

Episode One Hundred Forty-Five - Part 01 (Chapter 1 of Epicurus And His Philosophy)

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Notes from Episode 145 - The Philosophy of Epicurus by Norman DeWitt -- Chapter 1 -- the Synoptic View of Epicureanism (Part 1)

(Revised version 10/30/22)

0:30 -- This podcast is an attempt to provide a more general perspective for the generalist listener/reader who does not have a lot of background, and this will be based on the organizational plan used by DeWitt.

2:12 -- The book preface states DeWitt's purpose of writing this book:

1. To organize surviving data into a biographical sketch of Epicurus to show throw some light on the growth of his personality and the development of his philosophy.
2. To give a new interpretation based on less amended, less revised remains of Epicurus' writings.
3. To bring attention to Epicureanism as a bridge of transition from classical philosophies of Greece to the Christian religion. (which is not part of the goal of this podcast).

4:40 -- Epicurus as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in Greco-Roman world.

5:24 -- Most revered and how Epicureanism spread and flourished

6:27 -- Epicurus differed significantly from Plato as to his ideal forms, and Epicurus comes along and brings up a much different approach philosophy, and interest in Epicureanism spread to all corners of the known world.

8:05 -- He was reviled -- Jewish scholars applied the word "epikoros" (heretic).

10:45 - Now online you can read things about Epicureanism and the uncontroversial goal of how best to live happily -- so it seems Epicurus should be held in high regard. Why would there be any problem at all?

11:28 - Stoics, Christians, and Orthodox Jews, and others saw some something deeper and more threatening in the Epicurean rejection of Platonism, the rejection of idealism of forms, and the rejection of a supernatural creator that started the universe in motion and providentially attends to it, as well as the shift from absolute morality to contextual morality. So Epicureanism

contains explosively divisive ideas then (and now) and could get you exiled from your community.

14:05 - Epicurean philosophy actually constitutes a complete restructuring of the mental framework of how we should think about the most fundamental things -- everything from nature itself, to human societies, to the nature of the gods -- this is a radical reformation of thought at the time, and it's mostly because of that that we have this interesting dichotomy between the people who love what he is doing, like Lucian, and the people who hate him as much as they hate anything (that would be Alexander in this case).

15:02 -- A reform movement -- Epicurus realized what he was doing and was writing letters, articles and books -- writing against other philosophers and as a campaigner for his own views. So there was this missionary/evangelization aspect and a number of Epicureans were engaged in spreading their views and being pamphleteers -- engaging in spreading their message to correct improper beliefs about supernatural gods, incorrect views about life after death, and expressing new views about how to live life as a whole.

16:45 -- A Synoptic View of Epicureanism -- using the analogy of Henry David Thoreau's looking glass story as a clear way of expressing what a synoptic view is -- seeing things together and seeing them in their proper relations to one another.

19:00 -- This way of seeing things is important to Epicurus and we see this in the Letter to Herodotus, that we should use outlines so that we can know what the important points are and understand how things fit together.

20:15 -- DeWitt is supplying a broad outline, and over time will add things in to fill in the details. This is similar to building a robot -- starting out with a skeleton and then adding things on top of it. You can't see the forest if you stand six inches from a tree -- so we will start out with looking at the big picture, and then add in more details around what the important points are. We will attempt to provide an overall general perspective on Epicurus.

23:35 -- DeWitt says it is important to establish an attitude toward a particular subject. For example: The correct attitude to be taken with regard to the gods, how they are not to be feared, and the reason why not to fear them -- if a disciple could maintain this attitude it was felt that he would be rightly disposed to receive subsequent instruction about the nature of the gods.

25:53 -- So the attitude you take at the outset is going to color the way that you (or readers) interpret the subject matter. You can notice if a particular writer is hostile or not to Epicureanism.

27:27 -- Something about pleasure -- Epicurus is tagged with immediate pleasure. There is much less coverage of Greek philosophy in schools and often a younger person knows nothing of Epicurus.

28:20 -- The people who do somehow look up about Epicurus on the Wikipedia page will end up reading that Epicurus and his followers were known for eating simple meals and discussing a wide range of philosophical subjects, and the goal of philosophy was to attain ataraxia and aponia, and live in tranquility and self-sufficiency surrounded by friends. All of this was obvious and inoffensive. Who doesn't want happiness and freedom from the fear of death, and it seems like those are such general goals, unbelievable that anybody would ever have anything to say against Epicurus.

29:25 -- Development of the philosophy went beyond the set of philosophies that were taught at that time. It went beyond beliefs of supernatural gods who intervened and beyond fate and a deterministic aspect of life in which you were fated to have a particular result or the gods would intervene, as if all these assertions were true. And Epicurus was examining the foundations of these philosophies.

31:53 -- It matters where you start -- that the first step is going to make a difference. On the EpicureanFriends forum, this book has been recommended for a very long time.

33:00 -- Otherwise we might jump in at the same place that Wikipedia jumps in: the goal of life is pleasure, the highest pleasure is absence of pain -- and this would be in isolation with the rest of the philosophy.

33:40 -- Even today the commentary that we read about Epicurus is largely written by people who do not agree with some of the major aspects of Epicurus' philosophy, especially the morality, because they say that we have to pursue the good (virtue) as the ultimate goal. But we don't really know what it means to pursue the good. We don't know what the good (virtue, or the will of god) is because these are generalities that are not a given -- that have no meaning or have no ability of being defined in the real world, through the evidence of the senses and the logical approaches that Epicurus was pursuing.

34:50 -- Epicurus becomes the best guide of going back to nature for the answers - not nature as created by a supernatural god or nature with ideas floating around (ideas about virtue that existed from the beginning of time). So it is important to understand the revolutionary nature of Epicurus' philosophy.

35:30 -- Chain arguments, deductive reasoning, if this then that - general to the particular. (observation, evidence, observation). Canonics - test of truth -five senses, anticipations and the feelings as the basis of everything. Observation by the eyes doesn't tell you what it is you are observing.

37:20 -- DeWitt -- [all sensations are true](#) or not -- various meanings to [all sensations are true](#). Epicurus never declared sensations to be only source of knowledge. Our interpretations of sensations are not necessarily trustworthy. So like a witness testifying in a case - all sensations are reported honestly but because of distortions may not be the clearest view and take further observations before you come to a conclusion about what actually is true - weighing the evidence is a different process than gathering the evidence.

41:35 -- Philodemous talks about Epicureans in his time taking the synoptic view as good enough and just moving on. and not filling in the details. We need to take the whole thing in view and have a necessary education in the broader context, and then continue to study deeper.

43:20 -- Epicurus did a broad study of nature, but also the study of human nature. And it is important to understand your own thought processes and your own sensations, your own sense organs -- in order to use them successfully -- and also the way our mind operates.

45:40 -- DeWitt has attempted to provide almost a textbook of basic positions of Epicurus - perspective, structure, and sweeping background.

46:06 -- This philosophy is meant to be helpful on life decisions. Vain is the philosophy which does not provide for the health of the soul

49:08 -- Practical use of Epicurean philosophy that is useful for regular people.

50:02 -- Largely accurate, but Cicero and others were writing to refute Epicurus.

51:45-- Synoptic view is no substitute for the details -- but details are no substitute for the outlines. You need a foundation of course, but must take the final step to apply and impliment what you are studying -- the map is not the territory.

54:25 -- general assessment of your life and happiness, taking in an overview -- higher viewpoint understanding your place in nature and come to a feeling of tranquility and calmness.