

Wilson (Catherine) - "The Pleasure Principle"

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2019 at 1:53 PM

This book is being released approximately now, as this thread is being posted. However it is not in Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com as of this posting.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Pleasure-Princ...=UTF8&qid=&sr=&>

Post by "SamJ" of May 2, 2019 at 6:56 PM

I noticed this morning 3rd May it got released on Audible Australia. The blurb slightly more detailed on Audible.

Quote

In a dissatisfied world, looking back to ancient wisdom can shed light on fresh solutions.

For years, many of us have upheld the Stoic concept of 'no pain, no gain'. But in a time when we are burdened by the fear of failure and outsize ambitions, perhaps we should stop skirting around the edges of our problems via punishing exercise regimes, productivity apps and early morning starts.

According to the pleasure-centric philosophy of Epicureanism, life can be good without great sacrifice, and temptation isn't always the enemy. The riches of the sensory world are there to be enjoyed, so long as your pursuit of pleasure doesn't later bring you pain. Friendships ripen in restaurants. If the hangover is worth the fantastic night beforehand, go right ahead. Does your job bring you little satisfaction? Think it over. Are you a parent? Don't sacrifice your own interests by catering to your child's every whim. Are you unhappy in your relationship? Cut your losses - if you can do without, so much the better. If not, the time to find something better is now.

No honest philosopher can give you a formula for being happy. But philosophy can point the way to strategies for tackling the things that threaten our happiness. In *The Pleasure Principle*, Professor Catherine Wilson presents a framework for living not only comfortably and happily, but in a responsible and meaningful way

Display More

So I've downloaded the audio book this morning. Will let you know thoughts.

Cheers

Sam

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2019 at 7:16 PM

Thanks again Samj! I am now wondering if she's holding this off the American market with the intent of releasing the book that has the September date on it. Not sure why that would be, though.

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2019 at 11:18 AM

I now have my copy of the book but have only begun to go through it. My eye was caught, however, but this Stoic v Epicurean comparison chart near the end of the book. In particular, the description of the Epicurean "purpose of ethics" as "freedom from harm" and "happiness" as "freedom from anxiety and fear" strike me as grave distortions of Epicurus (but in accord with the modern majority view).

Much of the rest of the chart looks generally Ok to me, but the entire chart seems a little "loose" in meaning. For example, is the main concept "Orientation" clear enough to mean something?

Main Concepts	Stoics	Epicureans
Ontology	Pneuma	Atoms and void
Causality	Determinism, fate	Chance, free will
Purpose of ethics	Virtue	Freedom from harm
Source of moral authority	Natural law	Human agreement
Orientation	Universalist	Relativist
Emotions	Generally bad	Generally good
Family Life	Important	Inessential
Suicide	Recommended in difficult circumstances	Not recommended
Suffering	Inevitable	Minimisable
Pleasure	Generally bad	Generally good
Happiness	Freedom from all emotional disturbance	Freedom from anxiety and fear
Education	Develops human curiosity and capability	Undermines superstition
Warfare	Opportunity to display virtue	Motivated by greed and ambition

Post by “Joshua” of June 8, 2019 at 3:15 PM

Some part of my brain is snagging on that orientation line.

I believe the author means it to correlate with the line above. As in, "The Stoics believe that the *source* of moral authority is Natural Law, and the *orientation* of moral authority is that it applies universally to everyone." And, "The Epicureans believe that the *source* of moral authority is human agreement, and the *orientation* of moral authority is that its application is relative to varying human agreements."

It is *not* Universalist in the sense that some Christian sects are Universalist (that is, in their eschatology--"all souls end up in heaven").

As for moral relativism, which will no doubt be a charge leveled against Epicurus, the false assumption here is that the victims of a given covenant of justice have necessarily given it their assent. An Epicurean *may well argue* that slavery was immoral even in ancient Greece, in spite of their social conventions, specifically *because* the slave was never a party to the 'social contract' in the first place. The first lesson for the Epicurean to draw from this is the necessity of securing protection from other men, by means of self-sufficiency and friendship. The second lesson is this; that when the argument qualifying the idea of justice-by-convention is taken to its natural conclusion, it is in the end an argument for democracy; for general franchise; for limited government; and for free expression.

The "Natural Law", by contrast will *always* be a cudgel in the hands of dictators and theocrats, for whom moral certitude forms the thin veneer of respectability concealing their depredations.

Or so I think. ? -josh

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2019 at 3:38 PM

I agree with you as to "orientation" Joshua. And I bet if I had taken the trouble to read the text first, there might be explanations there that would make it clear.

As to "moral relativism" the more I think about anything involving "morality" the more I question whether the Epicureans even spoke in that term as we use it today. Certainly they spoke about "virtue" and "good" and "evil" but do we have good cites from Epicurus or Lucretius talking about "morality" as anything other than tied to pain and pleasure?

For example in your sentence: ". An Epicurean *may well argue* that slavery was immoral even in ancient Greece, in spite of their social conventions, specifically *because* the slave was never a party to the 'social contract' in the first place." The Epicurean would surely note that the relationship is pleasurable to the owner, and painful to the slave, and that if the relationship did

not come about by agreement (I suppose that is possible) then it would be unjust. And even if it came about by agreement at first, and the parties changed their mind, then we would at most have a breach of contract, not anything that violates any kind of abstract natural or divine or ideal law.

But would an Epicurean talk in terms of their being some kind of outside standard of "morality" which slavery in ancient Greece (or any other place) violated?

Certainly we have the example of Cassius Longinus who decided that Caesar (arguably a dictator against the law) offended his sense of *something* enough to assassinate him and to go to war against his successors. In those letters between him and Cicero he talks about the interrelation between virtue and pleasure as they applied to that situation, but I don't recall that he spoke in terms of the problems being one of "morality" or Caesar being "immoral."

Sometimes it is hard to separate the philosophical issue from the emotion of the particular example (slavery, here) but I think that is exactly what Epicurus was advising in those PD's on Justice from 30-40.

We personally find some things so painful and offensive to us that we go to war and fight to the death over them, but if there is no god, no ideal forms, no abstract eternal truths, then when we fight to the death we should realize that we are fighting for our own preferences, not because we are vindicated by gods or outside standards.

At least that is the way I am reading it. I am very interested in any opinions otherwise, or with a different twist on it, but I think the Epicurean fundamental principles of the way the universe work compel that conclusion.

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2019 at 4:18 PM

Ha - I just came across this which I have never seen before but is relevant to our discussion of "morality"

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"Catherine Wilson
asserts the **MORAL** right to be identified as the author of

Is this some kind of new phrasing in international copyright
law?

Good grief. I would have thought that "Copyright Catherine
Wilson 2019" was sufficient for that, must we appeal to
absolute morality in a book on Epicurus??? 😊

Post by "Joshua" of June 8, 2019 at 7:58 PM

I certainly recognize what you're saying about the emotive nature of slavery as a concept, and the tendency to get mushy in our thinking about it.

I agree with you that just using the word 'moral' is a problem, and that there is no "outside moral standard"--what in philosophy is often called a *Transcendental Moral 'Ought'*. This relates to David Hume's famous formulation, afterward called "Hume's Guillotine"; *There is no possible account of how things are that can tell us how things ought to be*. There are no Transcendental Moral Oughts, but there are what we call "Rational Oughts"; this is usually an "if-then" statement. *If you want a society that recognizes private property, then you ought to criminalize theft*. That's not a moral argument, but a rational one.

So perhaps I would reformulate that sentence. An Epicurean can make a rational case against slavery by citing the non-willingness of the slave as an impediment to justice, by definition.

Could the thief make the same defense as the slave? "That may be your convention, but I didn't agree to it. My convention says I can take what I want." I don't believe so; the thief is pleading himself *out* of the pact, and therefore forfeits its protection. The slave is trying to plead himself *into* the pact, and is therefore worthy of it.

Another way to put it; if a man takes as his mantra that line from Achilles--that there are no pacts between lions (himself) and men (society)--then he can't very well complain when society treats him like they would a man-eating lion, can he? This is again a rational rather than a moral conclusion.

Good points! It always helps to clarify one's thinking.

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2019 at 8:40 PM

If I understand your points I think I agree with all you wrote. I realize as I think about things things that I am trying to take these issues to their logical conclusion.

IF there is nothing eternal except matter in motion through the void, and if the universe has no "center" and no "outside" from which a creating power looks on and says "THIS is good and THAT is bad" then we are truly left with the feelings of pleasure and pain as the motivation for all action.

We can set our sights on things that we think will please us (democracy, equality, capitalism, socialism, communism) but never can there be any "outside" justification for it other than ourselves and what we set as our goals. Presumably we set goals for some reason, and that reason ultimately is a function of our calculation of how our feelings of pain and pleasure will be impacted.

All of this might seem like the path to nihilism, but I think Epicurus probably saw it as the opposite: He presumably saw it as daring to cut away all illusions and getting right to the heart of the matter. Looking for justification "out there somewhere" is a dream - all justification must come to us in life, and ultimately through our feelings of pleasure and pain. Deprive us of all feeling, and we are dead, as per PD2. But rather than look at feeling as "all we have" and feel like we are deprived of something that we "ought" to have, such as gods might have, I think the point would be that since our feeling is ultimately our most important connection to reality, we have to guard it as rigorously and intensely as we can, because in very short order life is over and it is gone.

And in one of the phrases from DeWitt's commentary that I remember best, I think it's true that all these issues of morality and ethics and pain and pleasure have meaning ONLY to "the living."

Post by "Joshua" of June 8, 2019 at 9:50 PM

That's all to the good, Cassius 😊

To clarify one further point, what I wrote about democracy, franchise, etc. doesn't derive from "absolute truth (TM)" or any such thing. I meant to draw a clear line between what Epicurus said about justice, which is the premise, and the things that necessarily follow from that premise. To speak of a system of justice where the strong make decisions and the weak suffer what they must is a contradiction in terms, *if* we're using his definition of justice. His

conception of pleasure as the good is built into that definition, and a rational (though not a moral) political theory can, I think, be derived from it.

Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2019 at 11:16 PM

"where the strong make decisions and the weak suffer what they must is a contradiction in terms, "

I know that what you say applies to me, but it concerns me that this comes close to drawing a bright line that may not be in fact so bright. Is it not possible to imagine situations where the strong do make decisions for the weak that do in fact lead to greater pleasure for both? Is a parent child relationship such an example? Generalities are useful but the closer we get to stating that anything is a "rule" the closer we probably get to extending our personal opinion further than it has the "power" to go over the feelings of the people involved.

Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2019 at 11:24 PM

joshua I appreciate your helping me think these things through. Like i said I am trying to put myself in the place of someone who tries to stay as rigorously consistent with the principles as possible without injecting my / our modern viewpoint. But it's of course hard to do that so it helps to test the arguments against ever more extreme test cases to see if they can stand the strain. So far I think they can if we rigorously reject the idea that any law or morality can be the same for all people at all times and all places under all circumstances.

Post by “Elayne” of June 9, 2019 at 1:31 PM

What I understand JJ to be saying is that slavery would not come under the category "justice" if it does not involve some type of mutual agreement, a contract which is at least implied, between the two parties. I agree completely. The use of force does not qualify as a contract. That is different from classifying it by a universal standard of right and wrong, different from popular concepts of "fairness", and different from an assessment of the consequences in terms of pain/ pleasure-- it's only saying it doesn't meet the definition of contractual justice as

Epicurus used that terminology.

Post by “Elayne” of June 9, 2019 at 1:35 PM

What caught my eye was that pleasures are only "generally good", when it is actually that the pleasures themselves are always good but that sometimes pains come along with certain pleasure-bringing actions and thus those actions are not advisable. It's not the pleasure that's the problem at all-- it's the entire consequences of the action. That might sound like a quibbling distinction but I don't think it is minor. Because sometimes one can modify the results of an action so that the pleasures remain and the pains are lessened or removed.

Post by “Cassius” of June 9, 2019 at 4:26 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

What caught my eye was that pleasures are only "generally good", when it is actually that the pleasures themselves are always good but that sometimes pains come along with certain pleasure-bringing actions and thus those actions are not advisable. It's not the pleasure that's the problem at all-- it's the entire consequences of the action. That might sound like a quibbling distinction but I don't think it is minor. Because sometimes one can modify the results of an action so that the pleasures remain and the pains are lessened or removed.

Oh I missed that and I completely agree with this.

Post by “Joshua” of June 9, 2019 at 5:39 PM

Elayne, you've expressed my position more clearly than I could. Thank you! 😊

Post by “JAWS” of July 6, 2019 at 10:10 PM

I recently decided to go back to the beginning of this book and read it more carefully. So this post is about a few things that caught my attention while reading the Preface.

1) At the bottom of page 6 she makes this comment about Epicureans: "Their moral philosophy is relational rather than individualistic." I would provide more of the paragraph for context, but when I read it, I feel like this sentence really stands alone. The way that I would interpret this sentence is that the Epicurean morality is dependent on the overall social implications rather than on individual pleasure, and I don't agree with that. Do you think I am misinterpreting this sentence? If so, what do you take it to mean? If not, do you agree with Catherine Wilson on the Epicurean morality? Then again, perhaps this is a silly question because I don't think that Epicurean philosophy has any sort of absolute morality, does it?

2) At the bottom of page 7, she says "My perceptions don't have any special claim to objectivity, and my preferences - indeed, human desires in general - don't deserve automatic priority over the preferences of other people and animals." I do not disagree with this sentence, but I think that my reason for agreeing is very different from what her lack of explanation suggests. My reason for agreeing with the sentence is that I feel the hedonic calculus needs to be considered and giving automatic priority to our own preferences may have consequences that could net out as more pain than pleasure. However, I feel like her lack of explanation suggests that Epicureans question their own preferences and deny them on the basis of some greater good, which I don't think would be very Epicurean. Again, I don't hate the sentence, just the lack of explanation around it, but maybe I'm reading too much into it.

3) Starting at the bottom of page 10 and going on to page 11, she has a block of sentences that I am uncomfortable with. "Although it might seem surprising in light of the many attacks from medieval and early-modern Western theologians on Epicureanism for its atheistic framework, the Epicurean conception of the good and meaningful life can even be found in the Jewish and Christian bibles. Ecclesiastes 8:15 says, 'Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry.' Isaiah 22:13 says, 'Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.'" This may seem nitpicky, but I don't like the term meaningful life. Is there an Epicurean conception of the meaningful life? Or is meaningful life synonymous with pleasurable life? This is an important question to me, because I don't believe that life has some absolute meaning and, up to this point, I didn't think that Epicurus necessarily disagreed. Am I wrong? I'm also curious what you think of the quotes from the bible. Is that a fair synopsis of the Epicurean conception of the good life - to eat, drink, and be merry? It seems too simplistic to me and suggests a hedonism that is more in line with the Cyrenaics than the Epicureans.

Post by "Cassius" of July 6, 2019 at 10:48 PM

JAWS: I very much agree with your comments. Let me explain on each point:

1) Yes I agree that the sentence you quote stands on its own, as part of a list, and doesn't gain any context from the surrounding sentences (see clip below). And I agree with your interpretation, and I think Wilson is wrong. From the discussion of friendship we know that Epicurus asserted that the foundation of friendship is in the utility it has for us in bringing pleasure, and even when we get to the point that we value our friends' happiness as much or more than our own, we are still working within the same principle that we see our own happiness tied up in our friends, and so we never depart from the original standard of our own pleasure motivating our choices. This clipped sentence in context seems intended to appeal to a certain type of reader who wants to find "altruism" in Epicurus, and it seems to me it undermines Wilson's credibility to make this argument.

the face of adversity. Unlike their main philosophical rivals, the Stoics, they did not believe the mind is all-powerful in the face of adversity or that we should strive to repress our emotions, griefs and passions. Their moral philosophy is relational rather than individualistic. And unlike the other, more influential schools of ancient philosophy, especially the Platonic and the Aristotelian, the Epicureans welcomed women into the sect.

6

2) Once again I agree with your criticism of the sentence you quote, and I interpret this as having much the same problem as the sentence you criticize in point one. Wilson is using broad language to appear to be making sort of an "egalitarian" argument to make Epicurus seem more appealing to those of that persuasion, and I think she is intending to convey the meaning to which you object, even though her sentence can be parsed to mean something less assertive. As I see it part of the ambiguity comes from the "deserve automatic priority" part, where it is not clear what that means. If she means "deserves automatic priority from Nature," or "deserve automatic priority from society" or "deserve automatic priority from the state" then she is probably correct. But that's not what I think she intends the reader to get. She intends (in my humble opinion) to imply that she herself (or anyone else, looking at themselves) should not put her own (or their own) preferences ahead of those of other people (or animals!) and that is pretty close to a ridiculous assertion. None of us asked the chicken we ate for dinner tonight whether the chicken preferred to be eaten or not. Maybe we should have - that's another issue - but talking in terms of "automatic priorities" is a vague way of implying that we're all just going to love one another and agree on everything, when that patently is not the case.

(3) Of your three criticisms I think this one hits her the hardest. First, to point out a couple of verses in the Bible that talk about mirth and pleasure and imply that there is a basic affinity between Epicurean philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology is absurd. Second, you're right I think to attack the use of "meaningful." Yes Epicurus appears to have talked in terms of the

"good" life, but where is there any reference in any text to something akin to "meaningful"? "Meaningful" to whom, and how, and for what? What does "meaningful" even mean if not as a reflection of some kind of justification from an outside source? Probably there are ways to save this part as well by playing with the definitions of the words, but I think you're right to question this JAWS because she is once again making claims for the sake of gaining the reader's sympathy that just aren't justified by the texts.

In summary, and with all due respect to the author's credentials and education, I just don't think she is correct. Is she consistent with the Academic orthodoxy on Epicurus and will they unite in praising her acuity on these issues? Oh heck yes -- but that doesn't make her right, and we have the right to read the texts ourselves and see if her conclusions make sense as consistent with the texts. And these don't. I also don't doubt that there will be many more in the book that are open to the same criticism.

Post by "JAWS" of July 7, 2019 at 9:56 AM

Thanks, Cassius! It is relieving to hear that you agree.