

Catherine Wilson interviewed by Michael Shermer

Post by “Hiram” of December 24, 2019 at 11:22 AM

Shermer is one of the most mainstream "atheist celebrities" today. That he's welcoming Epicurean philosophy into his platform should be a symptom of how mainstream E-ism is becoming.

<https://www.skeptic.com/science-salon/...of-living-well/>

Post by “Cassius” of December 24, 2019 at 12:34 PM

I am watching now. First comments:

(1) He's welcoming Catherine Wilson, which isn't quite the same thing as saying he's welcoming Epicurus.

(2) He's personally a professional "skeptic" / "atheist" - neither of which (especially skepticism) are Epicurean positions.

All presentations like this have a huge issue with whether they increase visibility to Epicurus at the cost of making what is visible more confusing or off-base than accurate.

I am going to watch the full thing and post more.

Post by “Cassius” of December 24, 2019 at 6:06 PM

More comments / observations after watching the whole thing. Before getting into the details, I think the major issues with her approach are contained in her statements at item 19 that she thinks that moral standards are timeless. This flies in the fact of the last ten PD's in regard to justice not being absolute (in fact in the entire interview, in which there is much discussion of justice, she never mentions these issues):

(3) She says that getting into Epicurus was a pure intellectual exercise for her originally.

- (4) At about the 12:30 part I applaud how they focus and reinforce that nothing can come from nothing.
- (5) At 13:30 she says that it isn't clear what the Epicureans thought about color?
- (6) At 15:00 she does a very good job of pointing out that the Epicurean position that atoms cannot themselves be conscious.
- (7) At 16:25 she talks about "deserving" not playing a role in Epicurean ethics. Strikes me as very good. However she says there is a principle of "not doing harm to others" which is NOT correct. She takes this down the political rabbit hole for several minutes.
- (8) At 19:12 talks about the need to take risks -- very good.
- (9) At 20:30 there is a discussion about how to balance long and short term -- "pleasure seeking does not work well"???
- (10) 22:03: Distinction between happiness and meaningfulness?
- (11) 23:00 - distinction between Epicurus and Stoicism. Pretty good distinctions, especially on suppression of emotion.
- (12) 26:57. She "absolutely" follows Epicureanism more than Stoicism.
- (13) 27:00 Says stoicism found acceptance among people who were politically engaged. Says Epicurean advice was to stay out of politics and ** admits she is going outside Epicureanism to talk about politics.**
- (14) 27:30 Talking about "rights" confuses the issues and is not helpful. (This is good.)
- (15) (28:18) talks about abortion in Epicurean terms -- she says abortion is permissible but not infanticide. (questionable, in the sense of whether a general law applies to all, because she is emphasizing "Who is in human society - a political argument).
- (16) 33:34 Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide -- Epicurus discouraged. "Nothing sacred about life because nothing is sacred." good.
- (17) 36:34 Jeffrey Epstein 'suicide' Her feelings about that case are "complicated." "If I were Jeff Epstein I would want to kill myself." and she feels compassion for him. As an Epicurean she doesn't believe in "deserts" - what he deserves. Were his crimes horrific crimes - she says no.
- (18) 40:46 He would not put Robert E Lee in the same category of Hitler or Goebbels. She brings up history of slavery (doesn't mention Epicurus' slaves).
- (19) 43:27 He asks about applying modern moral standards to the past and she says "I think moral standards are timeless." HUGE PROBLEM

(20) 47:00 "the government needs to do something about reparations"

(21) 47:51 - again on the issue of judging past by present standards, she says: again she repeats "ethics is timeless" on the other hand she thinks it is a matter of "information" or "amount of discussion." (she is not sympathetic to the Joe Biden example he raises).

(22) 52.00 -- he again asks about universal ethics; her answer really not clear, but from his followup it is clear that she is really taking the "they should have known better" approach.

(23) 56:40 - He argues for eternal moral truths and says the universe is moving in that direction.

(24) 56:26 - She criticizes Epicurus' view of death in part but seems to generally endorse it. Endorses view that "purpose of life is to have lived."

(25) 1:00:00 - Question about epistemology. Her answer appears to be that she is endorsing confidence in science even where evidence is not complete. He misstates and suggests Epicurean position was "all things in moderation."

(26) 1:00:02 - She states the position that Epicureans were "abstemious"

(27) 1:04:00 - Question about meaningful life. She says that she does not "try for it." And she says pursuit of pleasure and meaning is not a good strategy!" She says engagement with things that speak to you.

Post by “Hiram” of December 25, 2019 at 12:46 PM

Shermer is not a "skeptic" in the classical philosophical sense. This is a case where the old definition of the word and the new one are probably at odds. Clearly, he is a firm defender of science and empiricism, so he's all about withholding judgement until evidence is presented. (Also, notice how he challenges the idea that moral standards are timeless, so it seems like Shermer is already a proto- Epicurean, and in some points he comes off more Epicurean than she is. I wonder to what extent these types of podcasts may help many people realize that they already agree with most of Epicureanism).

Concerning your seventh point, she must be referring of the definition of justice as a covenant to "not harm or be harmed", which to be fair, is our version of the golden rule.

It seems like Wilson's views are tied to the belief that humanity has become progressively more compassionate and enlightened about many issues, and that we KNOW BETTER than the ancients in many regards. In other words, societies (like individuals) have the power to learn

and engage in processes of moral development. We know that Epicurus dedicated a [sermon to moral development](#), and we also know that Philodemus in "On Parrhesia" said that frank criticism is of two kinds: to an individual and to the society at large--so that the idea of moral development at the level of community exists.

This view has some merit, and deserves further consideration and discussion. It is one thing to say "ethics is eternal", which is not a clear statement, but it's another thing to say "we know better", with the implication being that some societies are more enlightened and therefore have conventions that generate more pleasure / less suffering to people than others, which is an undeniable fact. And if this is so, then what does this conception of moral development entail? I have a feeling that we may get closer to an answer to this by considering issues of mutual advantage in specific, concrete examples.

Post by "Cassius" of December 25, 2019 at 2:52 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

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No I don't think it is undeniable and I would deny that as written. i would say that I CASSIUS or YOU HIRAM can make the statement that I or YOU consider that some societies are more "enlightened" than others, but i think Epicurus' point is precisely that there is NOT an objective point from which we can say that our judgment on these matters is the last word.

And i say that especially since the main implication of saying "more pleasure/less suffering to PEOPLE" is that this formulation implies "greatest good for the greatest number."

I see absolutely no justification in Epicurus for "greatest good of the greatest number" or even "Greatest pleasure for the greatest number." Only the individual can say whether he himself considers the pleasure of some number of people (presumably his friends) more important than the pain of a million times larger that same number of people.

Any other attempt to stack up the pleasure and pain of groups of people is unalterably going to run into the question: "Who says so?" And [PD10](#) and many other statements explicitly rule out there being a single correct answer to that question.

I presume Hiram you picked this part out because you know how controversial these conclusions are, and how they fly in the face of "secular humanism." But that's exactly what they do -- they flatly contradict "humanism" and that's the kind of choice a person has to make when they decide whether they are an Epicurean or a humanist or something else.

Post by "Elayne" of December 25, 2019 at 3:43 PM

Cassius, I agree completely. The utilitarian position, IMO, is cold and unfeeling. I will not say it is "wrong", but I personally avoid hanging out with folks who think of humans as interchangeable. They could be more likely to be psychopaths. <http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/PDF/Ba...izarro.2011.pdf>

That is one of the primary reasons (among others) that I love this philosophy.

I do not manipulate my feelings about and actions towards other people based on some non-specific golden rule. I let my feelings, observations, and pattern recognition guide me-- who is a friend? Who is not? And choose accordingly.

If you go around manipulating your feelings instead of feeling them, you have lost one of your key pieces of information about reality. Feelings are to guide you towards actions that lead to pleasure. Muck around with them, and who knows what you will choose. It's like deciding to wear rose-colored glasses, so then you don't know what color things really are.

Epicureans use feelings as a guide to act for pleasure-- Stoics change their attitudes instead of their circumstances.

My friends can be secure in knowing my love for them is based on reality, not abstract concepts.

Hiram, this is the major pitfall of proof-texting Epicurus. If you take things out of context, you can make it appear that Epicurus was a utilitarian, but if you look at the whole picture, he clearly was not. That would not be consistent with his Canon or physics. It would be internally inconsistent.

The same thing happens when you go picking "effortless pleasure " out of Philodemus despite

over and over again Epicurus saying pleasure, unmodified, is the goal. If he had meant his goal was only effortless pleasure, he would have said it every time.

Because concepts are inherently unable to encapsulate all of the reality they indicate, every philosophy based on concepts will have inevitable internal contradictions and paradoxes. Epicurus avoided that, because his method of truth relies on primary subjective information, not conceptual ideas. You can't have a paradox about the color you see, the sounds you hear, your feelings of pain or pleasure, or your intuitive pattern recognition.

It grieves me to see people missing some of the most radical and pleasure-giving truths Epicurus gave us.

Post by “Cassius” of December 25, 2019 at 4:18 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Hiram, this is the major pitfall of proof-texting Epicurus.

Elayne I think it is very clear from the context what you are talking about, but it might help the discussion if you could elaborate on the term "proof-texting" because it seems clear that you have a specific aspect in mind, and the method we use to evaluate the texts is so important. We have a chicken and egg problem that the best way to avoid following some fragment down a rabbit hole is to compare it against what we know about the philosophy in total, but the problem is that there is so much wide divergence that there is no agreement on what the philosophy as a whole means. That's why I find it useful to refer back to DeWitt's book and his summarizes, because in my experience his high-level analysis seems the best way to unite all the varying threads and fragments. (And of course that's why I think reference to DeWitt is so conspicuously absent and even frowned upon by modern academics -- they know that his high-level analysis makes their own views of Epicurus seem ridiculous, in many cases, by comparison.

Post by “Elayne” of December 25, 2019 at 7:11 PM

Sure, Cassius-- proof-texting is applied to the Bible but also to the kind of examination and discussion of documents that we are doing. It is when someone takes a quote out of context of the whole. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prooftext>

I don't actually agree that there is more than one overall way to interpret the high level view-- every mistake I have seen violates the most basic facts about reality, and generally even the people like Hiram who develop conflicting opinions don't disagree about the high level view, so far as I can see.

Hiram and Wilson agree there is only material reality, for instance-- no ideal realm, no concept-land. Well, the features of this strictly material reality can only support the conclusion that there can't be absolute morality, and that only subjective experience is possible. Those are not separate ideas-- they are inescapable consequences of reality. Epicurus did not list any part of the Canon that isn't subjective, and he clearly said there was no absolute morality. This is not vague. But it's also the only possible conclusion c/w physics.

But then people like Hiram proceed to violate those truths, while trying to pretend they are not. That is not a different understanding of Epicurus. It is simply incompatible with Epicurean Philosophy, and incompatible with reality.

Every error I have seen is similar. Conclusions drawn from one quote must always be looked at in light of the nature of reality. DeWitt did a great job with this, but anyone who fully grasps the basics of material reality and the implications of it should be immediately be able to tell when mistakes are made, *******_even without having read Epicurus_*******. That's a bold statement, right? I believe it is true.

I can say it because I understand the full implications of the science. So did Epicurus and that is why he doesn't make that kind of error. If he had, we would need to say he was wrong. He would have violated his own philosophy.

Post by “Elayne” of December 25, 2019 at 7:36 PM

This is why Epicurus kept saying, again and again, to study nature. His philosophy comes from that starting point. If people skip that or think they understand it when they really don't, then they will likely misunderstand everything else he said.

Whereas if you start from the basics about the universe, you will read the rest and it will fall into place for you like a beautiful jigsaw puzzle, where everything fits together. You will see clearly where other philosophies have erred and why.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2019 at 6:02 AM

Good to have you back Oscar!