New (October 1 2019) Catherine Wilson Speech Video on Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Cassius” of October 8, 2019 at 4:15 PM

Catherine Wilson is on a tour, it seems, promoting her latest book, and here is video of a speech that was just uploaded on October 1. We're trying to make each post here as substantive as possible by adding commentary, so before posting this I watched the video in full and made the following notes of the major topics she covered. In sum, I think this is a fine speech and she deserves a lot of credit. She covers most of the major aspects of Epicurus (I don't think I heard her mention the canon or epistemology) and most of us here would have some differences with some of the points she makes. But this speech does not go off into politics whatsoever, and in general this is an excellent mostly-sympathetic introduction to Epicurean philosophy. I will forewarn you, however, that Ms. Wilson is not presenting this as a "motivational" speech. She is making an academic presentation to a serious audience, so her tone and presentation are appropriate to that setting.

I do want to give her particular credit for her quote from Plutarch, showing how the Epicureans disagreed with and opposed the Stoics, even calling Stoicism the result of "another and greater bad thing, savagery or unadulterated lust for fame, and madness."

With her featuring a quote like that, how could this speech be anything *but* worthwhile!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eqa24YHg2bs&feature=youtu.be

2:07 - Epicureanism is one of her favorite philosophies

- 2:27 - Epicurus had a "cult-like" school of philosophy.
- 5:55 - She says "infinity of shapes" but that is not correct. Lucretius said that the number of different shapes are limited, but the total number of atoms is unlimited/infinite. (this is a very minor point)
- 7:18 - Lots of other worlds with plants and animals too
- 11:09 - Reality depends on the observer. (Uses good example that the atoms do not have color; flock of sheep on a hillside)
- 12:29 - Attrition - (Uses good example of ring and, plow)
- 13:20 - Limits discussion. How much wealth etc is "ethically acceptable."
- 14:10 - Theology. She says that here there is a real difference between Epicurus and Lucretius(?) She cites the reference in the Letter to Menoeceus and how to think about the gods. She says Lucretius was much more fierce about religion than Epicurus and

implies that this was different from Epicurus himself.

- 18:20 - "Natural selection before Darwin" - "system of perishing." Says Epicurus was not very good on his science of how things came about and are regular - as to all sorts of natural phenomena.
- 21:44 Implies that Epicurean natural selection theory , as opposed to Darwin, was not based on observation and argument.
- 23:38 - Says that Lucretius said that the primitive period was the happiest period in the human race(?) And that what changed was technology which allowed tools of war and slavery (?) With civilization came war and slavery.
- 25:45 - Says aspiration to honor, fame, and power is root of evil.
- 26:35 - Book 6 doesn't seem to fit with the rest; ends up very darkly.
- 27:44 "Pleasure which I will get to in a minute."
- 29:02 - Maybe illness of humanity as a metaphor for sick state of society(?)
- 29:45 - "Epicurus said that physical well-being / absence of pain is the most important value in human life" Cites the "contend with Zeus for happiness" quote.
- 31:35 - Discovery of fire gradually produced misery of civilization and oppression
- 32:10 - Talks about how other philosophers are opponents of pleasure. Epicurus was out on a limb here and suffered a lot of criticism for it
- 32:58 - Death is nothing to us. This strikes people as a sophism, she says, because the main concern is that we are going to be "missing out." She explains there is neither heaven nor hell. They stress the idea of a natural limit and not bad to lose life when you are at the natural limit. (good)
- 35:00 Lucretius is consoling on death as are the Stoics.
- 36:48 - Epicureans v Stoics - She says Stoicism is about forbearance and you should resign yourself to your losses and your mind can choose not to be affected by external circumstances. Epicureans did not think that at all, as mind and body are one to epicureans. Epicureans did not suggest that all emotions should be suppressed. She gives an EXCELLENT quote from Plutarch with Epicurean criticism of Stoicism.
- 39:00 - Epicureanism is not (1) dedication to fine dining, (2) consumerism, (3) dialectical materialism."
- 40:45 - What Epicurus thought was most pleasurable in life was learning new things. For Lucretius what gave him pleasure was writing his poem.
- 42:00 - Recommends Greenblatt's book the Swerve. She thinks this is mis-titled as the swerve is not all that central to Epicurean philosophy. She does, however, stumble and say that Epicurus mentions the swerve once and Lucretius not at all; she has that reversed, but I am sure she knows that.

Epicureans vs. Stoics

The Epicureans argue with those who eliminate pains and tears…for the death of friends, and they say that the kind of freedom from pain which amounts to insensitivity is the result of another and greater bad thing, savagery or an unadulterated lust for fame, and madness.

- Plutarch, *Against Colotes*

https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1211-new-october-1-2019-catherine-wilson-speech-video-on-epicurean-philosophy/

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2019 at 6:33 PM

Here is some useful commentary posted elsewhere in response to my post above;

BDG:

Good to see more academic interest in Epicurus. I've just started watching, but I must say that based on the notes I'm going into this with a lot of skepticism.

First of all I notice the Anglicized pronunciation of Epicurus, which I just find jarring, being so used to the Greek pronunciation. But oh well, I guess that is a detail I should not be bothered by.

I notice she is spending a lot of time on physics, which I think is the least interesting and most outdated part of the philosophy of Epicurus.

Then at about 13:50 she says: "Coming to terms with these limits is really the center of Epicurean ethical philosophy." And here I have to disagree. In my reading of Epicurus, the center is really the principle of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Limits play a peripheral role. I could be wrong, and I'd like to here what other members here think of this.

I'll listen to the rest and add to my comments later.

21:45 Interesting (and something I was not aware of) that Epicurus had a primitive form of the theory of natural selection. I think this speaks to the strength of Epicurus physics, even tho they did not have the scientific tools to confirm their theories, or to adjust them to the specifics we have observed since. This in turn strengthens his metaphysics of materialism and the lack of supernatural gods.

I have to watch the rest later today.

Cassius:

I hope others will comment as they get a chance to watch this. In the meantime I want to make a friendly comment on this that Ben said: "First of all I notice the Anglicized pronunciation of Epicurus, which I just find jarring, being so used to the Greek pronunciation. But oh well, I guess that is a detail I should not be bothered by."

To me this is a perfect example of how so much is determined by perspective (which is itself an Epicurean core viewpoint). I personally find the Greek pronunciation of the name jarring (as I gather Holly did in her recent comment on Christos' video:-)) But as Ben said that is minor; a

better example is the physics. If someone comes from a background where they are at home with atheism and science as a given, then the physics may seem old hat. But the world is teeming with people who will never accept anything about Epicurean philosophy because they reject the idea that there is no life after death, and no creating god, and they see the supernatural under every bed. So physics can be an important link to them.

It just depends on the circles you are raised in and the circles you travel in, I guess. But there are also issues as to how closely you link the ethics and the physics. I tend to find them inseparable, even beyond the issue of the supernatural, but again some people have no issue with idea that there is really no absolute truth or virtue in the universe, and that "feeling" is what is ultimately important, so again there is a lot of variation.

JC:

I was introduced to Epicurean philosophy by Professor Wilson, and to date I haven't found a presentation of it I find more credible and level headed. I think that's because undergirding it is modern physicalist and prudential hedonist philosophy. I just wish in this talk she spoke more about *how to be* an Epicurean. In her latest book she often stresses a) the difference between what really exists and what exists only by convention and b) prudence in choosing which actions will maximise your overall pleasure. But I enjoyed the talk nonetheless; it's always a pleasure to see that rarest of creatures - a philosopher with a philosophy

Cassius:

JC following on your comment, i was impressed to observe her choice of topics here as what *she* thought was significant for people to know. In interviews she and others are generally led down a predisposed path by the interviewer. Here she could display what *she* thought was an appropriate introduction and she chose to cover a lot of ground rather than focus on one or two things. For general audiences i much prefer her approach.

BDG:

Around the 25 minute mark where she talks about the rise of civilization, and how according to Lucretius the primitive period was the happiest period in the human race: is that just his opinion; does she agree with it? Did Epicurus have the same view?

It also sounds quite Marxist to point out the power dynamics, oppression and slavery as the evils of civilization. She does mention the good products of culture also, but it doesn't seem to outweigh the bad?

And I have to disagree with this negative assessment of civilization. The primitive prehistory of mankind was not a paradise, but filled with violence and suffering in the struggle to survive. Civilization has progressively made things better for humankind.

And after she talks for just about two minutes about Epicurus' core idea of pleasure, she puts a downer on it with:

31:35 - Discovery of fire gradually produced misery of civilization and oppression -

Is there anything in Epicurus' writings themselves that point to this opinion, or is this just Lucretius, or maybe even just Professor Wilson's interpretation?

All in all I would say this is an interesting talk, but I find the choice of highlights curious, and I would feel ambivalent about recommending this as an introduction on how to be an Epicurean.

Cassius:

Excellent points Ben. I put a question mark around that part as i personally do NOT recall or think that Lucretius romanticized this 'pseudo-state of nature" as a golden age, but I need to check the texts. My bet is that this is mostly Professor Wilson's interpretation, because I read that section of Lucretius as chronicling what actually happened without lamenting that it should not have happened.

BDG:

I haven't come across that in my reading of Epicurus, but I must admit to not having read Lucretius yet.

And this interpretation seems to go hand in hand with the power/oppression/slavery angle, which sounds decidedly Marxist to me. And since academia is rife with Marxist ideology, I suspect this may be the lens thru which the professor is looking at the material.

Cassius:

I changed my "like" to "love" on that remark. I think this is probably exactly correct: "And since academia is rife with Marxist ideology, I suspect this may be the lens thru which the professor is looking at the material.

Everyone has their own lens, and that's probably a good thing, but it's at least the reality. When we read or hear commentary we need access to both the text and knowledge of the lens through which the commentary is being transmitted -- much like the discussion of images in book 4, where we are taught that we need to account for distortions in the work of the senses.

BDG:

That's a good point. And it is good to try to be conscious of our own biases as well.

My own lens is certainly colored by my experiences of recovering from fundamentalist religion, and from depression; and by my professional interest as a language teacher; by my experiences of living in different countries in Europe and now China; by the ideas I have taken

on board from reading certain books (e.g. Steven Pinker and Michel Onfray). And so on.

Cassius:

Since Catherine Wilson singled out "fire" as a turning point, it's worthwhile to point out that fire was an entirely natural development, through lightning, according to Lucretius:

"Herein, lest by chance you should ask a silent question, it was the lightning that first of all brought fire to earth for mortals, and from it all the heat of flames is spread abroad."

BDG:

Ah, how I appreciate Epicurus' conciseness in writing over the wordiness of Lucretius' poetry...

Anyway, he does not describe the primordial state as paradise ("For then more often would some one of them be caught and furnish living food to the wild beasts, devoured by their teeth, and would fill woods and mountains and forests with his groaning") and just describes the evolution of humanity and civilization, with both the good ("by their arts they reached the topmost pinnacle") and the bad ("many thousands of men led beneath the standards and done to death in a single day").

Cassius:

Yes exactly my view too Ben. And I want to thank you for all your comments in this thread because you've pointed out some important shortcomings in this presentation. This is an example why it is so helpful for us to post commentary along with links to presentations so that people who might be lurking will get help in separating the good from the bad. You are quite right in my view to point out the subtle (or not so suble) influence of marxist thought in this video. I am observing in other presentations that Ms. Wilson can be even much more outspoken about her political deductions, and people need to realize that those are her views, and not necessarily correct. The best way to keep an even presentation is for us to be sure to point these things out when they are posted.

Cassius: Here are sections from Book V (Bailey) that are probably the important ones for CW's assertions:

But the race of man was much hardier then in the fields, as was seemly for a race born of the hard earth: it was built up on larger and more solid bones within, fastened with strong sinews traversing the flesh; not easily to be harmed by heat or cold or strange food or any taint of the body. And during many lustres of the sun rolling through the sky they prolonged their lives after the roving manner of wild beasts. Nor was there any sturdy steerer of the bent plough, nor knew any one how to work the fields with iron, or to plant young shoots in the earth, or cut down the old branches off high trees with knives. What sun and rains had brought to birth, what

earth had created unasked, such gift was enough to appease their hearts. Among oaks laden with acorns they would refresh their bodies for the most part; and the arbute-berries, which now you see ripening in wintertime with scarlet hue, the earth bore then in abundance, yea and larger. And besides these the flowering youth of the world then bare much other rough sustenance, enough and to spare for miserable mortals. But to slake their thirst streams and springs summoned them, even as now the downrush of water from the great mountains calls clear far and wide to the thirsting tribes of wild beasts. Or again they dwelt in the woodland haunts of the nymphs, which they had learnt in their wanderings, from which they knew that gliding streams of water washed the wet rocks with bounteous flood, yea washed the wet rocks, as they dripped down over the green moss, and here and there welled up and burst forth over the level plain.

Nor as yet did they know how to serve their purposes with fire, nor to use skins and clothe their body in the spoils of wild beasts, but dwelt in woods and the caves on mountains and forests, and amid brushwood would hide their rough limbs, when constrained to shun the shock of winds and the rain-showers. Nor could they look to the common weal, nor had they knowledge to make mutual use of any customs or laws. Whatever booty chance had offered to each, he bore it off; for each was taught at his own will to live and thrive for himself alone. And Venus would unite lovers in the woods; for each woman was wooed either by mutual passion, or by the man’s fierce force and reckless lust, or by a price, acorns and arbute-berries or choice pears. And trusting in their strange strength of hand and foot they would hunt the woodland tribes of wild beasts with stones to hurl or clubs of huge weight; many they would vanquish, a few they would avoid in hiding; and like bristly boars these woodland men would lay their limbs naked on the ground, when overtaken by night time, wrapping themselves up around with leaves and foliage. Nor did they look for daylight and the sun with loud wailing, wandering fearful through the fields in the darkness of night, but silent and buried in sleep waited mindful, until the sun with rosy torch should bring the light into the sky. For, because they had been wont ever from childhood to behold darkness and light begotten, turn by turn, it could not come to pass that they should ever wonder, or feel mistrust lest the light of the sun should be withdrawn for ever, and never-ending night possess the earth. But much greater was another care, inasmuch as the tribes of wild beasts often made rest dangerous for wretched men. Driven from their home they would flee from their rocky roof at the coming of a foaming boar or a mighty lion, and in the dead of night in terror they would yield their couches spread with leaves to their cruel guests.

Nor then much more than now would the races of men leave the sweet light of life with lamentation. For then more often would some one of them be caught and furnish living food to the wild beasts, devoured by their teeth, and would fill woods and mountains and forests with his groaning, as he looked on his living flesh being buried in a living tomb. And those whom flight had saved with mangled body, thereafter, holding trembling hands over their noisome sores, would summon Orcus with terrible cries, until savage griping pains had robbed them of

life, all helpless and knowing not what wounds wanted. Yet never were many thousands of men led beneath the standards and done to death in a single day, nor did the stormy waters of ocean dash ships and men upon the rocks. Then rashly, idly, in vain would the sea often arise and rage, and lightly lay aside its empty threatenings, nor could the treacherous wiles of the windless waves lure any man to destruction with smiling waters; then the wanton art of sailing lay as yet unknown. Then, too, want of food would give over their drooping limbs to death, now on the other hand 'tis surfeit of good things brings them low. They all unwitting would often pour out poison for themselves, now with more skill they give it to others.

Then after they got themselves huts and skins and fire, and woman yoked with man retired to a single [home, and the laws of marriage] were learnt, and they saw children sprung from them, then first the race of man began to soften. For fire brought it about that their chilly limbs could not now so well bear cold under the roof of heaven, and Venus lessened their strength, and children, by their winning ways, easily broke down the haughty will of their parents. Then, too, neighbours began eagerly to form friendship one with another, not to hurt or be harmed, and they commended to mercy children and the race of women, when with cries and gestures they taught by broken words that 'tis right for all men to have pity on the weak. Yet not in all ways could unity be begotten, but a good part, the larger part, would keep their compacts loyally; or else the human race would even then have been all destroyed, nor could breeding have prolonged the generations until now.

But the diverse sounds of the tongue nature constrained men to utter, and use shaped the names of things, in a manner not far other than the very speechlessness of their tongue is seen to lead children on to gesture, when it makes them point out with the finger the things that are before their eyes. For every one feels to what purpose he can use his own powers. Before the horns of a calf appear and sprout from his forehead, he butts with them when angry, and pushes passionately. But the whelps of panthers and lion-cubs already fight with claws and feet and biting, when their teeth and claws are scarce yet formed. Further, we see all the tribe of winged fowls trusting to their wings, and seeking an unsteady aid from their pinions. Again, to think that any one then parcelled out names to things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is mere folly. For why should he be able to mark off all things by words, and to utter the diverse sounds of the tongue, and at the same time others be thought unable to do this? Moreover, if others too had not used words to one another, whence was implanted in him the concept of their use; whence was he given the first power to know and see in his mind what he wanted to do? Likewise one man could not avail to constrain many, and vanquish them to his will, that they should be willing to learn all his names for things; nor indeed is it easy in any way to teach and persuade the deaf what it is needful to do; for they would not endure it, nor in any way suffer the sounds of words unheard before to batter on their ears any more to no purpose.

Lastly, what is there so marvellous in this, if the human race, with strong voice and tongue, should mark off things with diverse sounds for diverse feelings? When the dumb cattle, yea and the races of wild beasts are wont to give forth diverse unlike sounds, when they are in fear or

pain, or again when their joys grow strong. Yea verily, this we may learn from things clear to see. When the large loose lips of Molossian dogs start to snarl in anger, baring their hard teeth, thus drawn back in rage, they threaten with a noise far other than when they bark and fill all around with their clamour. Yet when they essay fondly to lick their cubs with their tongue, or when they toss them with their feet, and making for them with open mouth, feign gently to swallow them, checking their closing teeth, they fondle them with growling voice in a way far other than when left alone in the house they bay, or when whining they shrink from a beating with cringing body. Again, is not neighing seen to differ likewise, when a young stallion in the flower of his years rages among the mares, pricked by the spur of winged love, and from spreading nostrils snorts for the fray, and when, it may be, at other times he whinnies with trembling limbs? Lastly, the tribe of winged fowls and the diverse birds, hawks and ospreys and gulls amid the sea-waves, seeking in the salt waters for life and livelihood, utter at other times cries far other than when they are struggling for their food and fighting for their prey. And some of them change their harsh notes with the weather, as the long-lived tribes of crows and flocks of rooks, when they are said to cry for water and rains, and anon to summon the winds and breezes. And so, if diverse feelings constrain animals, though they are dumb, to utter diverse sounds, how much more likely is it that mortals should then have been able to mark off things unlike with one sound and another.

Herein, lest by chance you should ask a silent question, it was the lightning that first of all brought fire to earth for mortals, and from it all the heat of flames is spread abroad. For we see many things flare up, kindled with flames from heaven, when a stroke from the sky has brought the gift of heat. Yet again, when a branching tree is lashed by the winds and sways to and fro, reeling and pressing on the branches of another tree, fire is struck out by the strong force of the rubbing, anon the fiery heat of flame sparkles out, while branches and trunks rub each against the other. Either of these happenings may have given fire to mortals. And then the sun taught them to cook food and soften it by the heat of flame, since they saw many things among the fields grow mellow, vanquished by the lashing of his rays and by the heat.

And day by day those who excelled in understanding and were strong in mind showed them more and more how to change their former life and livelihood for new habits and for fire. Kings began to build cities and to found a citadel, to be for themselves a strong-hold and a refuge; and they parcelled out and gave flocks and fields to each man for his beauty or his strength or understanding; for beauty was then of much avail, and strength stood high. Thereafter property was invented and gold found, which easily robbed the strong and beautiful of honour; for, for the most part, however strong men are born, however beautiful their body, they follow the lead of the richer man. Yet if a man would steer his life by true reasoning, it is great riches to a man to live thriftily with calm mind; for never can he lack for a little. But men wished to be famous and powerful, that their fortune might rest on a sure foundation, and they might in wealth lead a peaceful life; all in vain, since struggling to rise to the heights of honour, they made the path of their journey beset with danger, and yet from the top, like lightning, envy smites them and casts them down anon in scorn to a noisome Hell; since by envy, as by lightning, the topmost

heights are most often set ablaze, and all places that rise high above others; so that it is far better to obey in peace than to long to rule the world with kingly power and to sway kingdoms. Wherefore let them sweat out their life-blood, worn away to no purpose, battling their way along the narrow path of ambition; inasmuch as their wisdom is but from the lips of others, and they seek things rather through hearsay than from their own feelings, and that is of no more avail now nor shall be hereafter than it was of old.

And so the kings were put to death and the ancient majesty of thrones and proud sceptres was overthrown and lay in ruins, and the glorious emblem on the head of kings was stained with blood, and beneath the feet of the mob mourned the loss of its high honour; for once dreaded overmuch, eagerly now it is trampled. And so things would pass to the utmost dregs of disorder, when every man sought for himself the power and the headship. Then some of them taught men to appoint magistrates and establish laws that they might consent to obey ordinances. For the race of men, worn out with leading a life of violence, lay faint from its feuds; wherefore the more easily of its own will it gave in to ordinances and the close mesh of laws. For since each man set out to avenge himself more fiercely in his passion than is now suffered by equal laws, for this cause men were weary of leading a life of violence. Thence fear of punishment taints the prizes of life. For violence and hurt tangle every man in their toils, and for the most part fall on the head of him, from whom they had their rise, nor is it easy for one who by his act breaks the common pact of peace to lead a calm and quiet life. For though he be unnoticed of the race of gods and men, yet he must needs mistrust that his secret will be kept for ever; nay indeed, many by speaking in their sleep or raving in fever have often, so ’tis said, betrayed themselves, and brought to light misdeeds long hidden.

Cassius:

Here is the very END of book five. Again, I do not see all this building up to a climatic conclusion that all this change was bad, just that it happened and is part of reality:

"But sun and moon, like watchmen, traversing with their light all round the great turning vault of the world, taught men that the seasons of the year come round, and that the work goes on after a sure plan and a sure order.

Now fenced in with strong towers they would live their life, and the land was parcelled out and marked off: then the sea was gay with the flying sails of ships: now treaties were drawn up, and they had auxiliaries and allies, when poets first began to hand down men’s deeds in songs; yet not much before that were letters discovered. Therefore our age cannot look back to see what was done before, unless in any way reason points out traces.

Ships and the tilling of the land, walls, laws, weapons, roads, dress, and all things of this kind, all the prizes, and the luxuries of life, one and all, songs and pictures, and the polishing of quaintly-wrought statues, practice and therewith the experience of the eager mind taught them little by little, as they went forward step by step. So, little by little, time brings out each several

thing into view, and reason raises it up into the coasts of light. For they saw one thing after another grow clear in their mind, until by their arts they reached the topmost pinnacle."

Post by “Hiram” of October 10, 2019 at 11:58 AM

Re: this

“Then at about 13:50 she says: "Coming to terms with these limits is really the center of Epicurean ethical philosophy." And here I have to disagree. In my reading of Epicurus, the center is really the principle of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Limits play a peripheral role. I could be wrong, and I'd like to here what other members here think of this.

I'll listen to the rest and add to my comments later”

I remember that diogenes mentioned that not knowing the limits of our desires among the three “roots of all evil”. So this must have been of great importance.

https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2017/03/25/dio…-the-pleasures/

Post by “Hiram” of October 10, 2019 at 12:04 PM

I don’t know about fire only, but re: fire plus iron, in Lucretius, an evaluation of the association between iron and warfare is explored. The passage ends explaining how Discord multiplies the horrors of war.

> How nature of iron discovered was, thou mayst
> Of thine own self divine. Man’s ancient arms
> Were hands, and nails and teeth, stones too and boughs-
> Breakage of forest trees- and flame and fire,
> As soon as known. Thereafter force of iron
> And copper discovered was; and copper’s use
> Was known ere iron’s, since more tractable
> Its nature is and its abundance more.
> With copper men to work the soil began,
> With copper to rouse the hurly waves of war,
> To straw the monstrous wounds, and seize away
> Another’s flocks and fields. For unto them,

Thus armed, all things naked of defence
Readily yielded. Then by slow degrees
The sword of iron succeeded, and the shape
Of brazen sickle into scorn was turned:
With iron to cleave the soil of earth they ‘gan,
And the contentions of uncertain war
Were rendered equal.
And, lo, man was wont
Armed to mount upon the ribs of horse
And guide him with the rein, and play about
With right hand free, oft times before he tried
Perils of war in yoked chariot;
And yoked pairs abreast came earlier
Than yokes of four, or scythed chariots
Whereinto clomb the men-at-arms. And next
The Punic folk did train the elephants-
Those curst Lucanian oxen, hideous,
The serpent-handed, with turrets on their bulks-
To dure the wounds of war and panic-strike
The mighty troops of Mars. Thus Discord sad
Begat the one Thing after other, to be
The terror of the nations under arms,
And day by day to horrors of old war
She added an increase.
Lucretius, De Rerum Natura

Post by “Cassius” of October 10, 2019 at 2:00 PM

> Quote from Hiram
>
> “Then at about 13:50 she says: "Coming to terms with these limits is really the center of Epicurean ethical philosophy." And here I have to disagree. In my reading of Epicurus, the center is really the principle of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Limits play a peripheral role. I could be wrong, and I'd like to here what other members here think of this.
>
> I'll listen to the rest and add to my comments later”

> I remember that diogenes mentioned that not knowing the limits of our desires among the three “roots of all evil”. So this must have been of great importance.

Fr. 34

... reasoning ... [of happiness] ..... [is ... hope, after selection of these], and cure of erring emotions. So where, I say, the danger is great, so also is the fruit. Here we must turn aside these fallacious arguments on the grounds that they are insidious and insulting and contrived, by means of terminological ambiguity, to [lead] wretched human beings [astray] ..... [let us] not [avoid every pain that is present, and let us not choose every pleasure, as the many always do. Each person must employ reasoning,] since he [will not always achieve immediate success: just as] exertion (?) [often] involves one [gain at the beginning and] certain [others as time passes by], so it is also with [experiencing pleasure;] for sowings of seeds do [not] bring [the same benefit] to the sower but we see some seeds very quickly germinating [and bearing fruit and others taking longer] ..... of pleasures and [pains] ..... [pleasure].

And so the ..... [are] ..... If ..... [prudence.]

Let us now [investigate] how life is to be made pleasant for us both in states and in actions.

Let us first discuss states, keeping an eye on the point that, when the emotions which disturb the soul are removed, those which produce pleasure enter into it to take their place.

Well, what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears —of the gods, of death, and of [pains]— and, besides [these], desires that [outrun] the limits fixed by nature. These are the roots of all evils, and, [unless] we cut them off, [a multitude] of evils will grow [upon] us.

[Well, let us examine] our fear of the gods ...

Ok it looks to me like the three being referred to in that passage are three fears - of gods, of death, and of pains, with the general point under discussion there being "disturbing emotions."

I kind of agree that the statement ""Coming to terms with these limits is really the center of Epicurean ethical philosophy" is really pretty loose and overbroad, especially if you follow the traditional sequence of fear of the gods and fear of death being the most important issues to deal with at the very beginning.

Certainly the issue of realizing that desires are not unlimited, and need not be pursued to infinity, is an important part of Epicurean philosophy. But I would not say that it is "at the center," and Lucretius doesn't address it at length until Book 2.

But I wouldn't stress too much either way on Wilson's statements here. It seems to me that this entire presentation is kind of loose and general, especially in the way she presents it. She might indeed take that position in print in her book but I haven't looked at it yet.

Post by “Cassius” of October 10, 2019 at 2:09 PM

> Quote
>
> I don’t know about fire only, but re: fire plus iron, in Lucretius, an evaluation of the association between iron and warfare is explored. The passage ends explaining how Discord multiplies the horrors of war.
>
> > How nature of iron discovered was, thou mayst
> > Of thine own self divine. Man’s ancient arms
> > Were hands, and nails and teeth, stones too and boughs-
> > Breakage of forest trees- and flame and fire,
> > As soon as known.

Hiram: I think Ben's point in raising the "fire" issue was the general one that Wilson seemed to be saying that Lucretius' pre-history discussion was sort of a validation of Marxist "class-struggle" history in a political sense. Or maybe in other philosophical terms she seemed to be implying that Lucretius was glorifying life before technology as a better time / golden age. And Ben was saying, and I agree with him, that I do not read Lucretius "glorifying" that period, or calling it a golden age, as much as he just seems to be stating the facts of what happened, with both the bad and good that went with it, to get us to where we are. Almost as if he were chronicling the movement of the atoms and telling us what brought about current conditions.

Ben was speculating that because Marxism is so prevalent in academia that that might be coloring her approach. Whether or not that is true may not be important, but if Wilson is going to make a habit of suggesting that Lucretius and Epicurus extolled pre-history as a golden age, that leads to the implication that all technology and "progress" is bad, and reinforces the viewpoint that Epicureanism if carried to a logical conclusion would endorse living in caves.

Do you have a different reading of Lucretius on that point? How do you read it?

Post by “Hiram” of October 11, 2019 at 4:56 PM

Lucretius would not have known of Marx, as he lived in the first century. He argued that, with the invention of iron, weapons for warfare were made and that this, plus horses, plus chariots, made warfare much more dangerous.

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2019 at 5:16 PM

Well Hiram I think the point in issue in this part of the discussion is the part of Marx that is devoted to "class warfare" and the historical determinism that everything in human history derives from that conflict. A quick google indicates as:

"the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of **class** struggle." (The first line of communist manifesto (1848) reads.)

I am sure others (Martin) have a much more recent handle on that than I do.

I gather that what Ben was reading into Wilson's speech is that she reads Lucretius' history lesson as supporting the class warfare theory of history.

I think Ben thinks that's a gross misreading of Lucretius, and I would agree. The whole "economic man" orientation of Marxism, which is what I gather drives a lot of their analysis, is not something that's consistent with Epicurean theory, as it is not the issue of how to deal with money and material goods that drives the philosophy, but the basic orientation that tells us what money and which material goods to pursue in the first place.

Actually this is very close to the issue we are discussing in several threads. If we strip out the underlying physics and epistemology and theory of pleasure, and go right to the "live frugally" part, then we can make Epicurus look like almost a twin of Marx, and that is what a lot of people seem to want to do.

I think that's a terrible mistake and turns the philosophy on its head, and the way to avoid it is to stay with Epicurus and focus on the physics and the epistemology and then the discussion of what pleasure and virtue are all about, and only THEN move to the issue that is involved in Vatican Saying 63 -- because it is in fact as great an error to live too frugally as it is to live to luxuriously.

Post by “Joshua” of October 12, 2019 at 7:42 AM

> Quote
>
> Around the 25 minute mark where she talks about the rise of civilization, and how according to Lucretius the primitive period was the happiest period in the human race: is that just his opinion; does she agree with it? Did Epicurus have the same view?

> It also sounds quite Marxist to point out the power dynamics, oppression and slavery as the evils of civilization. She does mention the good products of culture also, but it doesn't seem to outweigh the bad?
>
> And I have to disagree with this negative assessment of civilization. The primitive prehistory of mankind was not a paradise, but filled with violence and suffering in the struggle to survive. Civilization has progressively made things better for humankind.

There are several things going on here;

Lucretius did not accept the view, common though it was in his day, that there was an original paradisal state or a primitive golden age. This view is logical (although not reasonable) if we adopt a creation model of origins, since presumably a creator doesn't begin by creating a fallen world.

Lucretius did not adopt such a model; he was a materialist, and concluded rightly that man emerged from a nighttime of shivering ignorance little better than a beast. He slept in caves. He ate flesh raw. At length he tamed fire, wore skins, and built dwellings. Lucretius believed, like Thomas Hobbes, that primitive life was "nasty, brutish and short".

> Quote
>
> They could not look to the common good, they
>
> did not know how to govern their intercourse by
>
> custom and law...
>
> ...and when night overtook them, like bristly
>
> hogs they just cast their savage bodies naked on the ground, rolling themselves in leaves and boughs...
>
> ...what troubled them was that the tribes of beasts
>
> often made their rest dangerous to the poor wretches:
>
> driven from their home, they would flee from their
>
> rocky shelters when a foaming boar appeared or a
>
> mighty lion, and at dead of night in terror would
>
> yield their leaf strewn beds to the savage guests...

> ...until cruel torments put an end to their life,
>
> with none to help, all ignorant what a wound wanted.
>
> Display More

Nor did Lucretius believe that civilization was a Grand March of History tending always toward greater wisdom and glory. After all, he repeatedly bemoans the poverty of the Latin language when compared with the 4th century BC literature of the Greeks. But in the century before that, Athens was beset by war and plague. In the centuries afterward, by the Macedonian conquest. And look where the Athenians were now; sacked by Sulla in the poet's own lifetime. This is again a materialist position—things come together, and things fall apart.

Indeed, if he seems to think little of civilization it is only because civilization hadn't got very far in his day. It seems probable that the majority in Italy couldn't read. Medicine hadn't advanced much beyond herbalism and bone-msetting. Mankind lay, as he puts it, "foully grovelling, crushed beneath the weight of grim religion".

Lucretius sums up the contrast between primitive and civilized man with delicious and wry irony;

> Quote
>
> In those days men often unwittingly poured poison for themselves; now they make away with themselves more skillfully.

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2019 at 8:38 AM

I very much agree with your take Joshua. No doubt there are elements that can be pulled out (I am thinking at the moment of passages that seem to lament that the Earth is no longer able to give rise to as hardy races/animals as in the past) but those fit well into the larger context that you are describing.

After all, the Epicurean physics has long before this point in the analysis established that all things that come together from the elements eventually dissolve back to those elements, so why should mankind, animals of any kind, life on earth, or the earth itself deviate from that pattern?

In fact I think Lucretius makes clear that we can expect the Earth to dissolve to nothing at some future point, and with it the end of the human race at least as we know it now here on earth.

There's no reason to think that up to that final point of destruction there would be a steady upward climb, certainly not in every particular area, and probably not in humanity as a whole either. That kind of analysis fits into the theistic model of a supernatural god having a plan of progression, but not at all into the Epicurean model.

I'll say it again here too: we can dismiss the "physics" as hopelessly obsolete in details if we like, but if we don't ground ourselves in the basic understanding of the premises and implications of a totally natural and atomistic universe then we - consciously or otherwise - hold open the door to "maybe there is a spiritual realm" or "maybe there is a realm of ideals / ideal forms" and we thereby miss the crux of what Epicurus was all about, because it was only after establishing those ground rules that we get to the point of identifying pleasure as the guide of life, and interpreting what that means.

Post by “Hiram” of October 13, 2019 at 2:02 PM

I don't remember Wilson mentioning class warfare, or Lucretius.

Epicurus, and especially Metrodorus, did bind philosophy with economics and taught that we should at once philosophize, engage in business, and laugh. Epicurean ethics is also very concerned with consumption and with being aware of its natural limits, and Philodemus articulated a doctrine of the natural measure of wealth. There is a scroll titled "Peri Oikonomias". So, the "homo economicus" aspect is clearly there in our tradition, but this is not a Marxist idea. Capitalists make these same claims that we as a species must engage in networks of mutual benefit (or if not, exploitation), and of production. People in human society have to produce, SOMEONE or something has to produce, and SOMEONE or something has to extract the product being produced so that it is consumed, and we all have to consume--at least to some extent, as nature does not give us a choice.

Also, I've never read (correct me if I'm wrong) any narratives of a "golden age" in the past where humans lived perfect lives, and then civilization made things progressively worse. I don't think such idealisms exists in the anthropological accounts we find in De Rerum Natura, for instance. We DO find in Diogenes of Oenoanda a "golden age" projected into the FUTURE, but in the text it says that it is based on the supposition that ALL humans are able to attain wisdom, and this is a BIG if. Even the text admits that this is a big if, and that Diogenes was merely engaging in an intellectual exercise when he entertained this idea.

Concerning Marxism, Marx erred in thinking that his interpretation of history was fully scientific and in trying to predict a future utopia that did not materialize. But his ORIGINAL project was to reject the German idealism of his predecessors, and to furnish a MATERIALIST re-interpretation of the idealists' DIALECTIC view of history, which saw history as a thesis - antithesis - synthesis of IDEAS. Marx said: NO, the real thesis - antithesis - synthesis is between the various groups

that are struggling for the MATERIAL means of production and the MATERIAL conditions in which they exist. So he was on to something, as he rejected a Platonic view of history, but his determinism and his utopian idealism proved to be an error.

I believe that we can apply a polyvalent approach to our view of history (I think both ideas and material conditions change each other). In Epicurus, we see a synthesis of Cyrenaic ethics and Democritan physics. In our embrace of friendship, I see a synthesis of Theodorus the Atheist's misanthropy and Anniceris' philanthropy. But there are also material reasons / conditions that led to the emergence of, for instance, the passive model of recruitment in EP, with privacy among friends being a synthesis of the retreat approach and the missionary-public approach, and this would have resulted from the Platonists' expulsion of Epicurus from Mitilene, a very concrete, material circumstance. So there is a dialectic of both ideas and of material conditions that are both in evidence, and from studying the Philodeman scrolls it's very clear that the Epicureans continually perfected and developed their ideas as a result of constant challenges from other schools.

Also (as Michel Onfray attests) I believe that we DO need a historical narrative as Epicureans because narrative and voice are power, and it is not advantageous for ourselves or for human society to be deprived of the wisdom of the Epicurean school. So while I disagree with Marx's particular over-confident narrative of history (even of future history), I do agree with him, with Nietzsche, and with Onfray that we should study, evaluate, and question the over-arching narratives of those in power and of our intellectual enemies, and posit our own narratives based on the study of nature and on real events.