

# Comments and Thoughts on DeWitt, Chapter 3

Post by “Don” of April 14, 2020 at 4:16 PM

As I continue my romp through DeWitt, I've assembled the following thoughts and comments on Chapter 3:

Quote

Quote P. 61: Epicurus, in turn, becoming the pupil of Nausiphanes, conceived a like admiration of Pyrrho's conduct "and was continually asking for more information about him."<sup>27</sup> Here may consequently be discerned one possible origin for the famous Epicurean doctrine of ataraxy or tranquility of soul. The practice of Pyrrho was closer to this than to the cheerfulness (euthumia) of Democritus, although Epicurus cultivated this also. It is to be remembered too that Pyrrho recommended abstention from public life (apragmosune), which should remind us that Epicurus disapproved of all public careers.

Thanks, DeWitt! I finally get to dig into another part of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives!* 😊 Footnote 27 refers to **DL IX.64**:

Quote

"...and [Nausiphanes] would often remark that Epicurus, greatly admiring Pyrrho's way of life, regularly asked him for information about Pyrrho,..."

For more on Pyrrho, we have a good-sized section in **Chapter 9** of **DL**. So, if Epicurus found Pyrrho's life so admirable, it would probably profit us to see why. I'm assuming Pyrrho will come up again in DeWitt, but this is an interesting part of Epicurus' **origin story** which makes him sound like a superhero 😊 but, if the sandal fits...

Quote

Quote P. 63: In the case of Nausiphanes there is another item of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (Platonists) will think me really a pupil of the 'lung-fish' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom." <sup>34</sup> The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics, <sup>35</sup> but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality

make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shadier side of student life among the Greeks.

This initially struck me as holier-than-thou judgementalism on the part of DeWitt, especially the "shadier side of student life." I decided to check the Footnotes 34 and 35 citations which reference **Usener 114** which refers to **Sextus Empiricus, Against the Professors, I.3** (Translated at [Attalus.org](http://Attalus.org) and the original in [Usener](#) and another translation at [Stoic Therapy](#)). The term DeWitt translates as "certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing" is, in the original (transliterated), **kraipalonton** from [κραιπάλη](#) which means "bout of drinking; intoxication, inebriation; hangover." SO, DeWitt's translation is not far from the mark although it seems "hangover students" might be better than "stupid" although those with hangovers are not known to be at the top of their game. It seems other translators are less forthcoming or literal than DeWitt was here. So, **I'll tip my hat to DeWitt on this one.**

However, the second part of DeWitt's translation is less cut-and-dried:

Quote

"For [Nausiphanes] was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom."

The original describes Nausiphanes as a **πονηρός άνθρωπος** (poneros anthropos) which appears to be more "[good-for-nothing, worthless, knavish, base, cowardly person](#)." I'm just wondering - PURE conjecture - if DeWitt is reading this as something like **πορνηρός\*** (porneros\* not attested but that extra "r" would make it look connected with **porne** "prostitute" or **porneion** "brothel") to get at DeWitt's "immoral". Also, DeWitt's "addicted" is **ἐπιτηδευκῶ** from [ἐπιτηδεύω](#) which appears to simply mean "to pursue or practise a thing, make a practice of, make it one's business." As I've said before, I am NOT any kind of classical scholar or any more than a novice student of Ancient Greek, but I don't think it should be hard to find a definition near to "addicted" using standard reference works.

So, it would appear to me, that Epicurus was saying that Nausiphanes' students were all hungover, and the teacher himself was "pursuing" things that didn't lead one, in the end, to wisdom "**και ἐπιτηδευκῶς τοιαύτα ἔων οὐ δυνατόν εἰς σοφίαν ἐλθεῖν**." I don't see a connection between the students being out drinking and engaged in sex (which would have most likely been part of their activities on some nights) and Nausiphanes' pursuit of certain subjects. I read this as Epicurus saying that he was disillusioned with Nausiphanes because his students didn't give the teacher any respect for the material being taught (they showed up hungover!) and Nausiphanes himself not doing anything worthwhile, in the eyes of Epicurus anyway.

Quote

Quote P. 66: states. In order to escape from these logical dead ends Epicurus worked his way to a novel division of pleasures into those that were basic and those that were decorative.<sup>48</sup> The pleasure of being sane and in health is basic and can be enjoyed continually.

I found the designation of pleasures as "basic" or "decorative" novel so followed up on Footnote 48 which cites [DL's Live II: 11](#). *DL II: 11* doesn't say anything about pleasure but does mention Metrodorus of Lampsacus. The word usually used to describe "empty" pleasures in the Greek is **κενός** but I can't see an alternative definition as "decorative" so I was both curious and amused by that description. If someone has a better source for "decorative" pleasures, by all means please share! This is also another "sane mind/sane body" allusion.

Quote

Quote P. 67: This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

I'm actually **giving kudos to DeWitt on this one**. I like the way he describes that a "nonpurposive" universe can produce a "purposive" being. Thumbs up!

Quote

Quote P. 68: "From the outset you must believe that no other end is gained from the knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether viewed in their associations [with the astral deities] or by themselves, than peace of soul and an abiding faith." 56

The "abiding faith" struck me as another potential way for DeWitt to sneak in the Epicureanism/Christianity parallel, so I took a look at **Footnote 56** which references [DL X:85](#):

Quote

"In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm conviction."

"Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν μὴ ἄλλο τι τέλος ἐκ<sup>132</sup> τῆς περὶ μετεώρων γνώσεως εἶτε κατὰ συναφὴν λεγομένων εἶτε αὐτοτελῶς νομίζειν εἶναι ἥπερ ἀταραξίαν καὶ πίστιν βέβαιον, καθάπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν."

DeWitt's "abiding faith" and the Perseus Project's "firm conviction" both translate **πίστιν βέβαιον**. **πίστιν** is indeed defined as ["trust in others, 'faith' \(translated into Latin as fides\),](#)

[belief](#)" so "faith" is a fine translation, but I would prefer the other one's "firm conviction." DeWitt's translation just gave me pause in light of his "Epicureanism is hiding in Christianity" proclivities. **βέβαιον** is simply "firm, steady". Basically, Epicurus is saying this knowledge should give one peace of mind (ἀταραξία in the original) and a firm trust that it's the truth.

#### Quote

Quote P. 68: This new note is promptly and beautifully struck in the opening words of his exhortation to philosophy, the letter to Menoecus, which was perhaps intended to compete with the famous Protrepticus of Aristotle: "There is no one for whom the hour has not yet come nor for whom the hour has passed for attending to the health of his soul." 57

This is a novel translation of the beginning of the letter to Menoikos and, I'll give DeWitt kudos for the poetic wordsmithing. Now, the original actually uses **νέος** "young/youth" and **γέρων** "old man" so DeWitt's translation is more paraphrase than literal, but that's certainly an acceptable path to take, basically the difference between [formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence in Bible translations](#).

I had to also look up the **Protrepticus** of Aristotle ([reconstructed version](#)) since I was unfamiliar with that work. It sounds like it was written [to encourage the young to study philosophy](#) and it is a lost work of that philosopher.

#### Quote

P. 69 Quote: sage. It must consequently be inferred that before leaving Colophon he had already worked out to its pragmatic implications the old analogy between philosophy and medicine, that all human beings, regardless of age or sex, stood in need of health of mind and the services of the teacher no less than of health of body and the services of the physician.

This appears to hint again at that "Epicurean prayer" notion of "a sound mind in a sound body." I'm still not sold on that characterization of that saying; however, I think **DeWitt does a good job here** of summing up the universal nature of Epicurean philosophy and the medical analogy.

So, we're ending the chapter on a high note 😊 On to Chapter 4!

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 14, 2020 at 6:41 PM**

1 - Lots of great comments -- thanks!

2 - Your remarks remind me that I have an academic review published years ago of DeWitt's book, and in it the reviewer called DeWitt's way with phrasing by the term -- DeWitticisms 😊  
From the pictures of DeWitt at Victoria College it does appear to me that he thought he had a wry way with phrasing.

3 - Now that you are into the detailed sections you'll find the footnotes you were looking for, so I hope you will continue to post your findings in them, because I confess many of the footnotes I have never looked into, so this is very valuable.

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### Post by “Don” of April 14, 2020 at 7:06 PM

Oh, DeWitticism!! That's a keeper 😊

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### Post by “Elli” of April 17, 2020 at 4:30 AM

#### [Quote from Eugenios](#)

The original describes Nausiphanes as a πονηρός άνθρωπος (poneros anthropos) which appears to be more "good-for-nothing, worthless, knavish, base, cowardly person." I'm just wondering - PURE conjecture - if DeWitt is reading this as something like πορνηρός\* (porneros\* not attested but that extra "r" would make it look connected with porne "prostitute" or porneion "brothel") to get at DeWitt's "immoral".

First of all, and of what I've checked and realized, Norman DeWitt knew excellent the greek language and the complexity of its grammar and syntax. And especially for understanding deeply the Epicurean Philosophy, he was able to read the ancient greek texts from the prototype without wearing the stoic glasses like Bailey's. 😊

So, in this case, and as far as I know, there is not such a noun as "πορνηρός" with that extra "ρ/r" in greek language. The noun that derives from the verb "πορνεύω" is "πορνευτής" or "πορνικός", and not "πορνηρός".

For the noun "**πονηρός**", there is the ES XLVI.(46) in which Epicurus uses this word in plural : "Τὰς φαύλας συνηθείας ὥσπερ ἄνδρας **πονηροὺς** πολὺν χρόνον μέγα βλάψαντες τελείως ἐκδιώκομεν".

And that means : Let us utterly drive from us our bad habits as if they were evil men who have long done us great harm.

The word "πονηρός" in greek language has for its synonyms, as the english say : as "sly", "cunning", "deceptive", "dishonest", and the "devious". 😊

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 17, 2020 at 6:39 AM**

I don't want to distract the focus here on Chapter 3, but the exchange above between Elli and Eugenios about DeWitt's translations recalls to my mind that I have an article by DeWitt that focuses on a subject that I know is very interesting to Elli - the Canon of Truth. In this article DeWitt suggests an interpretation of a passage in which he directly disputes Bailey and Hicks. Since you guys are considering DeWitt's scholarship and opinions I thought you might find this short article interesting at this point:

[Norman DeWitt - Epicurean Kinetics](#)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 17, 2020 at 7:08 AM**

One fascinating article deserves another, so I posted a second from my collection, on a similar topic. You guys will have to be the judge of DeWitt's translation abilities - this sounds very reasonable to me, but there's no way I can second-guess it as right or wrong from my own translation abilities:

[Article by Norman DeWitt on Present Impressions of the Mind](#)

[Also please correct me as to what I should call this - I can add the original Greek title but I don't want to leave the Greek alone without translation. So what is the best English rendition? "Present Impressions of the mind"? Or something else entirely? I guess the proper rendition is really the subject of the article!](#)

Or maybe I should put "Peri Fantasia"?

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**Post by "Elli" of April 17, 2020 at 7:28 AM**

Sorry Cassius, I can't see the image with DeWitt's article,

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**Post by "Don" of April 17, 2020 at 8:15 AM**

Thanks, [Cassius](#), for the articles. I'm looking forward to reading them.

While I have respect for DeWitt's credentials as a classical scholar and translator, I admit I'm somewhat skeptical of his proclivity for saying, in effect "everyone has been mistranslating [fill in the blank] and I'm the *only one* who *really* figured out what it means." Especially if the novel translation also fits with an unorthodox or idiosyncratic interpretation. I'm not saying that's always the case with him, but that is the kind of thing that give me pause.

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 17, 2020 at 9:09 AM**

[Don](#) - Oh absolutely it pays to be skeptical, of both DeWitt, AND of the "orthodox and syncretic interpretation" -- especially when the "orthodox and syncretic" interpretation leads to a view that harmonizes Epicurus with the Platonists and the Stoics, given that the Platonists and Stoics of the time, who had access to much better information than do we, reach very ANTI-harmonizing conclusions themselves (about each other, in denouncing each other).

And as another observation, it pays to consider that someone could reasonably take the position that the existing academic consensus is terribly wrong, especially since that appears to be exactly what Epicurus himself did in rejecting many of the Platonic and Aristotelian foundations of the philosophy of his time.

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 17, 2020 at 9:10 AM**

[Elli](#) is this link not working for you? [Article by Norman DeWitt: Epicurus, ΠερίΦαντασίας \(Present Impressions of the Mind\)](#)

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### **Post by “Elli” of April 17, 2020 at 9:26 AM**

[Don](#) χάρειν (greetings),

I would like to say that for someone to be skeptical and doubtful for a professor inside the Academic field who claimed that he understood Epicurean Philosophy deeply, is not a bad tactic, but the effort to find errors where there are not, it is not creative and beneficial, and for yourself and for the others like yourself.

The clinging to a deep analysis word by word and even me that I am greek, frankly, I can't understand all the greek texts, but the whole picture is clear, WHEN the concepts of the words as they synthesized and connected are giving you the same whole picture. In a few words, the whole meaning of any text has a dynamic if it can be applied in the reality of life. Because the Hellenes first they lived, and then they wrote whatever they lived.

Where do you find DeWitt any trace for leading you to the imaginative things and issues? And where DeWitt claims that Logos /abstract logic, as well as the elimination of desires, and pressure of feelings are the issues that Epicurus is speaking for? E.g. please read carefully for making a syncretism, on the basis of the first principles of EP, among Baileys' translation and DeWitts' translation on the letter to Meneoceus. There you'll realize some of the shades on differences that exist between a stoic and an epicurean man. 😊

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### **Post by “Don” of April 18, 2020 at 11:47 AM**

I certainly appreciate your perspectives. Thank you for taking the time to share them! I concur that it's important to not get hung up on details and miss the "big picture." I also freely admit that this may as well be my first reading of DeWitt as I only vaguely remember passages from my first reading as I'm reading this time. And I haven't even gotten to the meat of the philosophy chapters yet. You all have had years with DeWitt and so have a much broader perspective on his work. I hope you'll be patient with me as I dig into the rest of EAHP.

I also fully agree that a syncretic, cafeteria-style philosophy isn't worth much. Either a philosophy or "art of life" stands on its own or not. I apologize if I gave the impression I was going down that road. That is not my intention.

All that being said, I do not wish to be a DeWittean Epicurean, a Baileyan Epicurean, a Gassendian Epicurean, a Jeffersonian Epicurean, a Stoic Epicurean, but an Epicurean. I want to understand what Epicurus, Metrodorus, Philodemus, Lucretius, et al. taught and wrote to the best of my ability, using all the best scholarship available from multiple sources and using the example of Epicurus to question accepted wisdom and "culture" and to come to my own conclusions.

So, personally, I am withholding my judgement of DeWitt's claim of understanding Epicurus' philosophy better than any others. I definitely agree that academic consensus doesn't necessarily equate with "Truth." I also don't necessarily think the maverick freethinking scholar is always right either. DeWitt's agenda to find Epicureanism hidden in Christianity at every turn raises red flags for me. I fear he may try to make connections where none actually exist or are tenuous at best or have multiple valid explanations (like explanations for meteorological events in Lucretius). However, I *am* looking forward to digging into his anti-Platonic arguments. Epicurus was definitely no fan of the prevailing educational system of his day and it makes sense that he would work to counter that.

This is why I firmly believe, no matter the difficulty, that it is so important to look at the original works (on digitised manuscripts if possible), to compare numerous translations, and to consult authoritative dictionaries and other reference works. Is it a long involved process? Sure! Lifelong maybe. But I want to understand *why* translators and scholars chose the words they did. Because the words of Epicurus and Lucretius and Philodemus et al. - extant and buried in their critics - are the only connection we have to them. I'm reluctant to accept any one person's filter (other than Epicurus' 😊) through which to see this philosophy. If I'm going to make decisions about how to live my life using this philosophy, I'm going to base them on the words of Epicurus (and the other classical Epicureans) as I can reasonably come to understand them. I will gladly and enthusiastically accept the help of fellow aspiring Epicureans online. I will gladly and enthusiastically accept the help of scholars in the field - DeWitt included, of course! - but I'm going to check footnotes and citations and hold their feet to the proverbial fire to see if their conclusions are confirmed by the words in the original texts that they cite. If they're adding attributes that aren't there or making broad assumptions or trying to make tenuous connections to disparate facts, I'm going to be skeptical of other claims they make that aren't so easily questioned.

And I'm looking forward to taking pleasure in the journey! 😊

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**Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2020 at 2:53 PM**

### [Quote from Eugenios](#)

DeWitt's agenda to find Epicureanism hidden in Christianity at every turn raises red flags for me.

This is a very good point, and definitely something to be concerned about. In my reading, however, through the full book and through his "St Paul and Epicurus" and his academic articles, I find something very interesting to me: I find ZERO in the way of "proselytizing" or even inuendo that Christianity is correct and Epicurus is wrong. Zero. Absolutely zero. The favorable perspectives are always (I should say almost but I really don't remember any exceptions) limited to psychological issues related to friendliness and neighborliness and social concern, or comparisons of "salvation" perspectives, indicating again psychological goals. NEVER to my recollection does DeWitt make a comment that really reveals what his own perspective on religion is, or that his (DeWitt's) personal perspective is superior, or even relevant, to Epicurus' perspective.

So I think I can reassure you that if you are expecting that to pop out of each succeeding chapter, or even in St Paul and Epicurus, you need not be overly concerned.

This raises the issue of what DeWitt's own viewpoint really was, and why he has this interest in Christian analogies. I don't think we'll ever know for sure, but I can't help but suspect that the it is equally or not more possible that DeWitt is using these analogies as a way to draw in religion-oriented people who might not otherwise be interested in Epicurus. He certainly goes in that direction (and succeeds, I think) in St Paul and Epicurus, where he explains many new testament references as being addressed to those who understood Epicurean philosophy. And in those explanations (such as the reference to the "weak and beggarly elements") I think DeWitt makes valid points.

And no doubt there was some measure of "prudence" on his part in 1930's Canada that he not take himself entirely outside the existing societal framework, which I presume was still then largely Christian.

My personal guess - and it is just a guess - is that DeWitt knew exactly what he was doing, and that his regular references to Christian analogies were conscious decisions to (1) reach more readers, (2) maintain his own respectability, and (3) follow the actual facts, which are pretty much with him, as far as he goes.

And that's consistent with what I would expect someone in his position to do, much in the same vein as Frances Wright's book (which I hope you have on your reading list). Once you identify Epicurus as a revolutionary philosophical figure who turns upside down virtually every aspect of "establishment" thinking, and once you identify what you believe are chronic misrepresentations and misunderstandings calculated by Epicurus' enemies to bury his teachings as far out of sight as possible, it's hard to resist a significant degree of evangelical spirit. It's important to keep

that within bounds so as to maintain one's credibility and not get carried away, but I think that's what we see in DeWitt. And in my view he succeeds better than any book I know of -- better even than Frances Wright's book, which targets a significantly different audience.

As for the rest of your comments I can't think of a better way to attack this than the way you are doing, and it's going to be very valuable for us all if you share as many of your observations as possible. As you say we're not interested in being Bailey Epicureans or DeWitt Epicureans - we want to know first and foremost what Epicurus himself taught, and then we can judge for ourselves from that.

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### **Post by “Don” of April 18, 2020 at 5:25 PM**

[Cassius](#) , **thank you SO much** for your comments!! I can definitely see where you're coming from in explaining DeWitt's "Epicureanism in Christianity" directions and think you make some very valid conjectures and provide hearty food for thought. I especially liked your...

Quote

...hard to resist a significant degree of evangelical spirit.

Amen! 😊

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2020 at 6:45 PM**

It's what we see in Lucretius too, I think. It's still hard for us to assess the references to Epicurus being "godlike" but I do think the perspective of considering him to be a "father figure" does ring true. And it apparently continued to ring true as late as the time of Lucian, and his "strike a blow for Epicurus" quote that we have on the top of the first page of this website.