

Problems in Frances Wright's "A Few Days in Athens"

Post by "Elayne" of October 22, 2020 at 3:08 PM

I have dragged my feet on reading Frances Wright's fictionalized account of a student in Epicurus' Garden, partly because the language is so flowery that the passages I've seen quoted put me off. I've finally tackled it, and I have some thoughts to share. My main conclusion is that there are too many serious flaws to recommend it as a representation of Epicurean Philosophy without any accompanying commentary.

Misleading Implications about Pleasure as Restraint

Frances Wright has Epicurus say "Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it." Yes, I agree. She then has him say, "I think virtue only the highest pleasure, and vice, or ungoverned passions and appetites, the worst misery." I have a big problem with that phrasing. To me, virtue is any deliberate behavior that leads to more pleasure than pain, for the individual. The actual behavior may not always be pleasurable at the time, but the overall results are, or we would not label it virtue. It's because of the pleasure that we have come up with this whole conceptual category "virtue"-- but there isn't any freestanding thing such as virtue. (Wright does have Epicurus get into that later, but this particular thing she has him say is not coherent with that, so I am not convinced she fully understands it). It's not the deliberate quality of the action that makes it "highest", unless deliberation itself is the most pleasurable thing for a person. Instead, it is simply the fact that it is the most reliable way to get pleasure. Using deliberation to choose a pleasurable dinner menu based on past experience would be virtuous action in my framing. I'm not sure it would be so for Frances Wright.

I would say that deliberate choosing of behaviors that observation teaches us lead to pleasure is the most reliable way to go about things, and careless actions which fail to take our observations into account are the most likely to lead to pain. I could even go so far as to say certain behaviors are reliable enough to be useful as habitual virtues, such as the habit of honesty. It's generally not necessary to turn every minute of life into a major decision process, so having certain habits of behavior has benefit in most cases. If deliberation is involved in choosing the habit, I would still count it as a virtue. But she is contrasting "ungoverned" pleasure-seeking with the "highest pleasure" of virtue in a way which makes it sound like virtue = restraint=pleasure. Even if she didn't mean to imply that, she doesn't explain well enough to prevent someone from drawing that impression.

Wright has Metrodorus say "all is unanimity in the garden" and talks about passions being restrained and calm-- well, there may have been unanimity. Although I doubt it, I really have no idea-- but this is the kind of thing that leads people to think Epicureans will always agree with each other and also elevates restraint in a way that makes it sound like the whole placid "middle path" type of thing.

In chapter X, she gets downright Buddhist. She has Epicurus say, "ask and she [Prudence] will tell you, that sensual pleasure is pain covered with the mask of happiness." Egad. Then "a happy life is like... a placid and crystal stream, that flows gently and silently along"-- more of this idea that it is the calmness, not the pleasure, which we are supposed to be going for. When you contrast calm pleasure with exciting pleasure and say calm pleasure is better, then it is calm you are going for, not pleasure. She uses the word "moderation" in that same way. This is the kind of talk that leads people to imagine Epicureans as vacuously grinning Moonies, handing out flowers to each other in the airport.

Unclear Discussion on Ambitions and Greatness

Wright says "the end of true philosophy is to proportion... our ambitions to our capacities" but winds up tying capacity to skill level rather than capacity for pleasure. She says, "Ambition is the spur, and the necessary spur of a great mind to great action"... following on the heels of discussion of talents, which implies great action is talented action-- but if the talent is not specifically a talent at gaining pleasure, of what use is it? How can we define a "great mind" other than a mind which understands pleasure and can obtain it, or "great action" as action other than action producing great pleasure? She leaves the reader thinking people should choose their efforts according to whether they can succeed at some abstract definition of greatness, like technical skill in painting, rather than maintaining a focus on pleasure.

Implies the Existence of Universal Virtues

Wright has Epicurus say "whether I stand my virtue upon prudence, or propriety, or justice, or benevolence, or self-love, that my virtue is still one and the same; that the dispute is not about the end, but the origin"-- meaning, that there isn't disagreement about what is called virtue but how it came to be called that. But this isn't whatsoever true-- the origin of virtue in material reality means exactly that the end behavior called virtue can vary! I have recently discussed that in a post on Jefferson.

Wright's Epicurus says that "the united experience of mankind has pronounced virtue to be the great good" and calls this "universal" even in those who behave unvirtuously. He then says that the unvirtuous person is just in error-- that "hypocrisy has masked her [vice's] deformity" and that the person could be brought around to the truth by a sage. Even if Wright doesn't mean to imply it, she has completely neglected to explain things here so that they are grounded in pleasure. It would have been accurate to explain that the human species has typically found certain behaviors to result in more pleasure than pain and has labeled these behaviors 'virtues'-- sometimes people have been fooled into thinking they will get pleasure by doing the things typical humans have found lead to pain, called 'vices', but a person with more experience can point out factual observations about the usual consequences. However, there is no ground to say that just because a certain type of behavior has typically led to pleasure for most humans that it is always the most likely to do so (wisest) in a particular circumstance.

Ideas on Pain Inconsistent with Epicurean Philosophy

After discussing grief at the death of a friend, Wright has Epicurus say "were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health"-- a whole section that implies pleasure can only be known through contrast with pain. Yet this is not compatible with imagining [Epicurean Gods](#) as the most blissful beings along the pleasure spectrum-- where would be the pain that allows the pleasure to be felt, if pleasure is only a contrast situation? If contrast is necessary, the gods would have to have the most contrast and thus the most pain to have the most pleasure. My own observations about life have assured me long ago that although there is definitely pleasure in relief from pain, there is also ongoing pleasure that does not require interruption and contrast in the form of pain to be felt, because pleasure is an actual feeling, not just an absence of pain. If contrast/ change is necessary, which it probably is in order for our neurons to be triggered to fire, it can come in the form of variation of pleasurable inputs.

This is an entirely different notion from the accurate observation that sometimes in order to obtain greater pleasure, we will choose to undergo a lesser pain.

In the last section, about the morality of the "involved" model of gods, her failure to clearly incorporate the nature of the "good" as subjective (not universal) pleasure has again led to a big muddle. That is probably worth a separate post.

My overall impression of this book is not favorable. Even though here and there she gets around to explaining pleasure as a feeling, she does not seem to keep that solidly in her grasp. When writers make slips of this sort, it makes me suspect they have never fully understood the philosophy.