

# Problems in Frances Wright's "A Few Days in Athens"

Post by "Elayne" of October 22, 2020 at 3:08 PM

I have dragged my feet on reading Frances Wright's fictionalized account of a student in Epicurus' Garden, partly because the language is so flowery that the passages I've seen quoted put me off. I've finally tackled it, and I have some thoughts to share. My main conclusion is that there are too many serious flaws to recommend it as a representation of Epicurean Philosophy without any accompanying commentary.

## Misleading Implications about Pleasure as Restraint

Frances Wright has Epicurus say "Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it." Yes, I agree. She then has him say, "I think virtue only the highest pleasure, and vice, or ungoverned passions and appetites, the worst misery." I have a big problem with that phrasing. To me, virtue is any deliberate behavior that leads to more pleasure than pain, for the individual. The actual behavior may not always be pleasurable at the time, but the overall results are, or we would not label it virtue. It's because of the pleasure that we have come up with this whole conceptual category "virtue"-- but there isn't any freestanding thing such as virtue. (Wright does have Epicurus get into that later, but this particular thing she has him say is not coherent with that, so I am not convinced she fully understands it). It's not the deliberate quality of the action that makes it "highest", unless deliberation itself is the most pleasurable thing for a person. Instead, it is simply the fact that it is the most reliable way to get pleasure. Using deliberation to choose a pleasurable dinner menu based on past experience would be virtuous action in my framing. I'm not sure it would be so for Frances Wright.

I would say that deliberate choosing of behaviors that observation teaches us lead to pleasure is the most reliable way to go about things, and careless actions which fail to take our observations into account are the most likely to lead to pain. I could even go so far as to say certain behaviors are reliable enough to be useful as habitual virtues, such as the habit of honesty. It's generally not necessary to turn every minute of life into a major decision process, so having certain habits of behavior has benefit in most cases. If deliberation is involved in choosing the habit, I would still count it as a virtue. But she is contrasting "ungoverned" pleasure-seeking with the "highest pleasure" of virtue in a way which makes it sound like virtue = restraint=pleasure. Even if she didn't mean to imply that, she doesn't explain well enough to prevent someone from drawing that impression.

Wright has Metrodorus say "all is unanimity in the garden" and talks about passions being restrained and calm-- well, there may have been unanimity. Although I doubt it, I really have no idea-- but this is the kind of thing that leads people to think Epicureans will always agree with each other and also elevates restraint in a way that makes it sound like the whole placid

"middle path" type of thing.

In chapter X, she gets downright Buddhist. She has Epicurus say, "ask and she [Prudence] will tell you, that sensual pleasure is pain covered with the mask of happiness." Egad. Then "a happy life is like... a placid and crystal stream, that flows gently and silently along"-- more of this idea that it is the calmness, not the pleasure, which we are supposed to be going for. When you contrast calm pleasure with exciting pleasure and say calm pleasure is better, then it is calm you are going for, not pleasure. She uses the word "moderation" in that same way. This is the kind of talk that leads people to imagine Epicureans as vacuously grinning Moonies, handing out flowers to each other in the airport.

### **Unclear Discussion on Ambitions and Greatness**

Wright says "the end of true philosophy is to proportion... our ambitions to our capacities" but winds up tying capacity to skill level rather than capacity for pleasure. She says, "Ambition is the spur, and the necessary spur of a great mind to great action"... following on the heels of discussion of talents, which implies great action is talented action-- but if the talent is not specifically a talent at gaining pleasure, of what use is it? How can we define a "great mind" other than a mind which understands pleasure and can obtain it, or "great action" as action other than action producing great pleasure? She leaves the reader thinking people should choose their efforts according to whether they can succeed at some abstract definition of greatness, like technical skill in painting, rather than maintaining a focus on pleasure.

### **Implies the Existence of Universal Virtues**

Wright has Epicurus say "whether I stand my virtue upon prudence, or propriety, or justice, or benevolence, or self-love, that my virtue is still one and the same; that the dispute is not about the end, but the origin"-- meaning, that there isn't disagreement about what is called virtue but how it came to be called that. But this isn't whatsoever true-- the origin of virtue in material reality means exactly that the end behavior called virtue can vary! I have recently discussed that in a post on Jefferson.

Wright's Epicurus says that "the united experience of mankind has pronounced virtue to be the great good" and calls this "universal" even in those who behave unvirtuously. He then says that the unvirtuous person is just in error-- that "hypocrisy has masked her [vice's] deformity" and that the person could be brought around to the truth by a sage. Even if Wright doesn't mean to imply it, she has completely neglected to explain things here so that they are grounded in pleasure. It would have been accurate to explain that the human species has typically found certain behaviors to result in more pleasure than pain and has labeled these behaviors 'virtues'-- sometimes people have been fooled into thinking they will get pleasure by doing the things typical humans have found lead to pain, called 'vices', but a person with more experience can point out factual observations about the usual consequences. However, there is no ground to say that just because a certain type of behavior has typically led to pleasure for most humans that it is always the most likely to do so (wisest) in a particular circumstance.

## **Ideas on Pain Inconsistent with Epicurean Philosophy**

After discussing grief at the death of a friend, Wright has Epicurus say "were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health"-- a whole section that implies pleasure can only be known through contrast with pain. Yet this is not compatible with imagining [Epicurean Gods](#) as the most blissful beings along the pleasure spectrum-- where would be the pain that allows the pleasure to be felt, if pleasure is only a contrast situation? If contrast is necessary, the gods would have to have the most contrast and thus the most pain to have the most pleasure. My own observations about life have assured me long ago that although there is definitely pleasure in relief from pain, there is also ongoing pleasure that does not require interruption and contrast in the form of pain to be felt, because pleasure is an actual feeling, not just an absence of pain. If contrast/ change is necessary, which it probably is in order for our neurons to be triggered to fire, it can come in the form of variation of pleasurable inputs.

This is an entirely different notion from the accurate observation that sometimes in order to obtain greater pleasure, we will choose to undergo a lesser pain.

In the last section, about the morality of the "involved" model of gods, her failure to clearly incorporate the nature of the "good" as subjective (not universal) pleasure has again led to a big muddle. That is probably worth a separate post.

My overall impression of this book is not favorable. Even though here and there she gets around to explaining pleasure as a feeling, she does not seem to keep that solidly in her grasp. When writers make slips of this sort, it makes me suspect they have never fully understood the philosophy.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of October 22, 2020 at 3:55 PM**

I will have lots more to say about this but immediately wanted to say "thank you!" Elayne, this is excellent commentary.

It's been years now since I first read AFDIA and yes I remember having several reservations with it, but your comments are more detailed than I ever wrote down then or since then.

I remember I definitely thought that she was embracing determinism, and that her view of the [Epicurean gods](#) was misstating what Epicurus said (which is worse than disagreeing, to put different words in his mouth), but these points you are raising are at least as important as

those.

I remember that my primary reaction has always been in "relative" terms -- that Wright was contrasting Epicurus with the Stoics and showing the inferiority of Zeno's approach, and that to an extent she was at least defining pleasure most of the time in a somewhat normal way.

I was so relieved to find someone who even seemed to "approximately" get him right that I was happy to find her.

But I agree with you that these limitations you are pointing out are major issues with the book in absolute terms, and they need to be pointed out so that any good parts are taken in this context and the bad parts are warned about..

I will go through and have more detailed comments asap.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2020 at 4:33 PM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

To me, virtue is any deliberate behavior that leads to more pleasure than pain, for the individual. The actual behavior may not always be pleasurable at the time, but the overall results are, or we would not label it virtue. It's because of the pleasure that we have come up with this whole conceptual category "virtue"-- but there isn't any freestanding thing such as virtue.

I agree with you, but I think this is where we have a huge road ahead to articulate this in a firm way. I don't think people really even hear us when we contend that "virtue" is relative to pleasure rather than absolute. Possibly the best text material we have is the discussion in "On Ends" where the virtues are discussed as desirable because they produce pleasure, but that probably doesn't make it clear enough that it isn't virtue at all unless it produces pleasure. That's the next step in the chain reasoning that's essential to take and needs a lot more articulation.

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

This is the kind of talk that leads people to imagine Epicureans as vacuously grinning Moonies, handing out flowers to each other in the airport.

That's a great line, and exactly accurate I think! 😊

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

In the last section, about the morality of the "involved" model of gods, her failure to clearly incorporate the nature of the "good" as subjective (not universal) pleasure has again led to a big muddle. That is probably worth a separate post.

Yes I would definitely like to see you expand that. Are you talking about the last chapter where he gives a speech denouncing religion? I really don't remember the details of that too well, and maybe the reason is because it is more a muddle than I remember. I remember it being a strong denunciation of religion, but I don't remember much more than that.

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### **Post by "Elayne" of October 22, 2020 at 6:39 PM**

Yes, the last chapter. There are useful points in it, but also a lot of confusion!

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### **Post by "Cassius" of October 22, 2020 at 6:57 PM**

I will re-read it. I remember it ending on sort of a cliffhanging note, but I don't remember the rest.

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### **Post by "Joshua" of October 23, 2020 at 1:05 PM**

Going from memory, I would add to Elayne's list;

#### **Over-emphasis on Sensations as a criterion of knowledge**

Or at least I remember walking away from it with that feeling. Her system is nearly empirical, grounded in sensation and elaborated with reason. But Epicurus held that there are three criteria. The other two seem to get short shrift here.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 6:18 PM**

Yes I can't recall that she dealt with anticipations at all, which is something that probably relates to her long lecture on the priority of observation over theory. She clearly had some interesting views on all that which I don't profess to have sorted out.