

# My struggle with Norman DeWitt

Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 10:38 AM

Thanks for the post Waterholic because it raises important points. Just a few comments on point 1, because I think point 2 first is likely the much more significant one.

DeWitt's comparisons of Epicureanism to Christianity are pretty much neutral in terms of what they say about Epicurus, and I see them as much more reflective of DeWitt's own speculations about how they compare. In fact I was thinking about this point the other day and I believe it deserves to be emphasized when we discuss this topic: As frequent as DeWitt's comparisons are in the book, ask yourself: "Do those comparisons really state that Christianity is correct or did anything other than borrow procedures from Epicurus?" Yes he goes overboard in his parallels, but to what result? It's not like he is saying that Christianity is right, just that they were perceptive enough to borrow certain perspectives from Epicurus. If he goes overboard, and I think he does, it's on a topic that really doesn't touch Epicurus himself, and just shows that DeWitt's parallels are stretched too thin, because what he's saying they picked up from Epicurus they could have picked up anywhere, because the friendliness and charity and honesty etc are just largely common sense.

Compare DeWitt's comments to Gibbon's in his "Fall of the Roman Empire." Gibbon uses sarcasm and false-sounding praise of Christianity to make his derogatory points about the influence of Christianity. DeWitt's comments seem sincere, but then never to my memory rise to a level of saying "the Christians were right!" He's basically just drawing attention to parallels that some will find - and do find - extremely interesting, while others won't.

On point 2 I think the issue is much more important. When you say "Is this a problematic tangent of NDW or am I missing something?" I don't think this is something specific with DeWitt.

The characterization you use does remind me of what Martha Nussbaum says in her "Therapy of Desire," but I don't recall DeWitt being nearly so negative about it. Epicurus clearly thought it was important to combat skepticism, and he thought it important to state firmly what he thought was correct, and there is plenty of evidence in the texts to support that being an accurate characterization. But as far as being "a despotic figure with a strong will to dominate feeble minded and expand his influence by any means necessary, including missionary work," I would say yes he had strong will but never tried to "dominate feeble minded" people or expand his influence by "any means necessary." I do think that the term "missionary work" is probably a fair characterization, though it's hard to say how organized it really was.

I see I've already written a lot and only really set the stage for this, with my main points being (1) that the Christianity parallels are a tangent of DeWitt that some find interesting and some

don't, but no reason for worry, and (2) the issue of "dogmatism" vs "skepticism" in Epicurus is definitely there, and dedicated skeptics are definitely going to have a problem with Epicurus. Given that I believe Epicurus' position on skepticism is a correct one, that doesn't personally cause me any problem at all, and makes him more valuable to me. But that's the issue that we will want to discuss in much more detail and I feel sure others will weigh in on as well.

On the parallels with Christianity you're indeed struggling with DeWitt. On the issue with "dogmatism," you're struggling directly with Epicurus, though I think you'll eventually decide that your wording of Epicurus' position is significantly too strong.