

# An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by "Don" of October 28, 2022 at 6:19 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

comments from the far bleachers

All comments always welcome! We're all learning. 😊

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

First, while we might agree on the failings of Aristotle (and certainly Plato), I think we are well-served to remember that Epicurus did owe them an intellectual debt - and that his project was of a different order, even as it required him to jettison errors of his predecessors and, in the interest of *therapeía*, to simplify (at least in the limited Epicurean corpus available to us).

I'll admit that my impatience with Aristotle is sometimes - let's say - overly enthusiastic. I need to remind myself that he's basically making things up as he goes along - \*literally\*! His is some of the - if not \*the\* - first attempts to systematically examine these ideas. For all my, pooh-poohing in my notes, I do have respect (but not unquestioning awe!) for his place in Western intellectual history.

I also need to read that paper you referenced again (I've skimmed it in the past), but - at this time - I'm not sure I would phrase it that Epicurus owed Plato and Aristotle "an intellectual debt." It seems to me that Epicurus owed much, much more to the Democritean strain of Greek philosophy than he did to Plato & Aristotle. However, all the schools - and there were a myriad of them - all knew of each other, sparred with each other, responded to each other. Several of Epicurus's and Metrodorus's works were responses to other schools.

We I write this post, I see Epicurus as more of a reactionary against the Socratic lineage than owing a debt to it, other than the debt a knife owes a whetstone.

So, one of my goals for this reading of *Nichomachean Ethics (NE)* is to get an idea of what Epicurus would have had access to, what was the intellectual background like in which he was formulating his own ideas. Epicurus claimed he was "self-taught" but that's never, of course, entirely true.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Aristotle (as I recall in my thickly mist-shrouded memory), did at least define telos in terms of a fully lived life.

That's one of the areas I'd say Epicurus disagreed with Aristotle. My reading of *NE* is that Aristotle didn't think you could call anyone "happy" - no one could be said to have "well-being" (eudaimonia) - until they had lived their entire life and were dead. "Oh, she lived a happy life." Epicurus taught that we can have eudaimonia here and now.

#### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

Second, with regard to telos and the summum bonum, DeWitt (under the heading "The Summum Bonum Fallacy in Chapter XII "The New Hedonism," beginning on P. 219) thought it was an error to conflate the two: "To Epicurus pleasure was the telos and life itself was the greatest good. ... The belief that life itself is the greatest good conditions the whole ethical doctrine of Epicurus."

DeWitt goes on to unpack how he thought the error of conflation came about.

I've posted elsewhere on this forum that I reject Dewitt's "Epicurus said life is the greatest good" assertion. I see no evidence for this in the extant texts, and, to me, DeWitt's evidence doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Now, pass me that popcorn and hand me a beer 😊