

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2019 at 11:12 AM

I don't have this book yet, but it appears to be a variation with changes of "The Pleasure Principle" released in Britain for the UK audience. We can use this thread to discuss "How To Be An Epicurean" as people begin to get and read this one.

I know that Ms. Wilson is making the podcast rounds as well, so it will probably make sense to set up a thread for each of her major interviews, which I will do now with the Philosophy Bites podcast as suggested by [Samj](#)

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Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2019 at 6:29 PM

Here is a new (9/26) review of the Catherine Wilson book in the Economist, but it is behind a pay wall and I don't want to subscribe just to see this article. If anyone has access to a copy could they let me know?

<https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts...s-avoiding-pain>

Debts to pleasure

The key to a good life is avoiding pain

*And finding tranquil joys. Or so Epicurus thought. Is he right?*



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Post by "Joshua" of October 30, 2019 at 7:54 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1200-wilson-catherine-how-to-be-an-epicurean/>

I used to get the Economist, but it tended to pile up unread. Excellent journalism, but too much copy every week! I'll be interested in seeing this as well if we can get it.

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## **Post by “Eikadistes” of October 30, 2019 at 9:40 PM**

Since *The Economist* requires a subscription, you can't click on then link to access it. **However**, if you do a Google search for the title of the article in a private tab, the text will load long enough to copy/paste it all.

*"In Catherine Wilson's manual on 'the ancient art of living well', her guide is the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who advocated a calm life of modest pleasure. By explaining how the world was, he thought philosophy could show people how to live. Ms Wilson, an Epicurus specialist, agrees. Her intelligent and readable book lies, she says, somewhere between technical philosophy and "advice columns".*

*To latter-day secularists, Epicurus's formula for a happy life has obvious appeal. Step one was to see the world for what it was. Everything was made of matter, including mind and spirit. The only life was this one. The gods took no interest in humans and were neither vindictive nor demanding. Life's aim was happiness, understood as tranquil pleasure and freedom from pain. The pain that most concerned Epicurus was 'mental terror': anxieties rooted in false beliefs about 'the nature of things' (the title of the grand philosophical poem by his Roman follower, Lucretius). Step two was applying such knowledge to human existence. That meant not expecting too much, finding simple satisfactions and not agonising about mortality.*

*Epicurus opened his school, the Garden, outside Athens early in the 3rd century bce. Followers, it was said, included women and slaves. None of his 300 or more works survive; his thoughts came down through Lucretius and, later, biographers.*

*Christian thinkers considered him an atheist and amoralist. In Jewish tradition, 'apikoiros' meant a heretic. Dante put Epicureans in hell for denying the soul's immortality. In popular lore, Epicurus was patron to gluttons, publicans and brothelkeepers. The 'sensualist' slur stuck. Later 'epicure' came to mean an aesthete or foodie. Epicurus's scientific speculations—on atomism and natural selection—sound uncannily modern but rested on brilliant inference, not experiment. Read today, the detail sounds barmy.*

*The life-advice, by contrast, sounds like common sense for people thrown onto their own ethical resources without traditional guidance, as is widespread now. Epicureanism spread as the Greek city-state fell into decline, empires emerged and social authority grew distant and impersonal. Although Ms Wilson does not stress it, the parallel with the current disoriented*

*mood is striking.*

*In her book's first part, she sketches Epicurus's proto-democratic world-view. The senses, which are the source of knowledge, are common to all and reliable. Each knows what pleases or pains them. As people know their own minds, they cannot easily be bossed about by presumed betters.*

*'Living well and living justly', part two, builds on the Epicurean picture of morality as useful rules for reducing harm. Be canny about your pleasures. Don't stress over worldly success. Be good to friends. Enjoy sex but beware its risks. Don't expect too much of parenthood. Above all, stop worrying about death. As Dryden put it, when translating Lucretius:*

*'What has this bugbear death to frighten man,*

*If souls can die as well as bodies can?...*

*From sense of grief and pain we shall be free*

*We shall not feel because we shall not be.'*

*In her last two parts, Ms Wilson probes the philosophical underpinnings. A handy, schematic table contrasts Epicureans and Stoics. Ms Wilson notes Epicurean contempt for religious superstition, self-serving clergy and faith-based warfare, but sees common ground with believers in the shared conviction that 'morality matters'.*

*She notes and answers doubts that have dogged Epicureanism, but urges readers to make up their own mind. Is death truly no harm? After all, it cuts short plans, projects and responsibilities which give lives purpose. For his part, Stoic Cicero complained that Epicurus wanted happiness to be both virtuous and pleasant. Yet being fair, firm or a good friend—to take three common-or-garden virtues—need not be pleasant and may be taxing. Can everything today's liberal-minded Epicureans tend to approve of—human rights, abortion, social justice—really be reconciled with the idea that pleasure is all?*

*Floating over Epicureanism, for all its appeal, is a sense of loneliness. Family life is inessential. Friends are merely instrumental. Everything comes back to "How is this for me?" Perhaps not philosophy but an over-defensive temperament is at work. Could it be that in arming themselves so well against life's anxieties, Epicureans overlook its riches?"*

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## **Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2019 at 8:51 AM**

And now I see once again how divergent peoples' views of Epicurus can be. The article is negatively loaded from start to finish. I guess one has to ask whether this negative loading

comes from the writer, or from Catherine Wilson. My preliminary estimate is that it comes from Catherine Wilson, with some slight embellishment by the article writer.

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### Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2019 at 8:53 AM

The article says Wilson includes a table comparing Epicurus to Stoicism -- I will look for that and try to post a version here.

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### Post by “Joshua” of October 31, 2019 at 10:47 AM

[Wilson \(Catherine\) - "The Pleasure Principle"](#)

I'd guess it's the same table we've discussed here, right?

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### Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2019 at 10:50 AM

Ah you have a good memory!

Actually I have bought the epub of the new book - I will check right now ---

Here is the version from "How to Be An Epicurean" and yes it is exactly the same

Male Concepts	Stoics	Epicureans
Ontology	Platonic	Atomist and void
Cosmology	Deterministic, free	Chance, free will
Purpose of ethics	Value	Freedom from pain
Source of moral authority	Natural law	Human agreement
Orientation	Universalist	Particularist
Goals	Generally good	Generally good
Family Life	Important	Incidental
Success	Recommended in difficult circumstances	Not recommended
Suffering	Ignorable	Minimizable
Religion	Generally good	Generally good
Happiness	Freedom from all emotions (ataraxia)	Freedom from anxiety (ataraxia)
Education	Emphasis on morality and civility	Usefulness superior
Work	Open to be dictated by fate	Motivated by good and ambition

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## **Post by “Elayne” of October 31, 2019 at 5:14 PM**

I guess I will need to get the book so I can say I read it when I diss it, although every single excerpt and interview has been convincingly awful enough.

I can take this comment down, Cassius, if political, but they mention abortion rights not being compatible with pleasure. Lol, in what way??? I'm in training for a month, right now, to learn to do them. It's actually quite enjoyable to provide a medical service someone wants! It's generally not a teary occasion-- patients are relieved to have this available. When I see the protestors I just think ah, Children of the Corn, which gives me an interior giggle. I thoroughly enjoy being part of efforts to maintain and improve the freedom of women!

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## **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.

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 8:16 AM

Great notes thank you!

In this book, I'll explain how the ancient Epicureans saw the world and how a present-day Epicurean sees it. At the same time, I'll try to be honest and objective. Epicureanism was always a controversial philosophy, and it needs **rethinking** in some respects. Philosophers have their own irrational enthusiasms, and their views should never be accepted on faith without critical scrutiny. As far as that's concerned, I expect readers to roll their eyes at some of my opinions. In the end, you may find the Epicurean system as I present

She's very right about that! I hope she tells us explicitly what part of her book is "rethinking" and which is what Epicurus said!

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### Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 8:31 AM

Let me reassure you that real Epicureanism is neither frivolous nor dangerous to health, nor a threat to other people. Epicurus himself pointed out that the direct pursuit of pleasurable sensations is usually self-defeating. At the same time, he stated clearly that the best life is one free of deprivations, starting with freedom from hunger, thirst and cold, and freedom from persistent fears and anxieties. Living well requires friends to entertain and comfort us

This is going to go down as one of the most ridiculous statements in the book. As part of our review we ought to come up with a collection of "incorrect" statements, and I have to think this one would be near the top!

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### Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 8:36 AM

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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.

I completely agree. I was talking with someone privately yesterday who made a statement to the effect that ETHICS is the most important, and that epistemology and physics are subsidiary.

I said that I think the deemphasis of physics and epistemology is the pattern of "the Cambridge approach" and as a result they end up staying in the "rationalist / platonic / stoic" camp and

they force-fit Epicurus into their pre-existing models. But if you thoroughly fix in your mind first in the physics - that the universe has NO supernatural or eternal ideal goals, then it's easier to dismiss those and follow "pleasure and pain" to their logical conclusions. And also with the epistemology the same thing - the role of reason/logic vs the senses anticipations and feelings is pretty much the whole ball game too, because "reason / logic" is how all these supernatural and/or ideal virtue ethics are supported --

The real issue here is FEELING vs the abstractions of logic

Which can be reconciled if we recognize Feeling as the king, and reason/logic as the tools for maximizing our best feelings, but NOT reconciled if reason/logic is allowed to be the ultimate judge of "proper feeling."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 9:00 AM**

Let's continue with general comments in this thread, but I have also opened a thread devoted specially to :

[Responding To Catherine Wilson's Chart Comparing Epicurus To The Stoics](#)

I have also set up "Catherine Wilson Books - Careful" as a subforum of its own, so over time people can start their own threads, and we may want to end up devoting a thread to each chapter.

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### **Post by "Charles" of November 5, 2019 at 12:01 PM**

I'll have to see if I can get a comp. copy at work. I keep seeing Wilson showing up on my article feed & on fringe youtube searches.

From my brief understanding, it seems this book is full of errors. But it's worth looking into, maybe I can pirate a mobi or epub/pdf of it.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 12:16 PM**

Yes Charles it looks like this book may become a regular point of discussion for years to come, like Greenblatt's "The Swerve"

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### **Post by "Hiram" of November 5, 2019 at 2:39 PM**

This just came out today

<https://aeon.co/essays/forget-...being-epicurean>

Her publisher must have lots of media influence and capital. Aeon is very selective about who can write for them.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 3:03 PM**

Thank you Hiram!!!

Lots to comment on but sadly this immediately jumps out at me:

Rather than aiming specifically to maximise pleasure, the Epicureans [concentrated](#) on minimising pains, the pains that arise from failures of 'choice and avoidance'. "

Argh!!!!

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 3:06 PM**

Man!! she cannot resist the politics can she? Argh again!!!

Quote

"Fame and wealth are zero-sum. For some to be wealthy, powerful and famous, others must be poor, obedient and disregarded. "

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 3:09 PM

### Quote

"The value of philosophy is that it typically poses a challenge to conventional and socially powerful ideas."

No!!!! The value of philosophy is that it heals the sick and helps us lead happier lives!

She just cannot leave the politics alone!

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 3:14 PM

I now (in the past, I thought differently) think it is a major mistake to use the "***all that really exists...***" phrasing as Wilson does in this article. That is the method by which Religionists and Academics fool people into thinking that Epicurus is not worthwhile because their lives are only illusions -- "not really existing."

Sure the atoms and void are what have ETERNAL and UNCHANGING existence, but the bodies that are formed from atoms and void during our lifetimes are very real to us, and those bodies are every bit as "real" to us the atoms themselves. In fact, the bodies that we see and otherwise sense are in our own experience ALL that is really real to us!

*"Epicurus, by contrast, was a materialist. **All that really existed, he declared,** were indestructible atoms - tiny mobile particles, invisible to the naked eye, with various shapes and sizes, but devoid of colour, odour, flavour and sound, and separated by void space."*

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## Post by "Todd" of November 5, 2019 at 3:44 PM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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.

I presume, based on the preceding context, that she is referring here to so-called diseases of civilization, such as obesity, hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, certain cancers, etc. And by "our ancestors", she probably means our pre-agricultural ancestors. I don't know what evidence there is to support this claim, but in-context, it doesn't seem totally preposterous.

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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.

I would like this 100X if I could! The importance of this when it comes to ethics and justice cannot be over-emphasized.

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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.

In Wilson's defense, the Kindle preview I'm looking at only says that these are Epicurus' "most famous" teachings. I might dispute that, but I don't see her explicitly stating that she believes they are the most important (although that might be reasonably inferred).

In any case, what we consider most important is going to be a subjective thing. For people coming from a religious background, these may well be the most important lessons to be learned from Epicurus.

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This is going to go down as one of the most ridiculous statements in the book.

LOL! I'd be very interested to see a reference for that one!

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**Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2019 at 3:47 PM**

Great comments Todd. Glad to see you are reading this too. You guys are ahead of me!

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**Post by "Hiram" of November 5, 2019 at 4:15 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thank you Hiram!!!

Lots to comment on but sadly this immediately jumps out at me:

Rather than aiming specifically to maximise pleasure, the Epicureans [concentrated](#) on minimising pains, the pains that arise from failures of 'choice and avoidance'. "

Argh!!!!

You should pitch your own articles to publications like Partially Examined Life, etc. if you really want your own views and interpretations to be available.

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**Post by "Godfrey" of November 5, 2019 at 4:37 PM**

Cassius, I liked Hiram's post in the most positive and encouraging way. You've created a remarkable amount of valuable content which could add a lot to the discussion. But taking that next step probably involves a lot of additional work and could be opening a can of worms; I

respect your hedonic calculus in the matter! 👍

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### Post by “Todd” of November 5, 2019 at 4:45 PM

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

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.

Yeah...it's also a bit strange to quote Democritus on *physics* as a way of elucidating what *Epicurus* taught about *ethics*.

My take on her overall point is that Epicureans did not take things like the existing social structure, culture, traditions, laws, beliefs, etc. for granted. Those things are only to be considered useful to the extent that they provide pleasure to humans (edit: Wilson would apparently include other species here too), and not useful to the extent that they do not. In other words, Epicurus was a radical, which I think DeWitt also says, and with which I agree. She's talking about ethics.

The Democritus quote seems like a non-sequitur. He's talking about physics, not ethics. He's saying that things like flavors don't have a physical existence. Only the molecules exist. The flavor is only the way our taste buds and brain perceive the molecules, to which we assign the words bitter, sweet, etc.

If I try really hard, and squint my eyes, I can kind of, almost, see an analogy there. But really, I think she's conflating two entirely different categories of things, and creating unnecessary confusion.

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### Post by “Cassius” of November 5, 2019 at 5:28 PM

In response to Godfrey's and Hiram's encouragement to me to post more, let me focus on this first:

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

You've created a remarkable amount of valuable content which could add a lot to the discussion

And so did Norman DeWitt, in writing what I think is by far the best book on Epicurus in 100 years. Did he break through in the long term into the academic circles, or is he ignored?

#### [Quote from Hiram](#)

You should pitch your own articles to publications like Partially Examined Life, etc.

And that's part of the same issue. The "mainstream" places of discussion aren't just unaware of the DeWitt / Alternate argument -- they DISAGREE with it -- and if they have their way, they will also SUPPRESS it, which is why it can only arise \*outside\* and not \*within\* or even \*with the encouragement of\* the "mainstream" circles.

I don't think it is very helpful to categorize the issue as a "political" divide unless we also trace the same divide through the "politics" of the last 2000 years. But the big issue is that there is an elitist class (and I am talking about Platonic-style elitism) that has always wanted to control the conversation, and always will want to control the conversation, and they see Epicurus clearly as a threat to their power and their elitism. So my view has been and remains largely that we have to build our own base among the common people on the street who Cicero looked down on, rather than looking to the establishments of the elite.

Now having said that I am sure that there are some good people in Academia, and some in the mainstream platforms, who will be open to the alternative view. In some cases that is going to be because they are surprised that there IS an alternate view, since they don't know there is another view, as they have been so successful in shutting down DeWitt.

And I do want to do what I can to circulate my / our material in much wider circles. But I think Twitter and social media are likely to be more productive than to try to get sanction from the organs of the establishment.

Nevertheless I am up for any avenues that will accept our material!

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### **Post by “Elayne” of November 5, 2019 at 7:25 PM**

Todd, although we have more of certain diseases, we've gotten the ability to treat or cure others, and on balance I think it would need proof to say we are overall sicklier. Cancer rates actually appear to be about the same now as in early humans-- wild animals get cancer-- but

we can treat it now in many cases. There's evidence that infections are milder in developed countries partly because less virulent strains out compete the ones that kill you quickly. In less developed places, people are stuck going around with guinea worms, etc-- all sorts of parasites that make life wretched. There's a theory we've traded that for autoimmune dz and allergies, but I'll take a walnut allergy over a guinea worm any day. We can cure sexually transmitted diseases that used to result in chronic misery, like syphilis. Childbirth fistulas are rare now. It would be hard to set up a comparison, but her statement strikes me as extreme. Pet peeve of mine, professionally. Non medical people making extreme claims without citations. Lol

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### **Post by "Elli" of November 6, 2019 at 3:44 AM**

Schema oxymoron is a rhetorical play-trick. As we say "a prudent prodigal, "a fast turtle" "an ascetic hedonist" etc. Schema oxymoron is a rhetorical device that uses an ostensible self-contradiction to illustrate a rhetorical point or to reveal a paradox. A more general meaning of "contradiction in terms" is recorded by the oxford english dictionary in 1902.

#### **"We live longer but in a sicklier fashion".**

The above sounds to my ears as a schema oxymoron. Because, if we were lived in a sicklier fashion/way we won't manage to live longer than our ancestors.

But any way, and as our friend Elayne indicates through eras and periods in the history of medical science, and on the basis of environmental conditions, and molecular genetics there are diseases that appear and diseases that disappear. However, the efforts by the doctors on medical science are holding very well, till today, as are continuous, and especially in our era on molecular genetics, neurogenetics etc. Moreover, in a Nature of the multiple causes and multiple effects/results it is totally unscientific to draw such kind of conclusions as Mrs. Wilson does with the above phrase. But it is well known now, that in academician circles of philosophy, such kind of claims as conclusions have led to the confusion that means also that when someone does not have many sources of scientific studies and researches his/her claim/theory is foolishness.

**"Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth". - Epicurus to Pythocles**

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## Post by “Charles” of November 13, 2019 at 2:00 PM

My copy just arrived, I'll be reading it when I get home.

Edit: No I won't, my card keeps getting declined and I have to call the bank & wait a few days



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## Post by “Charles” of November 15, 2019 at 2:36 PM

The book is finally in my hands now. When my shift ends, I'll start reading it chapter by chapter.

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 15, 2019 at 3:28 PM

[Charles](#) (and to others reading this thread): I have prepared a blank outline of the book for ease of use in making notes on each section: [Outlining Catherin Wilson's "How To Be An Epicurean" - A Blank Form](#)

You can just cut and paste that outline into a new post of your own and then add your notes as you go along.

Everyone should feel free to make your own thread, preferably in this same sub-form; I would propose titles such as "**Charles'** Outline of Wilson's How To Be An Epicurean" for each thread.

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## Post by “Michael” of December 5, 2019 at 8:50 PM

It seems from what I've read here that she has a distorted view of Epicureanism common now. The view that we're sicklier now than in prior eras also seems highly questionable. We have our problems, but life expectancy (a concept often misunderstood) was lower *because* of greater unchecked diseases and injuries which could lead to it. I also think viewing wealth as a zero-sum game is usually fallacious (not that there are no issues with the income gap). From what I can tell also many people want to advocate Epicureanism for their purposes, unconcerned with

(or unaware of) what the philosophy really says.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of December 6, 2019 at 12:18 AM**

Regarding the wellness of Primitive versus Civilized Man, the relevant passage in Lucretius is V:988-1010. He contrasts the two using three specific examples. To summarize:

1. Primitive humans were on balance more likely to die by predation or festering wounds. Civilized humans are seldom devoured by beasts, but often die in droves at sea or on the battlefield.
2. Primitive humans suffered from a lack of food. Civilized humans, from overabundance ("penuria" vs "copia"). What the disease is that results from *rerum copia* is not specified; gout has long been thought of as a 'rich man's disease'.
3. Primitive humans unwittingly poisoned themselves. Civilized humans kill themselves [and, it is implied, each other] with deliberate skill.

There's no question that civilized humans today are much healthier than their primitive ancestors. But for a 1st century Roman the arithmetic was quite different. There's an amusing story in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* about a Gallic chief who forbade the import of goods, especially wine, from Rome. He didn't want his hardy frontier tribe to succumb to the ills of Roman culture and civilization.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2019 at 8:36 AM**

Michael if you do buy and read the book I hope you will consider adding your comments in this subforum as you do. That would be a great help to everyone!

I have been trying to read through it systematically but I find it very difficult to keep up my enthusiasm. She flips effortlessly between statements that adhere to the Epicurean texts and those that are clearly her own personal / political preference without any regard for consistency in doing so.

There's very little doubt in my mind but that this book is going to be helpful for introducing more people to Epicurus, but at the same time it is going to perpetuate the "humanist" view of Epicurus that seeks to identify him with particular popular political positions that are not at all

inherent in the Classical Epicurean position.

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### Post by “Michael” of December 7, 2019 at 2:21 PM

#### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

Regarding the wellness of Primitive versus Civilized Man, the relevant passage in Lucretius is V:988-1010. He contrasts the two using three specific examples. To summarize:

1. Primitive humans were on balance more likely to die by predation or festering wounds. Civilized humans are seldom devoured by beasts, but often die in droves at sea or on the battlefield.
2. Primitive humans suffered from a lack of food. Civilized humans, from overabundance ("penuria" vs "copia"). What the disease is that results from *rerum copia* is not specified; gout has long been thought of as a 'rich man's disease'.
3. Primitive humans unwittingly poisoned themselves. Civilized humans kill themselves [and, it is implied, each other] with deliberate skill.

There's no question that civilized humans today are much healthier than their primitive ancestors. But for a 1st century Roman the arithmetic was quite different. There's an amusing story in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* about a Gallic chief who forbade the import of goods, especially wine, from Rome. He didn't want his hardy frontier tribe to succumb to the ills of Roman culture and civilization.

Very astute observations by Lucretius. I'm no expert on this, but that seems largely accurate. Of course, the life expectancy now is still greater than in his time. "Rich men's diseases" are also probably more common as a result of our prosperity. Even in his time however others might have occurred due to obesity etc.

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### Post by “Michael” of December 7, 2019 at 2:24 PM

Cassius, given what I've read here I'll probably just get it from the library (I've checked on that-it's available). That is a good idea often anyway, to see if you really like it enough to purchase later. I will read it at some point and comment about what she says. However, as you know far

more about Epicureanism than I do any errors will be probably less obvious. We'll see.

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### **Post by “Hiram” of December 9, 2019 at 4:09 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

And that's part of the same issue. The "mainstream" places of discussion aren't just unaware of the DeWitt / Alternate argument -- they DISAGREE with it -- and if they have their way, they will also SUPPRESS it, which is why it can only arise \*outside\* and not \*within\* or even \*with the encouragement of\* the "mainstream" circles.

I think it's great that there's an open, wide market (agora?) of ideas out there and that people are openly disagreeing with us. That's not a reason not to engage people. I WANT to hear their disagreements. I've written for Partially Examined Life. I wrote a chapter for "How to Live a Good Life", together with 14 other people whose views are all at odds with mine. I've never experienced this exposure as scary in any way whatsoever, on the contrary. Philodemus, if you read most of his scrolls, was REACTING against the views and writings of others (Theophrastus, the mathematicians, etc.). This is how philosophy advances and grows and gains relevance and a wider audience.

But if you do not participate in public discourse, you forfeit the right to lament that your views are excluded. So you SHOULD participate.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2019 at 7:57 AM**

i suppose I am not as much of a libertarian as you are Hiram. I am interested in people who see the same things that I do and form friendships on that basis. I recognize that everyone will not agree, and the problem is not lack of communication, nor will it be resolvable by communication.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 10, 2019 at 8:27 AM**

Epicurus was highly successful in his time, and part of the reason is that he did not waste time debating opponents in the public square. By forming his own Garden, he was able to teach uninterrupted and to build a base from which outreach could occur. This strategy resulted in widespread adoption of his philosophy for centuries after his death. And that is what we are doing, following Epicurus' example of developing a strong, clearly defined hub from which to send our "leaflets" into the public space.

The success of competing philosophies does not rest only upon accuracy but upon many other factors, including power and timing. In that circumstance, it is critical to develop a strong nucleus, with a clear identity, and proceed carefully. Being more concerned with numbers than clarity at this stage only results in dilution of the philosophy and eventually an unrecognizable amorphous mess.

When powerful opponents are actively promoting interpretations of Epicurus which require the ignoring of some of his own writing and life, we are not forfeiting any right to lament their deplorable actions just because we've chosen to build our opposition carefully and in circles where they have less influence. That is an astonishing assertion.

When developing a non-violent resistance to tyranny, do you send 3 or 4 revolutionaries to yell at the established army? Instead of taking time to build a strong movement in places where the army hasn't bothered to frequent?

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**Post by "Hiram" of December 18, 2019 at 3:42 PM**

Late but finally here, my review of HtbE

<http://societyofepicurus.com/book-review-of...therine-wilson/>

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**Post by "Joshua" of December 18, 2019 at 7:12 PM**

Very thorough, Hiram. Thank you!