

Wilson (Catherine) - "How To Be An Epicurean"

Post by "Elayne" of November 4, 2019 at 5:18 PM

I am going to put my thoughts in this thread as I go, hoping for comments, and maybe eventually can pick out which parts to put in a full review.

I have read the intro, and here are a few things I noticed:

1) She identifies several specific modern stressors such as pollution, which I think is largely accurate, and then she makes the astonishing statement "we live longer than our ancestors but in a sicklier fashion." Really? I have not seen evidence of that. Seems like she needs to cite sources. Anecdotally (I know, not evidence lol), I would be functionally blind in premodern times and one of my kids would have died from appendicitis in childhood or from the sepsis she had due to a secondary infection of chickenpox, a year before the vaccine-- and she's a healthy, athletic young adult.

2) p 21 "no philosopher who is honest about it can give you a formula for being happy"... hmmm. If she means it isn't going to be precise math, ok. But if she is saying the general method of the hedonic calculus isn't reliable, I disagree.

3) P 22 the philosophy "needs rethinking in some ways"-- guess we will find out how, in her opinion, this is so.

4) P 24 "they sought... to balance the ethical treatment of others with our own self-interest"-- omg. So, what is ethical, then, lol? "Balance" used this way is a huge pet peeve of mine. There is no need to balance-- the pleasure of others is on the same side of the scale as my own, inseparable, although this depends on specifically who they are. These things are inseparable for a typically empathetic human. Understanding this is absolutely critical to understanding Epicurus, I believe. Believing that these pleasures are on opposite sides of some imaginary scale will lead to nonsense finagling, every single time. You only wind up with this stuff if you forget about subjective feelings.

5) P 24, discusses what she sees as the 3 key claims of Epicurus-- material nature of reality, no divine oversight, and finality of death. Although I do think these are important, I do not know that I would consider them more important than the way he put subjective feelings of pleasure and pain into the Canon or that this can be derived from those 3 items without the experience of feelings.

6) P 27 I may be over my head here-- could use some help. She includes the sense perceptions of sweet, bitter, etc as "conventions" as opposed to "natural"-- I think she has misunderstood. The specific words may be conventions, but the sensory information is natural. IMO this whole idea of conventions and nature as being different is unhelpful. Everything is nature. Our

conventions arise from natural processes in our brains-- they certainly can't be supernatural. I would say the key element is whether a process or object is amenable to change by human action or not, which does not depend on whether it is social or not. This line of thinking makes me think of people who believe we should go "back to nature"-- lol, we have not left it. They think there was some mythical golden age. But maybe there is something Epicurus said that she is referring to, and I am the one who is confused.

7) P 34 "Epicurus himself pointed out that the direct pursuit of pleasurable sensations is usually self defeating." What? Did he do that? I missed it. She doesn't give a reference-- help me out? This doesn't sound accurate at all, for my own life. Definitely I use wisdom to choose the sensations and the setting, etc, but direct pursuit works very well for me almost all the time. I made homemade spaghetti for my family a few days ago, and I was definitely taking direct action to pursue the pleasures of taste and friendship around the table.