

Thoughts and Criticism of Chapter 1

Post by "Don" of April 13, 2020 at 1:09 AM

This is my second reading through DeWitt, but, admittedly, the first was several years ago and I did not have a firm recollection. I'm currently through Chapter 2 on this reading.

It is valuable that DeWitt has undertaken a comprehensive look at Epicureanism, both in synopsis and in detail. Additionally, his scholarship is obviously deep, and [he taught in a number of schools in North America](#). I also find it interesting that he uses the terms *Epicureanism* and *Epicurean philosophy* somewhat interchangeably. I will say that I like his line "the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world." This is actually a good line and some clever wordplay on DeWitt's part.

However, I find DeWitt has the habit of often asserting certain things with no context or citations which, with a little digging, turn up to be much less definitive or under debate or to be taken out of context. The items I've found just through Chapter 2 give me pause and make me feel that I can't quite take what he writes at face value.

As stated elsewhere on this forum, he also seems to have an agenda in seeing Epicureanism around every Christian corner. His book on Paul delved deeper into that (and I need to re-read that one as well), but he seems to go out of his way to show Epicurus and his philosophy as being incorporated into Christianity albeit hidden until he came along to shine a light on these hidden threads. He reminds me of Gassendi in some respects that way.

Again, I realize I'm only through Chapter 2 and hope these concerns recede into the background, but, right now when they pop up, they serve as barriers to my reading DeWitt with an entirely open mind. The following are illustrative examples from Chapter 1. I'll post other assertions that concern me in the Chapter 2 thread.

Quote

P. 8 Quote: "The mistake is to overlook the terminology and ideology of Epicureanism in the New Testament and to think of its founder as an enemy of religion."

On the idea that Epicurus was not an "enemy of religion," it does seem that Epicurus allowed - even encouraged - participation in the festivals of pagan Greece. He did not want to be seen as an atheist. But to see *Epicurean philosophy* as not an "enemy of religion," I'd just point to Lucretius' "Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum."

Quote

P. 28: Quote: "As a missionary enterprise the activity of Epicureanism was not confined to the school premises. Every convert everywhere became a missionary. In the view of Epicurus philosophy should begin at home and be disseminated from the home. It was his injunction to his disciples "to apply it in their own households, to take advantage of all other intimacies and under no circumstances to slacken in proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy." This feature of the creed possessed the advantage of rendering it independent of schools and tutors; it was able to infiltrate itself into small towns and villages where no schools existed and even into rural areas. It was capable also of winning adherents in social groups untouched by more strictly intellectual systems."

DeWitt is quoting VS 41, but the saying, from my perspective, doesn't seem to sound entirely like what DeWitt says it does:

Quote

VS 41. One must laugh and seek wisdom and tend to one's home life and use one's other goods, and always recount the pronouncements of true philosophy. (γελᾶν ἅμα [simultaneously, together with, at the same time] δεῖ [one must] καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ μηδαμῆ λήγειν τὰς ἐκ τῆς ὀρθῆς φιλοσοφίας φωνὰς ἀφιέντας.)

To me, the saying appears to be instructing us to "to love wisdom" (philosophize) while we do everything in our daily lives. Don't let up! Do all these things simultaneously (ἅμα). Note that several of the alternative translations below put philosophize first when the first word in the original Greek is actually γελᾶν, the infinitive of γελάω "laugh." So the emphasis first in the phrase is on the laughing. The translations should really be something like: "*One must laugh and - at the same time - pursue the love of wisdom, administer the rest of one's household affairs, etc.*" Additionally, I interpret the "never ceasing to proclaim the words of true philosophy" in the sense of "walking the talk." Let others see the true philosophy living through your actions. Proclaim it through the conduct of your life. I don't think this necessarily means you don't also share it verbally with people, but it seemed to me that DeWitt was making more of the "proclaim" part than is necessary. I realize this witnessing theme is *my* interpretation and certainly open to criticism.

Alternative Translations of VS 41:

Quote

[Translation 1](#): At one and the same time we must philosophize, laugh, and manage our household and other business, while never ceasing to proclaim the words of true philosophy.

[Translation 2](#): One must philosophize and at the same time laugh and take care of one's household and use the rest of our personal goods, and never stop proclaiming the utterances of correct philosophy.

[Translation 3](#): We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

DeWitt also has this to say about Stoicism:

Quote

P. 29: "The battle is not always to the strong. Inherent in Epicureanism was a quiet crusading spirit which quickly extended it over the contemporary world and endowed it with a tenacity unequaled by rival creeds; it flourished for almost seven centuries. The vogue of Stoicism as a militant creed lasted a mere two centuries."

This is one of the assertions just thrown in with no context with which I have problems. I'm no fan of the Stoics but saying they lasted "a mere two centuries" is specious at best. Zeno taught around the 300s BCE, and Marcus Aurelius was a firm adherent of Stoic philosophy in the mid-2nd century CE. That's **at least four centuries** right there. Additionally, [Stoicism may possibly have even influenced the concept of Christ as the Logos in the Gospel of John](#).