

Thoughts and Concerns in Chapter 2

Post by "Don" of April 13, 2020 at 1:22 AM

I mentioned in a thread on Chapter 2 that I had concerns with DeWitt's penchant for making assertions with no context or citations or context. Here are several that I noted as I read Chapter 2.

Quote

P. 45 Quote: "[Epicureanism] attracted men like Lucretius, Horace, and Virgil. At a later time the Christians Arnobius and Lactantius knew their Epicureanism better than their Bibles. St. Augustine was tempted to award it the palm."

The phrase "knew their Epicureanism better than their Bibles" makes it sound - whether DeWitt meant it that way or not - like Arnobius and Lactantius had Epicurean affinities, but that is not the case. [Arnobius appears to have been familiar with Epicureanism](#) but was also a critic of the philosophy.

[Lactantius' De ira Dei](#) ("*On the Wrath of God*" or "*On the Anger of God*") was directed specifically against both Stoics and Epicureans. See also the [New Advent Encyclopedia: Chapter 4.— Of God and His Affections, and the Censure of Epicurus](#).

Quote

The treatise on The Anger of God is directed mainly against the tenets of the Epicureans and Stoics, who maintained that the deeds of men could produce no emotions of pleasure or anger in the Deity. Lactantius holds that the love of the good necessarily implies the hatred of evil; and that the tenets of these philosophers, as tending to overthrow the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, are subversive of the principles of true religion.

And while Augustine of Hippo wrote in his [Confessions \(Book VI, Chapter XVI\)](#):

Quote

Thine be the praise; unto thee be the glory, O Fountain of mercies. I became more wretched and thou didst come nearer. Thy right hand was ever ready to pluck me out of the mire and to cleanse me, but I did not know it. Nor did anything call me back from a still deeper plunge into carnal pleasure except the fear of death and of thy future

judgment, which, amid all the waverings of my opinions, never faded from my breast. And I discussed with my friends, Alypius and Nebridius, the nature of good and evil, maintaining that, in my judgment, Epicurus would have carried off the palm if I had not believed what Epicurus would not believe: that after death there remains a life for the soul, and places of recompense. And I demanded of them: "Suppose we are immortal and live in the enjoyment of perpetual bodily pleasure, and that without any fear of losing it--why, then, should we not be happy, or why should we search for anything else?" I did not know that this was in fact the root of my misery: that I was so fallen and blinded that I could not discern the light of virtue and of beauty which must be embraced for its own sake, which the eye of flesh cannot see, and only the inner vision can see. Nor did I, alas, consider the reason why I found delight in discussing these very perplexities, shameful as they were, with my friends. For I could not be happy without friends, even according to the notions of happiness I had then, and no matter how rich the store of my carnal pleasures might be. Yet of a truth I loved my friends for their own sakes, and felt that they in turn loved me for my own sake.

Augustine appears to be saying *in his youth* he thought "Epicurus would have carried off the palm" if he had believed in an afterlife. In fact, he appears to say that this kind of palm-worthy Epicureanism "was in fact the root of my misery." In other works, [Augustine firmly rejects both Stoicism and Epicureanism](#), but DeWitt - from my reading - implies that Augustine was almost an Epicurean.

Quote

P. 50 Quote: "...Epicurus taught men to defy, and with commendation of the Epicurean prayer for 'a sound mind in a sound body.'"

This is another of DeWitt's assertions that he doesn't seem to back up with any citation. "A sound mind in a sound body" is NOT an Epicurean prayer from any research I can see. That specific phrase is from the Satire X of Juvenal in the last stanza:

Quote

"Is there nothing then for which men shall pray? If you ask my counsel, you will leave it to the gods themselves to provide what is good for us, and what will be serviceable for our state; for, in place of what is pleasing, they will give us what is best, Man is dearer to them than he is to himself. Impelled by strong and blind desire, we ask for wife and offspring; but the gods know of what sort the sons, of what sort the wife, will be. Nevertheless that you may have something to pray for, and be able to offer to the shrines entrails and presaging sausages from a white porker, you should pray for a sound mind in a sound body; for a stout heart that has no fear of death, and deems length of days the least of Nature's gifts; that can endure any kind of toil; that knows

neither wrath or desire and thinks that the woes and hard labours of Hercules are better than the loves and the banquets and the down cushions of Sardanapalus. What I commend to you, you can give to yourself; for it is assuredly through virtue that lies the one and only road to a life of peace. Thou wouldst have no divinity, O Fortune, if we had but wisdom; it is we that make a goddess of thee, and place thee, in the skies."

The lines seem almost Stoic, not Epicurean, to me. And the sentiment if much older than Epicurus anyway [with similar thoughts written by Thales](#):

"What man is happy?" "He who has a healthy body, a resourceful mind and a docile nature."

Quote

Pg. 53 Quote: For instance, one of the teachings of Epicurus was the following: "Human nature is not to be coerced but persuaded."

DeWitt is quoting an excerpt from **VS 21** which doesn't appear to say anything about "Human nature" but rather "Nature." The text of VS 21 reads:

Quote

"Nature must be persuaded, not forced. And we will persuade nature by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the natural desires too if they cause no harm, but sharply rejecting the harmful desires. οὐ βιαστέον τὴν φύσιν ἀλλὰ πειστέον· πείσομεν δὲ τὰς ἀναγκαίαις ἐπιθυμίας ἐκπληροῦντες, τὰς τε φυσικὰς ἂν μὴ βλάπτωσι, τὰς δὲ βλαβερὰς πικρῶς ἐλέγχοντες."

Another translation reads:

Quote

XXI. We must not violate nature, but obey her; and we shall obey her if we fulfil the necessary desires and also the physical, if they bring no harm to us, but sternly reject the harmful.

The "nature" here is φύσιν which appears in other texts as well including:

Fr. 548. Happiness and bliss are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature. τὸ εὐδαιμον καὶ μακάριον [happiness and blessedness] οὐ χρημάτων πλῆθος οὐδὲ πραγμάτων ὄγκος οὐδ' ἀρχαί τινες ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀλυπία καὶ πραότης παθῶν καὶ διάθεσις ψυχῆς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὀρίζουσα.

And also PD 6:

As far as concerns protection from other men, any means of procuring this was a natural good [φύσιν ἀγαθόν]. Ἔνεκα τοῦ θαρρεῖν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἦν κατὰ φύσιν ἀγαθόν, ἐξ ὧν ἄν ποτε τοῦτο οἶός τ' ἦ παρασκευάζεσθαι.

And also PD 30:

Among *natural desires*, those that do not bring pain when unfulfilled and that require intense exertion arise from groundless opinion; and such desires fail to be stamped out not by nature but because of the groundless opinions of humankind. Ἐν αἷς τῶν φυσικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν, μὴ ἐπ' ἀλγοῦν δὲ ἐπαναγουσῶν ἐὰν μὴ συντελεσθῶσιν, ὑπάρχει ἡ σπουδὴ σύντονος, παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν αὐταὶ γίνονται, καὶ οὐ παρὰ τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν οὐ διαχέονται ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κενοδοξίαν.

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2020 at 8:34 AM

As far as Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine, I read the essence of the criticism to be that you are saying that DeWitt implies that they "had Epicurean affinities." I don't recall in my reading of DeWitt that this was confusing - everyone knows that the early "fathers" were bitter enemies of Epicurus, and DeWitt is just making the point that they sometimes expressed grudging respect for Epicurean social values. I did not come away from these references thinking that DeWitt was over the line or confusing the points, both of which (they were bitter enemies; they respected certain non-theological aspects) would appear to be true.

As far as a sound mind in sound body I thought I remember DeWitt saying explicitly that this phrasing does not occur, but that it is a logical implication of Epicurean philosophy, which it certainly seems to me to be. I wouldn't doubt also that Juvenal could sound Stoic, as I have not read him in detail, but I do not think that Juvenal's being of mixed mind would undercut DeWitt's point. Were it not for DeWitt stressing the differences between Epicurus and the Stoics, as he does throughout the book, many readers of Epicurus would be stuck in the modern "they're essentially the same" mindset.

As far as persuading "human nature" rather than nature" I recall that section being rather clear too, that he was making the point that Nature has no mind and is thus not something that can logically be persuaded, but that "human nature" is the sum of individual human minds and thus is the only logical meaning of a reference to "persuading."

In general sum at the moment I do want to say that I do think it is great that you are writing up these concerns in detail and I think it will be a valuable contribution to address any and all of them, so thank you! By no means do I think that the DeWitt book is perfect so it is helpful to be able to discuss and look into all details. The value of the DeWitt book is not that it is perfect, but that it raises issues and arguments that are almost totally excluded from contemporary writing about Epicurus. We just have to read and judge for ourselves how much value those arguments have. As for me, they are hugely valuable, and made the difference between my writing off Epicurus as a passive decadent, as I read Nietzsche to have done, vs. reading him as a philosophical and social revolutionary, worthy of deep and extensive study, as DeWitt saw him. Quite possibly it depends on one's background as to how one reacts to DeWitt's interest in comparing Epicurus with Christianity. My personal background led me to find his "St Paul and Epicurus" very interesting and helpful, but ultimately the implications of Epicurus far transcend the issue of whether early Christians viewed Epicurus as an antichrist. On this I take the side I perceive DeWitt and Nietzsche both to be on, which is that Epicurus was aggressively battling in pre-existing forms the worst corruptions that plague human existence, and that it is the opposite of the truth to see Epicurus as essentially leading a bunch of elderly people in a nursing home justifying their having wasted their lives by fancying that they should be satisfied with a cave, bread, water, and a couple of friends (the modern non-DeWitt consensus).

Post by "Cassius" of April 13, 2020 at 1:09 PM

This is what I recall as to "sound mind in sound body" --

From such materialistic reasoning arose the famous Epicurean doctrine of the dualistic good, health of body and health of mind. Even if no longer citable in so many words from the extant remains, it is abundantly assumed; it was absorbed anonymously into the stream of Western culture and survives in thought and literature down to our day. In Rome, where Epicurean teaching under Augustus was forced into anonymity, this ideal was publicized by the poet Horace, though verbally concealed with such painstaking felicity in a mosaic of diction that recognition escapes the commentators:

frui paratis et valido mihi,
Latoë, dones, at precor integra
cum mente.¹⁰

An expanded rendering is best: "I have made preparations for my old age. Grant me, child of Leto, health to enjoy them, and I beseech you, also with soundness of mind." The same dualism presents itself again in the famous satire of the incomparable Petronius: *bonam mentem bonamque valetudinem sibi optarunt*,¹¹ "they wished one another health of mind and health of body." It also furnished a memorable finale for the famous satire of **Juvenal**: *mens sana in corpore sano*.

I now realize that part of what we may be observing here is that DeWitt wrote the early chapters, as he says, following the model of Epicurus himself, starting with a synopsis of the whole, at a higher level of outline, while reserving the details of his analysis for later chapters. So the quoted part takes place much later in the book, under Chapter TWELVE - "The New Hedonism" - rather than in the highest-level outline, chapter one.

Rather than being a defect this is intentional and I think beneficial. The Epicurean model was to make sure that the final conclusions were not buried under mounds of academic verbiage. You play fair with the reader by telling him very early where you are going. Then if the reader wants to stick around for the evidence that supports the detail, then he can do so, but the primary outline of Epicurean philosophy is not buried under tons of words that only the hard-core academic is going to dig out. That's the way life is - we only get a short time to engage with any one person before they tend to move along to something else, so you need to tell them as quickly as possible what is important about the detail, if they choose to pursue it.

So that's the most general answer to this comment:

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

DeWitt's penchant for making assertions with no context or citations or context.

- yes that's the "multi-level outline" model as suggested by Epicurus himself in the letter to Herodotus.

Post by "Don" of April 13, 2020 at 3:52 PM

Thanks again! I am finding DeWitt an interesting intellectual and philosophical endeavor. I would agree with you that:

Quote

The value of the DeWitt book is not that it is perfect, but that it raises issues and arguments that are almost totally excluded from contemporary writing about Epicurus. We just have to read and judge for ourselves how much value those arguments have.

And I greatly appreciate your openness to addressing the concerns I posted here and in Chapter 1's thread! I see this as an expression of Epicurean frank speech among friends of the Garden. Thank you!

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2020 at 8:09 PM

If I am delayed in responding to more posts in the next 24 hours or so don't be concerned:-) My area had a tornado come through with a wide power outage and I am having to ration my cell phone battery!

Post by “Godfrey” of April 13, 2020 at 8:18 PM

Be safe!

Post by “Don” of April 13, 2020 at 9:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If I am delayed in responding to more posts in the next 24 hours or so don't be concerned:-) My area had a tornado come through with a wide power outage and I am having to ration my cell phone battery!

OMG Take care and I hope everything is alright soon!

Post by “Cassius” of April 14, 2020 at 6:29 PM

I am sorry to have been away but my power has just now returned after being off for most of two days. I will catch up as quickly as I can!

Post by “Don” of April 14, 2020 at 7:07 PM

Glad to hear your power is back! Hope that was the extent of your inconvenience! Welcome back.