

Wilson (Catherine) - "The Pleasure Principle"

Post by "Cassius" of July 6, 2019 at 10:48 PM

JAWS: I very much agree with your comments. Let me explain on each point:

1) Yes I agree that the sentence you quote stands on its own, as part of a list, and doesn't gain any context from the surrounding sentences (see clip below). And I agree with your interpretation, and I think Wilson is wrong. From the discussion of friendship we know that Epicurus asserted that the foundation of friendship is in the utility it has for us in bringing pleasure, and even when we get to the point that we value our friends' happiness as much or more than our own, we are still working within the same principle that we see our own happiness tied up in our friends, and so we never depart from the original standard of our own pleasure motivating our choices. This clipped sentence in context seems intended to appeal to a certain type of reader who wants to find "altruism" in Epicurus, and it seems to me it undermines Wilson's credibility to make this argument.

the face of adversity. Unlike their main philosophical rivals, the Stoics, they did not believe the mind is all-powerful in the face of adversity or that we should strive to repress our emotions, griefs and passions. Their moral philosophy is relational rather than individualistic. And unlike the other, more influential schools of ancient philosophy, especially the Platonic and the Aristotelian, the Epicureans welcomed women into the sect.

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2) Once again I agree with your criticism of the sentence you quote, and I interpret this as having much the same problem as the sentence you criticize in point one. Wilson is using broad language to appear to be making sort of an "egalitarian" argument to make Epicurus seem more appealing to those of that persuasion, and I think she is intending to convey the meaning to which you object, even though her sentence can be parsed to mean something less assertive. As I see it part of the ambiguity comes from the "deserve automatic priority" part, where it is not clear what that means. If she means "deserves automatic priority from Nature," or "deserve automatic priority from society" or "deserve automatic priority from the state" then she is probably correct. But that's not what I think she intends the reader to get. She intends (in my humble opinion) to imply that she herself (or anyone else, looking at themselves) should not put her own (or their own) preferences ahead of those of other people (or animals!) and that is pretty close to a ridiculous assertion. None of us asked the chicken we ate for dinner tonight whether the chicken preferred to be eaten or not. Maybe we should have - that's another issue - but talking in terms of "automatic priorities" is a vague way of implying that we're all just going to love one another and agree on everything, when that patently is not the case.

(3) Of your three criticisms I think this one hits her the hardest. First, to point out a couple of verses in the Bible that talk about mirth and pleasure and imply that there is a basic affinity between Epicurean philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology is absurd. Second, you're right I think to attack the use of "meaningful." Yes Epicurus appears to have talked in terms of the "good" life, but where is there any reference in any text to something akin to "meaningful"? "Meaningful" to whom, and how, and for what? What does "meaningful" even mean if not as a reflection of some kind of justification from an outside source? Probably there are ways to save this part as well by playing with the definitions of the words, but I think you're right to question this JAWS because she is once again making claims for the sake of gaining the reader's sympathy that just aren't justified by the texts.

In summary, and with all due respect to the author's credentials and education, I just don't think she is correct. Is she consistent with the Academic orthodoxy on Epicurus and will they unite in praising her acuity on these issues? Oh heck yes -- but that doesn't make her right, and we have the right to read the texts ourselves and see if her conclusions make sense as consistent with the texts. And these don't. I also don't doubt that there will be many more in the book that are open to the same criticism.