

Notes and Musings on Chapter 6

Post by "Don" of July 7, 2020 at 5:35 PM

A few thoughts on Chapter 6. Some very enlightening, some aggravating. How's that for a teaser!

Quote

QUOTE P. 106: [Epicurus's] objective was not the production of a good citizen but a happy and contented man. For practical purposes this happiness was defined as health of mind and health of body. The famous prayer for mens sana in corpore sano, "a sound mind in a sound body," recommended by Juvenal, is genuine Epicureanism.

This is another example of DeWitt's penchant for just stating something as fact with no back-up. He called "mens sana in corpore sano" (in English) an "Epicurean prayer" back in Chapter 2 and I addressed my misgivings about that [elsewhere in the forum](#)

Quote

QUOTE P. 107: [Epicurus] was genuinely pious and insisted upon employing of the gods only such language as was consistent with their perfection of happiness, which was to him a sort of majesty. The proper feeling toward them was reverence. Quite rightly, then, he is reported as saying: "The wise man will experience a higher enjoyment than the rest of men in the public spectacles." The pleasure here described is of the nobler sort; it is euprosune; it is best understood as having reference to the emotional uplift, a sort of communion with the divine.

DeWitt writes this in a section where he is talking about Epicurus's preference for different musical styles . However, I addressed the "public spectacles" quote from Diogenes Laertius's Lives in [my new translation of Book X.117-121](#). My research led me to believe that that phrase should be better translated as "The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation, speculation, and theorizing" when looking at the other uses of the same Greek word within DL, Chapter X. I actually hate trying to go head-to-head with DeWitt when it comes to translation (He could without a doubt translate rings around me!), but I would beg to differ here. And, that being the case, this quote doesn't really address what he means it to here.

Quote

QUOTE P. 107: He assumed that poetry will be read, and

in the Epicurean school as described by Philodemus there is mention of a philologus, which means a teacher of literature.

DeWitt's source for "philologus" meaning "teacher of literature" is DeWitt: N. W. DeWitt, *Classical Philology* (1936) 207-208; Philonides at the court of Antiochus Epiphanes was surrounded by a throng of them: *Rheinisches Museum* 56(1901) 145.

It doesn't necessarily mean a "teacher of literature." In fact, that isn't one of the [definitions in LSJ](#). It can mean anything from studious, literary, student, scholar, or even "fond of speaking" when used in relation to Socrates. So, I'm dubious of the "teacher of literature" translation here.

Quote

QUOTE P. 109: The belief that according to Epicurean doctrine the soul was incapable of existing outside of the body was considered no obstacle. Instead, the thinker was thought of as projecting his mind into space.

This quote is in the section concerning Epicurean "orgies" and the "flight of the mind." I found this section very interesting, especially since Lucretius (I believe) uses this metaphor of flying through the universe to uncover the truth of reality. So, DeWitt is explaining that it's simply through your mind that you explore the universe. It's not supernatural! Just using your intellect to wonder, study, and muse. I think it's also interesting when he talks of the Epicurean "orgies." DeWitt does a good job of explaining that these are "orgies" (not as we think of them) but "mysteries" as in the mystery religions of the ancient world. The section goes on...

Quote

QUOTE P. 109-110: Here are the words of Metrodorus, which at the same time designate the teachings of Epicurus as "orgies," that is, mysteries, and indicate the heavenly trend: "Let us crown fine actions by another — only not sinking downward with feelings common to the mob — and, shaking free of this life upon the earth, rise to the divinely revealed orgies of Epicurus." 13

Citation 13 refers to *Against Colotes*: 13 Plut., adv. Colot. 1117b

Quote

QUOTE: And yet Metrodorus, writing to Timarchus, says: 'Let us do some extraordinarily excellent thing, not suffering ourselves to be plunged in reciprocal affections, but

retiring from this low and terrestrial life, and elevating ourselves to the truly holy and divinely revealed ceremonies and mysteries of Epicurus.'

' ἄλλ' ὅμως ὁ μὲν Μητρόδωρος τὸν Τίμαρχον παρακαλῶν φησι 'ποιήσωμέν τι καλὸν ἐπὶ καλοῖς, μονοноῦ καταδύντες ταῖς ὁμοιοπαθείαις καὶ ἀπαλλαγέντες ἐκ τοῦ χαμαὶ βίου εἰς τὰ Ἐπικούρου ὡς ἀληθῶς θεόφαντα ὄργια'

Perseus Digital Library gives [definitions of ὄργια "orgia"](#) I'm excerpting a section of the orgia definition below to highlight Demeter. DeWitt mentions Demeter in chapter 5 in reference to the choice of the 20th. I wonder if this is yet another connection to the choice to celebrate on the 20th hiding in Metrodorus' choice of words? **ὄργια** , **ἰων**, **τά**, A. secret rites, secret worship, practised by the initiated, a post-Hom[eric]. word ; used of the worship of Demeter at Eleusis; of the rites of the Cabeiri and Demeter Achaia; of Orpheus; of Eumolpus; of Cybele: most freq. of the rites of Dionysus. II. generally, rites, sacrifices. 2. metaph., mysteries, without reference to religion.

Quote

QUOTE P. 111: The title chosen for his famous collection of forty doctrines was Kuriai Doxai. The precise meaning of this has remained so uncertain that a variety of renderings are in circulation from the pens of the best scholars: Peculiar Propositions, Established Beliefs, [Principal Doctrines](#), Fundamental Tenets, Cardinal Principles, Sovran Maxims, Authentic Doctrines, Pensees Mattresses. In this book they are being called Authorized Doctrines, an approximate rendering of Cicero's maxime ratae sententiae, "doctrines specially endorsed"; Cicero was near the truth in believing them so named "as being of supreme importance for the happy life."

It seemed to me that DeWitt is making more of this than he needs to. From my perspective, all these are - in one way or another - synonyms of each other: propositions, beliefs, doctrines, tenets, etc.; established, principal, fundamental, cardinal, etc. There was no question in Epicurus's mind. He called them Kuriai Doxai, so I think we should try and keep all those English synonyms in mind when we talk about them. Summary: They're important!

Quote

QUOTE P. 114: The nature of the memorial writings has been completely overlooked but they belong no less logically in the scheme than the two previous classes. One of their aims was to confer a new kind of immortality upon deceased members of the circle. It was the teaching of Epicurus that happiness was attainable; it was possible for mankind within the limits of mortal life to approximate all but completely to the happiness of the gods. This happiness embraced two elements, blissfulness and incorruptibility. Although the soul of man was corruptible, it was still possible for the

memory of him to be made imperishable in the records and in the rites of the Epicurean brotherhood. It was with the aim of securing this new kind of immortality for himself and his associates that Epicurus established during his lifetime the regular celebration of the twentieth in each month and provided for its perpetuation in his will. These celebrations were memorial sacraments and the memoirs of deceased members are comparable to the Acts of the Apostles and the Lives of the Saints in the Christian church.

I found this section interesting... and maybe this is the ONE place I'll let DeWitt make his Christianity comparison with the Acts of the Apostles. The Epicurean and Christian writings do seem to have served similar purposes but one need not have been the inspiration of the other.

Quote

QUOTE P. 116: As a rare exception to this principle of dividing the labor may be mentioned the approval given to the brilliant courtesan Leontion in writing against the living Theophrastus, head of Aristotle's school. 39

While Leontion had to be educated, literate, and well respected by Epicurus, DeWitt's choice of "brilliant" just strikes me as his penchant for his historical fiction. No doubt the story of Leontion *would* make an interesting novel! But the citation itself gives the *barest* of details. Citation 39 refers to Cicero and Pliny (Cic., *Natura deorum* 1.33.93; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Praefat.) Pliny states:

Quote

I, indeed, freely admit, that much may be added to my works; not only to this, but to all which I have published. By this admission I hope to escape from the carping critics, and I have the more reason to say this, because I hear that there are certain Stoics and Logicians, and also Epicureans (from the Grammarians I expected as much), who are big with something against the little work I published on Grammar; and that they have been carrying these abortions for ten years together—a longer pregnancy this than the elephant's. But I well know, that even a woman once wrote against Theophrastus, a man so eminent for his eloquence that he obtained his name, which signifies the Divine speaker, and that from this circumstance originated the proverb of choosing a tree to hang oneself 42.

Note 42: "Suspendio jam quærerere mortem oportere homines vitæque renunciare, cum tantum licentiæ, vel feminæ, vel imperiti homines sumant, ut in doctissimos scribant;" Hardouin in Lemaire, i. 29. We learn from Cicero, *De Nat. Deor.* i. 33, that the name of this female was Leontium; "...sed **meretricula** etiam Leontium contra Theophrastun scribere ausa sit."

meretrīcula ae, f dim. of meretrix, a prostitute, courtesan (Lewis, Charlton, T. An Elementary Latin Dictionary)

Quote

QUOTE P. 117: One curious title, the Corner in the Atom, would remain mysterious were it not known that Plato had accounted for the phenomena of old age by postulating the detrition of the sharp edges of his angular atoms. 44 To Epicurus such an assumption would have been preposterous, his atoms being indestructible.

I also found this section interesting. Having seen Epicurus's work *On the Angle of the Atom* (Περὶ τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀτόμῳ **γωνίας**) listed in DL, Chapter X, I admit I did find that title odd. The **γωνία** (gōnía) of the title can mean: (geometry) corner, angle; joiner's square; cornerstone. So, angle and corner are both feasible translations. However, citation 44 references [The Timaeus which does talk about triangles](#) τριγώνῳ. So, *kudos* to DeWitt for shedding some light on this work of Epicurus's!

On p. 118, DeWitt indulges in some more of his historical fiction writing when he writes about "the plodder Hermarchus" and "the more sprightly and vigorous talents of Metrodorus." And also on p. 119, where he talks about "a youthful disciple named Hegesianax." As far as I know, we only know Hegesianax's name from the list of Epicurus's works (that's the citation DeWitt gives). On p. 120, he describes Polyaeus as "outstanding for his friendly and sympathetic nature." I don't believe DeWitt has any idea what these men were like or what their situations were.

Quote

QUOTE p. 118: When St. Paul spoke of "many members, yet but one body," 52 he was addressing Epicureans and making capital of their own coherence as a sect.

No! No! No! [1 Corinthians 12:12](#) (citation 52) talks about being one in Christ. There is ZERO need to read this as an Epicurean thing.

Quote

QUOTE P. 119: When St. Paul wrote, "O death, where is thy sting?" he was purloining the word "sting" from the Epicureans and also the sentiment. 54

There's no way I can accept this. Citation 54 is to [Lucretius, 3.874](#) and 3.1019 . So, we're to believe that Paul knew *De Rerum Natura* well enough in Latin, that he was able to pick out one the [Latin word stimulum](#) which can mean *prick, goad, sting, torment, pain, etc.*, translated into his letters in Greek, and THEN later English translators just knew to translate it as "sting"?? Color me skeptical at best. And the idea of death being a "sting, torment, pain" is NOT exclusive

to the Epicureans. In fact, if I remember, [death is nothing to us](#).

Again, I see bits of flashes of genius in DeWitt and bits of "You have got to be kidding me!".

I still maintain that I enjoy his academic articles better than his writing style in this work, but - if I understand - this book was more a labor of love and a project he undertook after his retirement from academia. So, maybe he felt freed up and let fly all his pent up flowery prose and urge to write historical fiction. I freely admit that he has provided a service with this book.

So, now onto the next chapter!

Post by “Cassius” of July 7, 2020 at 9:31 PM

Your comments might come across as overly harsh to a new reader who stumbled on them before getting familiar with DeWitt directly, but I don't read them that way. Dewitt's contributions are immense and even in the areas where he may get carried away, there's usually at least a grain of truth or something useful to think about. Talking about where we agree and disagree with this speculations is a very useful exercise.

Post by “Don” of July 7, 2020 at 9:56 PM

Agreed. My perspective is that, after reading some of his papers, I'm holding him to a higher standard now. I know he has the (academic) goods. I did genuinely find several of his points in this chapter fascinating and enlightening.

I'm getting closer to his exposition of doctrine, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that I can be more generous overall.

Post by “Joshua” of July 8, 2020 at 2:03 PM

I should have replied to your other thread Don, but I'll put it here!

Regarding *mens sana in corpore sano*, there is a history there that DeWitt doesn't tease out for us. Your instincts are correct; Juvenal's famous line *is* Stoical;

Quote

You should pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body.

Ask 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 nor desire and thinks
the woes and hard labors of Hercules better than
the loves and banquets and downy cushions of Sardanapalus.

What I commend to you, you can give to yourself;

For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.

Display More

The Epicurean response was offered by Horace, which I'll paraphrase as I cannot find the source just now;

Let me ask Jupiter only for what is in his power to give—it would be absurd to ask for a contented mind, as I can provide that for myself.

You don't need to ask for a stout heart that has no fear of death; Epicurus suggested that that is what philosophy is for!