

Comments and Thoughts on DeWitt, Chapter 3

Post by “Don” of April 14, 2020 at 4:16 PM

As I continue my romp through DeWitt, I've assembled the following thoughts and comments on Chapter 3:

Quote

Quote P. 61: Epicurus, in turn, becoming the pupil of Nausiphanes, conceived a like admiration of Pyrrho's conduct "and was continually asking for more information about him."²⁷ Here may consequently be discerned one possible origin for the famous Epicurean doctrine of ataraxy or tranquility of soul. The practice of Pyrrho was closer to this than to the cheerfulness (euthumia) of Democritus, although Epicurus cultivated this also. It is to be remembered too that Pyrrho recommended abstention from public life (apragmosune), which should remind us that Epicurus disapproved of all public careers.

Thanks, DeWitt! I finally get to dig into another part of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives!* 😊 Footnote 27 refers to **DL IX.64**:

Quote

"...and [Nausiphanes] would often remark that Epicurus, greatly admiring Pyrrho's way of life, regularly asked him for information about Pyrrho,..."

For more on Pyrrho, we have a good-sized section in **Chapter 9** of **DL**. So, if Epicurus found Pyrrho's life so admirable, it would probably profit us to see why. I'm assuming Pyrrho will come up again in DeWitt, but this is an interesting part of Epicurus' **origin story** which makes him sound like a superhero 😊 but, if the sandal fits...

Quote

Quote P. 63: In the case of Nausiphanes there is another item of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (Platonists) will think me really a pupil of the 'lung-fish' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom." ³⁴ The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics, ³⁵ but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shadier side

of student life among the Greeks.

This initially struck me as holier-than-thou judgementalism on the part of DeWitt, especially the "shadier side of student life." I decided to check the Footnotes 34 and 35 citations which reference **Usener 114** which refers to **Sextus Empiricus, Against the Professors, I.3** (Translated at Attalus.org and the original in [Usener](#) and another translation at [Stoic Therapy](#)). The term DeWitt translates as "certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing" is, in the original (transliterated), **kraipalonton** from [κραπάλη](#) which means "bout of drinking; intoxication, inebriation; hangover." SO, DeWitt's translation is not far from the mark although it seems "hangover students" might be better than "stupid" although those with hangovers are not known to be at the top of their game. It seems other translators are less forthcoming or literal than DeWitt was here. So, **I'll tip my hat to DeWitt on this one.**

However, the second part of DeWitt's translation is less cut-and-dried:

Quote

"For [Nausiphanes] was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom."

The original describes Nausiphanes as a **πονηρός άνθρωπος** (poneros anthropos) which appears to be more "[good-for-nothing, worthless, knavish, base, cowardly person](#)." I'm just wondering - PURE conjecture - if DeWitt is reading this as something like **πορνηρός*** (porneros* not attested but that extra "r" would make it look connected with **porne** "prostitute" or **porneion** "brothel") to get at DeWitt's "immoral". Also, DeWitt's "addicted" is **ἐπιτηδευκῶ** from [ἐπιτηδεύω](#) which appears to simply mean "to pursue or practise a thing, make a practice of, make it one's business." As I've said before, I am NOT any kind of classical scholar or any more than a novice student of Ancient Greek, but I don't think it should be hard to find a definition near to "addicted" using standard reference works.

So, it would appear to me, that Epicurus was saying that Nausiphanes' students were all hungover, and the teacher himself was "pursuing" things that didn't lead one, in the end, to wisdom "**και ἐπιτηδευκῶς τοιαύτα ἔων ου δυνατόν εις σοφίαν ἐλθεῖν**." I don't see a connection between the students being out drinking and engaged in sex (which would have most likely been part of their activities on some nights) and Nausiphanes' pursuit of certain subjects. I read this as Epicurus saying that he was disillusioned with Nausiphanes because his students didn't give the teacher any respect for the material being taught (they showed up hungover!) and Nausiphanes himself not doing anything worthwhile, in the eyes of Epicurus anyway.

Quote

Quote P. 66: states. In order to escape from these logical dead ends Epicurus worked his way to a novel division of pleasures into those that were basic and those that were

decorative.⁴⁸ The pleasure of being sane and in health is basic and can be enjoyed continually.

I found the designation of pleasures as "basic" or "decorative" novel so followed up on Footnote 48 which cites [DL's Live II: 11](#). *DL II: 11* doesn't say anything about pleasure but does mention Metrodorus of Lampsacus. The word usually used to describe "empty" pleasures in the Greek is **κενός** but I can't see an alternative definition as "decorative" so I was both curious and amused by that description. If someone has a better source for "decorative" pleasures, by all means please share! This is also another "sane mind/sane body" allusion.

Quote

Quote P. 67: This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

I'm actually **giving kudos to DeWitt on this one**. I like the way he describes that a "nonpurposive" universe can produce a "purposive" being. Thumbs up!

Quote

Quote P. 68: "From the outset you must believe that no other end is gained from the knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether viewed in their associations [with the astral deities] or by themselves, than peace of soul and an abiding faith." 56

The "abiding faith" struck me as another potential way for DeWitt to sneak in the Epicureanism/Christianity parallel, so I took a look at **Footnote 56** which references [DL X:85](#):

Quote

"In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm conviction."

"Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν μὴ ἄλλο τι τέλος ἐκ¹³² τῆς περὶ μετεώρων γνώσεως εἶτε κατὰ συναφὴν λεγομένων εἶτε αὐτοτελῶς νομίζειν εἶναι ἥπερ ἀταραξίαν καὶ πίστιν βέβαιον, καθάπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν."

DeWitt's "abiding faith" and the Perseus Project's "firm conviction" both translate **πίστιν βέβαιον**. **πίστιν** is indeed defined as "[trust in others, 'faith' \(translated into Latin as fides\), belief](#)" so "faith" is a fine translation, but I would prefer the other one's "firm conviction." DeWitt's translation just gave me pause in light of his "Epicureanism is hiding in Christianity" proclivities. **βέβαιον** is simply "firm, steady". Basically, Epicurus is saying this knowledge should give one peace of mind (ἀταραξία in the original) and a firm trust that it's the truth.

Quote

Quote P. 68: This new note is promptly and beautifully struck in the opening words of his exhortation to philosophy, the letter to Menoeceus, which was perhaps intended to compete with the famous Protrepticus of Aristotle: "There is no one for whom the hour has not yet come nor for whom the hour has passed for attending to the health of his soul." 57

This is a novel translation of the beginning of the letter to Menoikos and, I'll give DeWitt kudos for the poetic wordsmithing. Now, the original actually uses **νέος** "young/youth" and **γέρον** "old man" so DeWitt's translation is more paraphrase than literal, but that's certainly an acceptable path to take, basically the difference between [formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence in Bible translations](#).

I had to also look up the **Protrepticus** of Aristotle ([reconstructed version](#)) since I was unfamiliar with that work. It sounds like it was written [to encourage the young to study philosophy](#) and it is a lost work of that philosopher.

Quote

P. 69 Quote: sage. It must consequently be inferred that before leaving Colophon he had already worked out to its pragmatic implications the old analogy between philosophy and medicine, that all human beings, regardless of age or sex, stood in need of health of mind and the services of the teacher no less than of health of body and the services of the physician.

This appears to hint again at that "Epicurean prayer" notion of "a sound mind in a sound body." I'm still not sold on that characterization of that saying; however, I think **DeWitt does a good job here** of summing up the universal nature of Epicurean philosophy and the medical analogy.

So, we're ending the chapter on a high note 😊 On to Chapter 4!