomplished, without direct reference to Wilson, on here many times.]

In sum – and, as I said, contingent on my revisiting of her *How to Live as an Epicurean* – I am revising my opinions recorded above in this thread to a more affirmative view. 😊

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On reflection of my thoughts in the 2nd paragraph above, I searched my (much diminished) philosophy shelf, and found a book I had forgotten: *Atoms, Pleasure, Virtue: The Philosophy of Epicurus* by Avraam Koen (1995). Has anyone else read it? The book was drawn from his PhD dissertation. It seems to be out of print but available: the Amazon price for the paperback is a hefty \$61.75.

My copy is riddled with highlights, underlines and marginal notes – some of which I started to skim. If I find anything I think worth discussing here, I'll post it.