

# Catherine Wilson's January 2021 article: "Why Epicureanism, Not Stoicism, Is The Philosophy We Need Now"

Post by "Cassius" of January 13, 2021 at 11:01 PM

## [Quote from Don](#)

Finally, I'm just happy to see Epicurus's name in a popular magazine where it's not some Stoic writing how unworthy pleasure is as a goal then going off on their "following nature" and virtue rant.

Ok this is I think a good summary of your point and I certainly agree with it - you're cutting her a lot of slack because of this, and indeed that title -- explicitly promoting Epicurus over Stoicism - is impossible not to appreciate. How infrequently we see anything like that in the popular material that we read is a testament to how bad things are out there. Catherine Wilson deserves tremendous credit from that point of view.

So within that context I can certainly appreciate that you want to be generous. I tend to think the same way -- I've watched some of her videos and I like her personality. She seems honest and friendly and clearly means well. And I think she realizes that even to the small extent she's wandered from the academic orthodoxy, in her circle she's pretty much out on a limb on her own, with few allies. So I can appreciate that she's being brave even being in the game at all.

But having said that, I think Elayne's criticism still stands. It would not be very hard for Wilson to word these passages more accurately, and I don't really think that she was being sloppy -- she seems to really draw back from the full logical conclusions that Epicurus' logic compels her to draw. Elayne's point about Epicurus saying clearly that we sometimes choose pain in order to eventually achieve more pleasure --- that really is a super-fundamental point. I cannot imagine a really no good excuse for her not making that very precisely and clearly except that she doesn't want to -- she doesn't want to say explicitly that wisdom or knowledge is not desirable in itself unless it brings pleasure. That's just too much for the academic world to tolerate, and she's not willing to go there even though that is clear Epicurean doctrine.

As to the bliss pill, I also see Elayne's point that the general principle that she's laying out is very wide from the mark. She's choosing to emphasize that the problem would be that "the causes of pain and pleasure would be obscured." Well, why is that a problem? If the bliss pill works, who cares WHY it works -- that's principle doctrine 10 in spades. The clear implication of this phrasing is that it is the KNOWLEDGE of the causes that is of concern to Wilson. She's clearly implying that knowledge in and of itself is good, which is totally wrong in Epicurean

terms. It is even somewhat contradicted by what she has just said in the preceding paragraph, where she implies that the benefit of experiencing pain is to "keep our appetites sharp."

Here's the main point I wanted to come back and add, and this is a little different from what Elayne wrote:

Rather than Wilson failing to appreciate pleasure as a feeling, I think the thing that bothers me about her approach is that she seems to back away from taking the doctrines to their logical conclusions. As Elayne pointed out, her emphasis on the pleasure of "all" is Wilson's own arbitrary humanist addition, and isn't at all supported by the texts. She's universalizing and humanizing the edge because she isn't willing to follow the logical progression to the end, which involves real feelings of pleasure for real people and not universalized abstractions about what would be nice if the world were like that. Same with her observations about "justice."

Probably the best way I can express my concern at the moment is that I think you have to accept that Epicurus was preaching pleasure (a feeling) as the goal while at the same time employing words in a system that he wanted to be rigorously logical and consistent. If you can't follow the principles he set out to their logical conclusions, you're really ignoring them and producing something that might seem pleasing to us for the moment, but isn't true to what Epicurus was teaching.

So I think in order to really understand and appreciate Epicurus you have to be ruthlessly logical in identifying and then applying Epicurus' chain reasoning, as I think is DeWitt's strength. We can debate in good faith all day long whether it is necessary to follow his chain reasoning on eternity and infinity, but even those of us on different sides of that question are on the same team. We ultimately pick up the chain at some point where we all affirm materiality and lack of supernatural forces, and so we're ultimately holding the same chain, just at different starting points.

In ethics though it's hard to say that we're even on the same chain with Catherine Wilson. Wilson understands that "pleasure" is identified as the goal, but she takes all sorts of liberties with other aspects of the ethics, so she reaches conclusions that are more personal preference than they are illustrations of the principles. She's taking principles and showing how SHE applies them without identifying the fundamental issues involved in them, so she ends up teaching "Wilsonism" rather than Epicurus' process, approach, and system. By doing so she lowers the discussion away from the "philosophy" part entirely and makes Epicurus into simply *an ethicist with whom we should agree*.

My greatest concern then is that because she isn't following the course logically, she ultimately isn't going to be able to deal effectively to what I see to be one of the biggest obstacles we all face -- dealing with the "pleasure as the absence of pain" passages.

Unless you get used to seeing Epicurus as a master logician, you're going to try to make sense of the "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain" passages thinking that he is talking in terms of feelings that we should grasp directly, when -- in my humble opinion - he is talking in

primarily LOGICAL terms [in order to address the Platonic logical arguments against pleasure as the highest good](#) such as expressed in [Philebus](#). He's expecting us to remember that the logical context is that there are only two feelings, so that BY DEFINITION - by logic - the presence of one equals the absence of the other. If you try to take that passage in purely experiential or "I know it because i feel it" terms without keeping in mind its logical context you're going to crash on the rocks, because in "feeling" terms it doesn't feel right to identify the goal of life - the greatest joy we can experience, as "absence of pain."

You're got to be prepared to approach Epicurus at the same time as both (1) the master architect of human happiness -- a masterful conveyor of the importance of "feeling," as well as (2) a master logician who was superior to Plato in explaining the goal of life in terms of ideas.

If you can't walk both paths then you're going to stumble. If you're too focused on emotion and feeling you will stumble when you confront the logical ideas of the Platonists, but at the other extreme if you're too focused on logic you'll fail because you sound like as much of an emotionless robot as the Stoics.

I firmly think you have to be grounded in *\*both\**. Catherine Wilson is primarily explaining Epicurus in terms of her own feelings, and that's not good enough.