

My struggle with Norman DeWitt

Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 1:59 PM

From Diogenes Laertius: "When once a man has attained wisdom, he no longer has any tendency contrary to it or willingly pretends that he has. ... He will give lectures in public, but never unless asked; he will give definite teaching and not profess doubt."

[Quote from waterholic](#)

From Epicurus' point of view, I see two reasons: 1. to help people (as that's the ultimate goal of the philosophy), 2. build a community of friends - safety in numbers. My impression is that the intensity of this effort in DeWitt's book comes across a little greater than would be warranted by the nature of the school.

I think there is a third reason that was actually more important to Epicurus than these two, and comes through especially through the intensity of Lucretius, which does come through in DeWitt. That reason is the earnest desire to be confident in knowing the "Truth" about the way things are, so as to then live according to those conclusions. Epicurus doesn't start out simply deciding he wants to be happy -- he starts out - from his first questioning of "Chaos" - wanting to know what "the truth" is about the universe, so as to then live accordingly. Had Epicurus determined from his search for truth that theism could be confidently established, I would argue that Epicurus would then have turned his energetic and determined mind -- see the opening of Lucretius Book I - to being "more catholic than the pope." He would have engaged his powers of persuasion to whatever course he deemed to be correct, and if living per the instructions of supernatural gods could be proven to be the correct course, then Epicurus would have led the way.

Of course that theistic conclusion cannot be proved to be correct, and in fact the non-theistic conclusion is established by such weight that we can have great confidence in it, and thus we have the confident Epicurus (and Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda) that comes through in the texts. These are personalities that will be mocked by such as Cicero, alleging that they talk as if they just came down from the intermundia, and that they want to avoid nothing so much as seeming to be in doubt, but we all have to make our own decisions about how to evaluate the evidence and then act accordingly.

So accordingly I would definitely not agree that "to help people" is the ultimate goal of Epicurean philosophy. It is a very important aspect of the conclusion, but it is not the starting point or the end point.