

Some Thoughts on Chapter 4 of DeWitt

Post by "Don" of May 19, 2020 at 6:07 PM

This was an interesting chapter with much to dig into, both DeWitt's text itself and intriguing references. I found this enjoyable... except for those last couple pages. Consider that a teaser. Here we go...

Quote

p. 73: This is not the limit of our information, however. It is fairly plain that Epicurus chose for his assault upon the Mytilenean philosophers one of the more irritating of all forms of argument, the "sorites syllogism."

I had no idea what the "sorites syllogism" was. [Wikipedia had a basic introduction to polysyllogism](#). "A sorites is a specific kind of polysyllogism in which the predicate of each proposition is the subject of the next premise."

On p. 78, DeWitt talks about Origen writing about Epicurus penchant "to sprinkle his writings liberally with the names of the Greek gods. I found this intriguing and followed up on the citation for that sentence has (Footnote 27). Footnote 27 cites Usener 389:

Quote

U389: Dionysius the Episcopalian, On Nature, by way of Eusebius of Caesarea, Preparation for the Gospel, XIV 26, 2 p. 779A: And moreover he {Epicurus} inserts in his own books countless oaths and adjurations addressed to those who are nothing to us, swearing continually "No, by Zeus," and "Yes, by Zeus," and adjuring his readers and opponents in argument "in the name of the gods," having, I suppose, no fear himself of perjury nor trying to frighten them, but uttering this as an empty, and false, and idle, and unmeaning appendage to his speeches, just as he might hawk and spit, and turn his face, and wave his hand. Such an unintelligible and empty piece of acting on his part was his mentioning the name of the gods.

Usener fragment 389 (i.e., footnote 27) doesn't cite Origen, but DeWitt may be referring to others nearby in the Usener list which cite Origen:

Quote

U390: Origen, Against Celsus, VII.66, [p. 386 Hoesch.]: And the charge of folly applies not only to those who offer prayers to images, but also to such as pretend to do so in compliance with the example of the multitude: and to this class belong the Peripatetic philosophers and the followers of Epicurus and Democritus. For there is no falsehood or pretense in the soul which is possessed with true piety towards God.

On Page 79 there is a lengthy paragraph that talks about Theodorus, "an egotistical and insolent hedonist of Cyrene." Footnote 32 refers to Epicurus "filching part of his [Theodorus's] doctrine." The footnotes in this section cite Diogenes Laertius 2.97:

Quote

"The Theodoreans derived their name from Theodorus, who has already been mentioned, and adopted his doctrines. Theodorus was a man who utterly rejected the current belief in the gods. And I have come across a book of his entitled Of the Gods which is not contemptible. From that book, they say, Epicurus borrowed most of what he wrote on the subject."

That paragraph also mentions Hipparchia (footnote 33: DL 6.97) who, though not an Epicurean, sounds interesting after looking at her section in Diogenes Laertius:

Quote

DL 6.97: "...[Hipparchia] appeared at the banquet given by Lysimachus, and there put down Theodorus, known as the atheist, by means of the following sophism. Any action which would not be called wrong if done by Theodorus, would not be called wrong if done by Hipparchia. Now Theodorus does no wrong when he strikes himself : therefore neither does Hipparchia do wrong when she strikes Theodorus. He had no reply wherewith to meet the argument, but tried to strip her of her cloak. But Hipparchia showed no sign of alarm or of the perturbation natural in a woman."

On p. 83, DeWitt provides an example of one of my frustrations with him. He states a "fact" without any citations to sources:

Quote

P. 83 Quote: "Epicurus even went so far as to declare that only those who spoke Greek were capable of philosophizing, and Philodemus would have it that the gods themselves spoke some form of the Greek language."

Why couldn't he put a footnote in there? Those both seem like a pretty big deal in light of the evangelical nature of Epicurean philosophy. DeWitt's articles are referenced to a fault. This

book, however, has him simply stating things that are obviously from somewhere. It's just aggravating.

This was also the first chapter where I highlighted a reference to Croenert. (p. 83, footnote 54, Croenert, p.4-8):

Quote

"Extant in papyri are also remnants of attacks upon the Lysis and the Euthydemus of Plato."

This refers to [Kolotes Und Menedemos \(1906\) by Wilhelm Crönert](#) which is available on Internet Archive. I don't read German, unfortunately, but it looks like it could be interesting.

And, finally, we come to my pet peeve with DeWitt with his Epicureanism hidden in Christianity proclivities. It just all seems so superfluous in this particular work. Which is why DeWitt decided to write the St. Paul one, I'm sure. He had much more to say (unfortunately). In any case, I highlighted two sections in particular. First:

Quote

P. 85: "It may be observed in passing that St. Paul quoted the words Peace and Safety as catchwords of the Epicureans, to whom he refused the honor of mention by name. 69 In this collocation Peace signified harmonious relations with neighbors while Safety meant the security of the man as a citizen, the sort of safety that Paul himself enjoyed by virtue of Roman citizenship."

This drives me crazy! Paul doesn't mention who is speaking by name. So HOW does DeWitt have such certainty that he's referring to Epicureans?? I can read that passage of Paul's and have a completely different interpretation if Epicureans aren't mentioned!! The text is [Thessalonians 5:3](#). See also this in [Speech-in-Character, Diatribe, and Romans 3:1-9: Who's Speaking When and Why It Matters by Justin King](#) for different interpretations.

And, this section in DeWitt:

Quote

P.88: "Thus the epistles of Epicurus seem to have been unique and must have furnished the model for New Testament writers. One immediate purpose of the latter was to create for the benefit of converts from Epicureanism a substitute literature which should preserve the form of the texts with which they were familiar. Common to both was the practice of addressing each epistle to an individual or a group, though the intention was that copies should be distributed among circles of adherents

everywhere."

Maybe I'm missing something here, but, to me, this appears to just be letter writing that DeWitt is referring to! You address it to a person or group. There was a robust letter writing tradition in the ancient world even as a literary genre. One need look no further than the *Letters* of Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD). DeWitt makes it sound like Epicurus invented letter writing.

I hated to end this section on a downer when I found so much else interesting in this chapter. DeWitt's scholarship is evident in his works, but I still find some of his habits frustrating.

Looking forward to Chapter 5. Onto Athens!

Post by "Cassius" of May 20, 2020 at 5:18 AM

Great observations, Eugenios, and those are very helpful to add here. I know when i first read the book that I did not go through the footnotes systematically so it is very helpful that you are doing so and posting about them.

i do think I remember also thinking that the letter-writing comment seemed stretched, so I am in pretty much full agreement with your comments here. I think the detail on the gods speaking Greek is in the chapter on the true Piety, citing Cicero's 'On the Nature of the Gods, but again I agree that more detailed footnoting throughout the book would have made our job today a lot easier.