

New (October 1 2019) Catherine Wilson Speech Video on Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of October 8, 2019 at 4:15 PM

Catherine Wilson is on a tour, it seems, promoting her latest book, and here is video of a speech that was just uploaded on October 1. We're trying to make each post here as substantive as possible by adding commentary, so before posting this I watched the video in full and made the following notes of the major topics she covered. In sum, I think this is a fine speech and she deserves a lot of credit. She covers most of the major aspects of Epicurus (I don't think I heard her mention the canon or epistemology) and most of us here would have some differences with some of the points she makes. But this speech does not go off into politics whatsoever, and in general this is an excellent mostly-sympathetic introduction to Epicurean philosophy. I will forewarn you, however, that Ms. Wilson is not presenting this as a "motivational" speech. She is making an academic presentation to a serious audience, so her tone and presentation are appropriate to that setting.

I do want to give her particular credit for her quote from Plutarch, showing how the Epicureans disagreed with and opposed the Stoics, even calling Stoicism the result of "another and greater bad thing, savagery or unadulterated lust for fame, and madness."

With her featuring a quote like that, how could this speech be anything *but* worthwhile!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eqa24YHg2bs&feature=youtu.be>

2:07 - Epicureanism is one of her favorite philosophies

- 2:27 - Epicurus had a "cult-like" school of philosophy.
- 5:55 - She says "infinity of shapes" but that is not correct. Lucretius said that the number of different shapes are limited, but the total number of atoms is unlimited/infinite. (this is a very minor point)
- 7:18 - Lots of other worlds with plants and animals too
- 11:09 - Reality depends on the observer. (Uses good example that the atoms do not have color; flock of sheep on a hillside)
- 12:29 - Attrition - (Uses good example of ring and, plow)
- 13:20 - Limits discussion. How much wealth etc is "ethically acceptable."
- 14:10 - Theology. She says that here there is a real difference between Epicurus and Lucretius(?) She cites the reference in the Letter to Menoeceus and how to think about the gods. She says Lucretius was much more fierce about religion than Epicurus and implies that this was different from Epicurus himself.

- 18:20 - "Natural selection before Darwin" - "system of perishing." Says Epicurus was not very good on his science of how things came about and are regular - as to all sorts of natural phenomena.
- 21:44 Implies that Epicurean natural selection theory , as opposed to Darwin, was not based on observation and argument.
- 23:38 - Says that Lucretius said that the primitive period was the happiest period in the human race(?) And that what changed was technology which allowed tools of war and slavery (?) With civilization came war and slavery.
- 25:45 - Says aspiration to honor, fame, and power is root of evil.
- 26:35 - Book 6 doesn't seem to fit with the rest; ends up very darkly.
- 27:44 "Pleasure which I will get to in a minute."
- 29:02 - Maybe illness of humanity as a metaphor for sick state of society(?)
- 29:45 - "Epicurus said that physical well-being / absence of pain is the most important value in human life" Cites the "contend with Zeus for happiness" quote.
- 31:35 - Discovery of fire gradually produced misery of civilization and oppression
- 32:10 - Talks about how other philosophers are opponents of pleasure. Epicurus was out on a limb here and suffered a lot of criticism for it
- 32:58 - [Death is nothing to us](#). This strikes people as a sophism, she says, because the main concern is that we are going to be "missing out." She explains there is neither heaven nor hell. They stress the idea of a natural limit and not bad to lose life when you are at the natural limit. (good)
- 35:00 Lucretius is consoling on death as are the Stoics.
- 36:48 - Epicureans v Stoics - She says Stoicism is about forbearance and you should resign yourself to your losses and your mind can choose not to be affected by external circumstances. Epicureans did not think that at all, as mind and body are one to epicureans. Epicureans did not suggest that all emotions should be suppressed. She gives an EXCELLENT quote from Plutarch with Epicurean criticism of Stoicism.
- 39:00 - Epicureanism is not (1) dedication to fine dining, (2) consumerism, (3) dialectical materialism."
- 40:45 - What Epicurus thought was most pleasurable in life was learning new things. For Lucretius what gave him pleasure was writing his poem.
- 42:00 - Recommends Greenblatt's book the Swerve. She thinks this is mis-titled as the swerve is not all that central to Epicurean philosophy. She does, however, stumble and say that Epicurus mentions the swerve once and Lucretius not at all; she has that reversed, but I am sure she knows that.



Epicureans vs. Stoics

The Epicureans argue with those who eliminate pains and tears...for the death of friends, and they say that the kind of freedom from pain which amounts to insensitivity is the result of another and greater bad thing, savagery or an unadulterated lust for fame, and madness.

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Plutarch, *Against Colotes*

