

Catherine Wilson's January 2021 article: "Why Epicureanism, Not Stoicism, Is The Philosophy We Need Now"

Post by "Cassius" of January 13, 2021 at 9:01 AM

Here is a new article by Catherine Wilson: <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/...phy-we-need-now>



Who can disagree with the title?

Quote

OK I just looked at this one and see it is actually a new article by Catherine Wilson. It contains some good philosophical points along with some not-so-good, but is something most of us would personally agree with. However it's focused on politics, and my view is that it would probably not be a good idea to post it, especially right now.

All of us in the USA are no doubt aware that political tensions right now are probably higher than any time in our lifetimes, so this is probably a particularly good time to adhere to the posting guidelines for the greater good of our mutual project here.

I almost want to post the article solely for this following paragraph, and I might pull the paragraph out somehow and post it anyway. This increases Catherine Wilson in my estimation, but the danger involved in opening discussion into humanism and politics is probably too great to post the whole article.

An important objection to regarding pleasure as the sole human good, and pain as the only true evil, is that few of us would choose to take a "bliss drug" that kept us in a permanent and passive state of delight, unaware of our hurts. Most would rather experience hardships, ups and downs, and the pains of off-and-on deprivation that keep our appetites sharp.

The Epicurean can agree entirely. A bliss drug would not be a source of real pleasure because it would wipe out experience. Blissed out, we would not be encountering the world as it is, but a distorted world in which the causes of physical and psychological pleasure as well as pain were obscured.

I even hesitate to post these confidential comments because I want us to stay away from politics as far and as long as we can. But at the very least we need to be open to discussing where the limits are, and I think at least here in this confidential group we have a close enough relationship we can at least discuss where the limits are, if anyone has any comments.

Post by "Cassius" of January 13, 2021 at 9:09 AM

Actually I want to pull back my first good impression of that bliss drug comment. Now that I look at it again, is the analysis really correct? Is she in fact showing that she does not understand the importance of maintaining that pleasure is pleasure and good in itself, and that the reason that the problem with a bliss drug is its IMPRACTICABILITY, not the desire for total pleasure?

The second paragraph seems to hint at the right analysis, but..... she isn't stating WHY it is good to experience the world as it is....

Elayne I particularly want to know what you think about that! The more I think about it the less I like it. I think she is buying into the "we must have pain in order to experience pleasure" argument which might give us a good example of why Epicurean divinity has an important use -- to illustrate that pain is not necessary to the best life ??????

Oh my this implicates a lot of our discussions! Is Wilson so focused on the practical feeling / experience aspect that she has lost the importance of the "logical" argument by which we must maintain that pleasure is desirable in and of itself? Is this an illustration of how we must constantly recognize BOTH the logical and practical arguments lest we slide down a slope in which we lose our focus on the need for both?

Now I have raised two topics (1) the political angle of the article, and (2) Wilson's bliss drug analysis. Of the two, the SECOND is far more important than the first.

Post by “Don” of January 13, 2021 at 11:48 AM

First impressions on the article:



I agree with her take on the "bliss pill."

She gets a little utilitarian but that may just be for historical context.

I'm less enamoured of the last two paragraphs. They seemed tacked on to me.

She's not an ideal Epicurean spokesperson but Epicureans aren't into Platonic ideals anyway.

At least someone is getting Epicurean airtime against the Stoics!

Post by “Elayne” of January 13, 2021 at 2:05 PM

Ack. I think the article is pretty bad.

She says the application of rationality must itself be enjoyable or no reason to do it-- untrue. If studying boring material for a test leads to passing a class and gaining access to a more interesting class, I would (and have) done it. That's basic EP, sometimes choosing a pain for greater pleasure.

Self control reducing pain to others and the self? Basic misunderstanding that pain to others is painful to us (most of us), so it should not be listed separately. If we didn't care about them and there were no consequences from them, they wouldn't enter into consideration. It's empathy that causes us innate inclusion of their pleasure.

She lists associations of consumerism without clearly linking those to the reader's pains. Lot of assuming there.

Did Epicurus have security for "all" as a goal? I don't see that.

We've discussed the bliss pill a lot. She's wrong that the person wouldn't be in reality-- the pill is real, so the effects and pleasure experiences are real. The problems we've identified are that hypotheticals don't contain real world details. If it really were continual pleasure, complete pleasure, there would be nothing missing. If it was boring or somehow unsatisfactory it wouldn't be bliss as advertised. If it felt unreal in an unpleasant way, it wouldn't be bliss. The flaws in her argument aren't a logical failure just a failure to remember pleasure is an actual feeling. She is substituting a reasoning process for the feeling.

Most wouldn't take it bc in real life, we use pain as a warning of tissue damage, and this pill might severely shorten our lives if we had no way to know our appendix was rupturing, etc. It would require not just a bliss pill but total safety from all life-shortening harm that we would lose our ability to notice. Most of us also wouldn't necessarily trust such a medication without extensive testing. If we had a way to stop all harm and threat of harm, then we wouldn't need the bliss pill anyway ☐.

Although we can't increase the height of pleasure past the limit of removal of pain, most people do want to extend the area under the curve, longevity-- we want to continue our pleasure. So this bliss pill would be a risky move.

I don't find this a justification for chains of logic. Instead, although there are some pragmatic issues, mainly she seems to forget pleasure is a feeling.

On the political side, she has confused EP with social utilitarianism. Not the same. In EP we would expect to see people trying to max their pleasure, including their vicarious pleasure at that of others, probably by a negotiation process, making justice contracts.

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2021 at 2:37 PM

The more i thought about it the more i expected Elayne to blast the article, and I see I was not disappointed. In my view this is one of Elaynes strongest areas (of many).

I understand (I think) why Don reacted the way he did, because I see this article from several different angles. But there's something fundamentally wrong with Catherine Wilson's approach to Epicurus which really gives us some great oppportunities to discuss.

I really think there is a lot of important material here to digest, and I will probably suggest we cut this out to a public post while treating the politics at a very high level, as Elayne did. But I am in the road for 4 hours so can't do that til tonight. I hope more will comment.

We should never be afraid to disagree with each other and on this topic above all our discussions will help us articulate the issues better and see where obstacles stand in our way.

There's nothing more important than this in Epicurean philosophy, and the road to explaining how we get there is crucial. The interplay of the logic and the feeling aspects still seems to me to be one of those where we can improve our presentation. I see that aspect slightly different from Elayne but I need to work on articulating how. I think Wilson is failing dramatically in her understanding of the logical issues.

Catherine Wilson is providing us great material for growth in these areas.

Post by “Don” of January 13, 2021 at 3:44 PM

I'll weigh in a little more so [Cassius](#) can see if he was right in his understanding of my motives



I'm not a huge Wilson fan, but my perspective is that she should be cut a little slack in this article. She's writing for a popular magazine for a popular audience. Her arguments are not going to be finely detailed or nuanced. I'm sure she had a hard word limit, too.

Wilson says:

If the exercise of our rationality in learning, thinking and communicating were not pleasurable, there would be no point in trying to master any subject or practice.

So, she doesn't say if it's a long-term pleasure or immediate pleasure etc. Just that learning, thinking and communicating can be pleasurable. Maybe she means short term pain of study leading to long term pleasure. Maybe the pleasure of learning something new. Can't tell. I'm willing to defer judgement. The fact that pleasure is said to be worthy in a popular article: good enough for me right now.

The whole "bliss pill"/"experience machine" thing is *always* going to come up in any popular article about pleasure being a worthy goal, so she needed to address it. I think she did an acceptable job in addressing that in a few words. Additionally, I agree with her on the general principle she lays out. I'm not going down that alley here though. Again, word limit. Asked and she answered after a fashion.

Finally, I'm just happy to see Epicurus's name in a popular magazine where it's not some Stoic writing how unworthy pleasure is as a goal then going off on their "following nature" and virtue rant.

Post by “Joshua” of January 13, 2021 at 3:57 PM

This bit about the 'bliss pill' is a very modern-sounding thought-experiment, but its roots are ancient. Homer proposes a similar problem in his *Odyssey* with the land of the Lotus-Eaters, memorably captured by Tennyson in a poem of that name.

If you could spend your life on an exceedingly pleasant island in the Mediterranean eating narcotic flowers, drowsy and content and forgetful of family and duty and honor, would you choose that? The 'right' answer for Homer and all good pious Greeks was no. It might be worth exploring what the Epicurean answer would be.

Post by “Elayne” of January 13, 2021 at 4:02 PM

Well that's more specific, narcotic flowers. Def no. I hate the feeling of opiates. I don't even take them after surgery. Even back then, you'd get habituation to opiates and then all you get is wanting but not liking. Addictive substances are miserable.

The devil is in the details lol

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2021 at 11:01 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Finally, I'm just happy to see Epicurus's name in a popular magazine where it's not some Stoic writing how unworthy pleasure is as a goal then going off on their "following nature" and virtue rant.

Ok this is I think a good summary of your point and I certainly agree with it - you're cutting her a lot of slack because of this, and indeed that title -- explicitly promoting Epicurus over Stoicism - is impossible not to appreciate. How infrequently we see anything like that in the popular material that we read is a testament to how bad things are out there. Catherine Wilson deserves tremendous credit from that point of view.

So within that context I can certainly appreciate that you want to be generous. I tend to think the same way -- I've watched some of her videos and I like her personality. She seems honest and friendly and clearly means well. And I think she realizes that even to the small extent she's wandered from the academic orthodoxy, in her circle she's pretty much out on a limb on her own, with few allies. So I can appreciate that she's being brave even being in the game at all.

But having said that, I think Elayne's criticism still stands. It would not be very hard for Wilson to word these passages more accurately, and I don't really think that she was being sloppy -- she seems to really draw back from the full logical conclusions that Epicurus' logic compels her to draw. Elayne's point about Epicurus saying clearly that we sometimes choose pain in order to eventually achieve more pleasure --- that really is a super-fundamental point. I cannot imagine a really no good excuse for her not making that very precisely and clearly except that she doesn't want to -- she doesn't want to say explicitly that wisdom or knowledge is not desirable in itself unless it brings pleasure. That's just too much for the academic world to tolerate, and she's not willing to go there even though that is clear Epicurean doctrine.

As to the bliss pill, I also see Elayne's point that the general principle that she's laying out is very wide from the mark. She's choosing to emphasize that the problem would be that "the causes of pain and pleasure would be obscured." Well, why is that a problem? If the bliss pill works, who cares WHY it works -- that's principle doctrine 10 in spades. The clear implication of this phrasing is that it is the KNOWLEDGE of the causes that is of concern to Wilson. She's clearly implying that knowledge in and of itself is good, which is totally wrong in Epicurean terms. It is even somewhat contradicted by what she has just said in the preceding paragraph, where she implies that the benefit of experiencing pain is to "keep our appetites sharp."

Here's the main point I wanted to come back and add, and this is a little different from what Elayne wrote:

Rather than Wilson failing to appreciate pleasure as a feeling, I think the thing that bothers me about her approach is that she seems to back away from taking the doctrines to their logical conclusions. As Elayne pointed out, her emphasis on the pleasure of "all" is Wilson's own arbitrary humanist addition, and isn't at all supported by the texts. She's universalizing and humanizing the edge because she isn't willing to follow the logical progression to the end, which involves real feelings of pleasure for real people and not universalized abstractions about what would be nice if the world were like that. Same with her observations about "justice."

Probably the best way I can express my concern at the moment is that I think you have to accept that Epicurus was preaching pleasure (a feeling) as the goal while at the same time employing words in a system that he wanted to be rigorously logical and consistent. If you can't follow the principles he set out to their logical conclusions, you're really ignoring them and producing something that might seem pleasing to us for the moment, but isn't true to what Epicurus was teaching.

So I think in order to really understand and appreciate Epicurus you have to be ruthlessly logical in identifying and then applying Epicurus' chain reasoning, as I think is DeWitt's strength. We can debate in good faith all day long whether it is necessary to follow his chain reasoning on eternity and infinity, but even those of us on different sides of that question are on the same team. We ultimately pick up the chain at some point where we all affirm materiality and lack of supernatural forces, and so we're ultimately holding the same chain, just at different starting points.

In ethics though it's hard to say that we're even on the same chain with Catherine Wilson. Wilson understands that "pleasure" is identified as the goal, but she takes all sorts of liberties with other aspects of the ethics, so she reaches conclusions that are more personal preference than they are illustrations of the principles. She's taking principles and showing how SHE applies them without identifying the fundamental issues involved in them, so she ends up teaching "Wilsonism" rather than Epicurus' process, approach, and system. By doing so she lowers the discussion away from the "philosophy" part entirely and makes Epicurus into simply *an ethicist with whom we should agree*.

My greatest concern then is that because she isn't following the course logically, she ultimately isn't going to be able to deal effectively to what I see to be one of the biggest obstacles we all face -- dealing with the "pleasure as the absence of pain" passages.

Unless you get used to seeing Epicurus as a master logician, you're going to try to make sense of the "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain" passages thinking that he is talking in terms of feelings that we should grasp directly, when -- in my humble opinion - he is talking in primarily LOGICAL terms [in order to address the Platonic logical arguments against pleasure as the highest good](#) such as expressed in [Philebus](#). He's expecting us to remember that the logical context is that there are only two feelings, so that BY DEFINITION - by logic - the presence of one equals the absence of the other. If you try to take that passage in purely experiential or "I know it because i feel it" terms without keeping in mind its logical context you're going to crash on the rocks, because in "feeling" terms it doesn't feel right to identify the goal of life - the greatest joy we can experience, as "absence of pain."

You're got to be prepared to approach Epicurus at the same time as both (1) the master architect of human happiness -- a masterful conveyor of the importance of "feeling," as well as (2) a master logician who was superior to Plato in explaining the goal of life in terms of ideas.

If you can't walk both paths then you're going to stumble. If you're too focused on emotion and feeling you will stumble when you confront the logical ideas of the Platonists, but at the other extreme if you're too focused on logic you'll fail because you sound like as much of an emotionless robot as the Stoics.

I firmly think you have to be grounded in **both**. Catherine Wilson is primarily explaining Epicurus in terms of her own feelings, and that's not good enough.

Post by "Don" of January 13, 2021 at 11:43 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As to the bliss pill, I also see Elayne's point that the general principle that she's laying out is very wide from the mark. She's choosing to emphasize that the problem would be that "the causes of pain and pleasure would be obscured." Well, why is that a problem? If the bliss pill works, who cares WHY it works -- that's principle doctrine 10 in spades. The clear implication of this phrasing is that it is the KNOWLEDGE of the causes that is of concern to Wilson.

I don't want to go down the "bliss pill" rabbit hole again, but, in principle, I agree with Wilson about this. I continue to assert that PD 10 is about personal responsibility and it's specifically saying the "pleasures of the profligate" are not recommended, and that the most important word in that Doctrine is *if*. If they do these things, then we have no complaints... But those pleasures *don't* provide freedom from fear or teach us limits, etc. That's the point. Plus it has to be taken in context with the Letter to Menoikeus which appears to me to be commentary on PD 10:

Quote

10If the things that produced the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires, then we would have no complaints against them, since they would be filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress (and that's what is bad).

In the Letter to Menoikos: So when we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent people or the enjoyment of sleep, as is believed by those who are ignorant or who don't understand us or who are ill-disposed to us, but to be free from bodily pain and mental disturbance. For a pleasant life is produced not by drinking and endless parties and enjoying boys and women and consuming fish and other delicacies of an extravagant table, but by sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject, and driving out opinions that cause the greatest trouble in the soul.

If we're on the bliss pill or on the experience machine or constantly intoxicated or eating lotuses, we can't use "sober reasoning" or "search out the cause of everything we accept or reject." Taking the bliss pill could be a personal choice, but I think it would fall under the unrecommended pleasures of the profligate (literally, the lost) and I don't believe Epicurus

would endorse that. Pleasure is pleasure, but not every pleasure should be chosen.

I realize I may be a minority opinion, but this is one I haven't been convinced to change yet.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2021 at 12:04 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I agree with Wilson about this

I'm afraid we can't unwind this without being more clear what we are agreeing with, because I am no longer certain what we are talking about as Wilson's opinion.

As to the bliss drug, let's ask IF IT WORKED TO PRODUCE PERPETUAL LIFETIME BLISS (which seems to be the issue, some of us are presuming it works, others are simply concluding it can't), would you take it? Again, for purposes of this answer, let's presume that the hypothetical is that the bliss drug is in fact effective to produce perpetual uninterrupted bliss for the rest of one's life. And let's just say "lifetime" so that we're not arguing that the bliss pill extends or shortens life.

So :

(1) Is Catherine Wilson saying Epicurus would say to take it, or not? She seems to be saying that most people (with whom she apparently agrees?) would say no, but let's be clear as to what she is saying or implying that Epicurus would say. What is she saying is the Epicurean answer to the bliss drug question?

and therefore in terms of whether you agree with her Don,

(2) Would you (Don) take that pill?

Post by “Don” of January 14, 2021 at 7:19 AM

(1) She's saying Epicurus would say "Don't take the pill."

(2a) Short answer: No. 😊

(2b) Longer answer: The drug's effects, once taken, would serve as a barrier between me and the cosmos and I would no longer be able to prudently make decisions about how to achieve my own pleasure. Prudence is instrumental in achieving the goal of feeling pleasure. Prudence and wisdom don't sit above pleasure. Some might say, "but you've achieved pleasure with the pill." I've achieved pleasure but it's someone else's definition of pleasure. The creator of the drug has decided for me the hormone levels (dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin) that will produce "my" pleasure. I have a similar reason for not wanting to upload my mind into a computer to live forever. Who owns the hardware? What parameters have they programmed into it? Same way with this hypothetical pill (that I'm defining here as producing hormone levels determined by someone else's chemistry). The pill is someone else's hardware. The only way in this universe to achieve pleasure is to make choices and rejections based on one's own senses, one's own reactions of pleasure and pain, and whatever the prolepses are.

My take is that this is the crux of Wilson's argument expressed in the least number of words for her article.

Quote

Most would rather experience hardships, ups and downs, and the pains of off-and-on deprivation that keep our appetites sharp.

The Epicurean can agree entirely. A bliss drug would not be a source of real pleasure because it would wipe out experience. Blissed out, we would not be encountering the world as it is, but a distorted world in which the causes of physical and psychological pleasure as well as pain were obscured.

To bring this back to Wilson, she's not saying experiencing hardship and pain are somehow superior to pleasure. She's saying without encountering the real world, we have no way to make choices of how to achieve pleasure. We don't *want* or desire to experience hardship or pain, but we recognize that the world is full of both. Having the *choice* of either experiencing the world *as it is* and making *my* choices and avoidances based on the input of *my* senses etc. or being "blissed out" on someone else's definition of an abstract ideal "pleasure" for me, I'd choose the " hardships, ups and downs, and the pains of off-and-on deprivation." It's not a Stoic glorification of enduring pain. It's a proclamation of the fact that I have one life to live; it should be lived pleurably; and the only path I have is for me to make my choices and aim at that goal - directing myself as best I can using the Canonic faculties I've been given by natural evolution.

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2021 at 8:47 AM

As to your last paragraph, "To bring this back to Wilson..." I totally agree. As to the first paragraph, I see we are, as you warned, in the rabbit hole of dealing with hypothetical without firmly agreeing on the terms of the hypothetical first.

As to Wilson (not you) I see that as another example of my concern about her logical consistency. If you're not going to go all the way with the logical argument in a piece like that, I would say it likely does not make sense to bring it up, else you end up creating just the kind of ambiguity that causes the doubts we're now discussing.

Because if the "bliss drug" were defined as the equivalent of transforming you into an Epicurean god, then surely I think Epicurus WOULD say to take it. Would you agree with that?

I think that the answer is probably yes, but given the way she has written her statement I am not clear that Wilson would say yes, and in fact I would read her as likely saying "no."

Post by "Don" of January 14, 2021 at 9:04 AM

Oh my! We already have a hypothetical drug and now we're talking about ill-defined gods. Yikes.

My answer is still no. Epicurus wouldn't advocate taking the drug. How would it make me a god? How would my atoms replenish themselves to make me incorruptible?

That's a quick reply. More later.

Post by "Elayne" of January 14, 2021 at 9:27 AM

[Don](#) If the awareness of choosing is essential to bliss, then the bliss pill must provide that too-- if anything at all is missing from total pleasure, then it's not a total bliss pill, by definition! If someone else's bliss is not yours, and it's marketed as total bliss for you, then it's false advertising! That would go into my own reasons not to take it, lol-- I would not be convinced there could be a pill that would give complete bliss to a wide variety of individuals.

I don't think you understand PD 10. If you take it in context with the entire body of writings, it is very clear Epicurus places nothing above or equal to pleasure. The problem is that the pleasures of the profligates not only produce more pain than pleasure but that they leave anxiety unaddressed, and thus they can't produce complete pleasure. They leave the pain of

anxiety. And he is talking about limits not because of the modern concept of "knowing our limits." He is referring to the understanding that once you have removed all pain, you will be full of maximum pleasure, a real and wonderful feeling, and that we are not (as was argued in his time) forced to seek more and more pleasure endlessly, if there is no pain. He is saying complete pleasure can actually happen for humans.

Post by “Elayne” of January 14, 2021 at 9:39 AM

Here's another analogy-- if our need for pleasure were like an infinitely large universe, complete pleasure could never happen for a human, not even for a second. We would always need more and more.

But in contrast to his view of an unlimited universe, he taught that our capacity for pleasure does have a limit, the point at which all pain is removed and pleasure is full! So this is a good sort of limit to have. It doesn't reduce our pleasure, as if we need to moderate pleasure -- it makes pleasure completely blissful, no pill needed. He is saying we can be satiated. We are not doomed to endless dissatisfaction with incomplete pleasure.

And I find by observation of my life that this is exactly true. It's not whatsoever a logic process for me but direct observation. Of course, as he acknowledged, pains do come in life which are unavoidable. But I have also had not just moments of feeling full pleasure but extended periods, and what disrupts that is not inability to be satiated but a change in conditions. If I have eaten enough, I am not becoming disappointed with that satisfaction in a few hours, but my food gets digested, a change in conditions, creating hunger again.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2021 at 11:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus wouldn't advocate taking the drug. How would it make me a god? How would my atoms replenish themselves to make me incorruptible?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

if anything at all is missing from total pleasure, then it's not a total bliss pill, by definition!

OK I see this discussion as reinforcement of the need to be more aggressive in the logical side. As Elayne is pointing out, the only way to resolve these questions is to look at the definitions, and that's the problem that has to be addressed with hypotheticals at the very beginning -- stating the terms extremely clearly.

Does the difficulty with clarify in hypotheticals mean that we should never use them? I can see the possibility of arguing both sides of that, but the step of arguing both sides would probably be extremely helpful for being clear on the benefits and limits of the use of hypotheticals.

I think that's behind our different viewpoints on [PD10](#). I think that Epicurus WAS setting up an extreme hypothetical in which he was in fact suggesting what Don is resisting -- [PD10](#) in my view is as hypothetical or a logical challenge or whatever you would like to call it, set up specifically as an "in your face" statement of the position that the ultimate goal is pleasure, and forcing you to confront what some people are going to think are uncomfortable truths.

So if you state in your hypothetical that the "bliss drug" is in fact fully effective in providing you with a lifetime of unmitigated and undiluted pleasure - the effective equivalent of Epicurean godhood as set forth by Torquatus in on ends -- then yes indeed I do think that Epicurus would say: "Of course you should take it - that's the whole goal of my philosophy!"

[Note: I am referring to this section from Torquatus, which I see as itself a hypothetical such as we are debating: "

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."]

I'm not trying to criticize Don here because he's not the one who wrote the article for public consumption that ends up creating the confusion that I think Wilson is creating. The more I think about it the more I think she has raised exactly what Epicurus held to be the ultimate point -- that "pleasure" must be defended to the end on both logical and experiential grounds, and she has flubbed the test.

Which is not to say that she is by any means unique, because it appears that later people who thought they were following Epicurus have been arguing about this for 2000+ years, if the comments in Cicero's "On Ends" in the underlined section below are any indication:

Quote

This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain.

I will address expected comments here by saying that I think even this doesn't state the issue the way I would state it. I think that the first part about "grasped by the intellect and reason" is what Epicurus was doing, and they were not in fact refining upon Epicurus' doctrine, because everyone knows that the intellect and reason aren't feelings that can detect pleasure and pain. So my view is that this first position is that the a a proper intellectual and reasonable argument that "the good" is pleasure can and does go hand in hand and with the observation that no outside proof of pleasure is necessary or even possible.

I think the error -- the one that Torquatus says he agrees with, is that "the nature of pleasure and pain" requires elaborate and reasoned argument and abstruse theoretical discussion. There's no way to appreciate pleasure and pain except to experience it -- to me that is clear, and that is I think Elayne's position. But if it were truly unnecessary to engage the question of "what is the good?" logically, then we wouldn't even be having these discussions at all. We'd just say "look over there" and the discussion would be over.

Even the statement "What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?" is in fact a logical proof that supports and bolsters the "experience-based" position.

Post by "Elayne" of January 14, 2021 at 1:01 PM

[Cassius](#) -- of course, we can't really even have conversations and think without any reasoning at all. However, a strong appeal of this philosophy to me is that logic is nowhere in the Canon. It is a supplemental tool only. Primarily used for explanation to others, but not as the fundamental basis.

I know we have different opinions on prolepses, but it is going too far to assert that the basic conclusions of EP must include contributions from logic that are not already established as evidence. That is adding logic to the Canon itself.

I would stay instead that when it comes to applying logic, be sure to conform your logic to observations and not the contrary. We can't refrain from logic completely but in this philosophy it is secondary.

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2021 at 2:32 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I know we have different opinions on prolepses, but it is going too far to assert that the basic conclusions of EP must include contributions from logic that are not already established as evidence. That is adding logic to the Canon itself.

I really think I agree with your comments Elayne, but I don't think we have fleshed out what we really mean by "logic." We are using logic or reason or something whenever we communicate,

and we're using logic and reason in all our "formulations." And we agree that the logic has to be based on observations of the senses. So i think that the issue is coming to an articulation of what we mean by "true reasoning" so that we can apply some kind of label to the process of the deductions that Epicurus was drawing. The "pleasure is the absence of pain" formulation is something other than pure sensation - what would you prefer to call it?

Post by “Don” of January 14, 2021 at 3:00 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[PD10](#) in my view is as hypothetical or a logical challenge or whatever you would like to call it, set up specifically as an "in your face" statement of the position that the ultimate goal is pleasure, and forcing you to confront what some people are going to think are uncomfortable truths.

I don't see it that way, and I know [we had this conversation previously](#). I don't think Epicurus is dealing in hypotheticals at all in this doctrine. I think he's being very concrete. Especially taking the Letter to Menoikeus along with this, I think he's saying, "Look at those people who stay drunk all night and treat their bodies so badly. Yes, that's pleasure, but they don't consider the consequences of their pleasure. That's not what I'm calling you to do. You can't live a pleasurable life without living nobly, justly, and prudently. The lost are not living nobly, justly, or prudently, and so will find it impossible to live pleurably."

Post by “Don” of January 14, 2021 at 3:14 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I don't think you understand PD 10. If you take it in context with the entire body of writings, it is very clear Epicurus places nothing above or equal to pleasure. The problem is that the pleasures of the profligates not only produce more pain than pleasure but that they leave anxiety unaddressed, and thus they can't produce complete pleasure. They leave the pain of anxiety. And he is talking about limits not because of the modern concept of "knowing our limits." He is referring to the understanding that once you have removed all pain, you will be full of maximum

pleasure, a real and wonderful feeling, and that we are not (as was argued in his time) forced to seek more and more pleasure endlessly, if there is no pain. He is saying complete pleasure can actually happen for humans.

Yes. There's a problem with the pleasures of the profligate, and I think you described that problem well. I'm not seeing where we disagree.

Post by “Elayne” of January 14, 2021 at 4:25 PM

[Don](#) then maybe I misunderstood what you said about "teaching us limits"-- because he didn't use it that way.

[Cassius](#) You've lost me ☐. Pleasure being maximized at the absence of pain is not a logic statement at all. It's just a description of observed experience. If he had not felt complete pleasure at least a few times when he couldn't detect any pain, he would have no grounds for such a statement. It would just be a hypothetical.

I knew he was correct when I read it the first time because it agreed with my experience. What he describes is simply a real, achievable condition. It does get interrupted for most if not all of us, but it isn't an imaginary ideal. It's a real experience! If it were not, I would likely have little interest in Epicurus.

Post by “Elayne” of January 14, 2021 at 5:44 PM

[Don](#) you did say [PD10](#) was about taking responsibility though-- but that's only in service of pleasure. So that would not be a reason to turn down a true bliss for you pill in an environment free of threats, if you believed it was as advertised.

I saw an article a couple of weeks ago about some major developments in aging research. It might become possible to stop aging. That wouldn't prevent death from injury, infection and so on, but it would increase longevity dramatically and reduce age related suffering. If I were convinced of the safety and effectiveness, I would take that kind of pill.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2021 at 7:27 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1833-catherine-wilson-s-january-2021-article-why-epicureanism-not-stoicism-is-the-phi/>

We certainly have a variety of opinions -- maybe we can come closer on certain points or maybe not - but I do think we're all on the same team that pleasure is the key to all this, however we conceive the best way to explain it to be the case.

So when Elayne says

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Pleasure being maximized at the absence of pain is not a logic statement at all

I would maintain that it is, and that it is a function of there being the only two feelings and thus the measure of one by definition being the inverse of the other.

But I don't dispute that Elayne is also correct that we can validate the statement through personal experience.

I would say this illustrates how true reasoning is supposed to work, with experience being the basis on which the only kind of valid logical statements can be made.

Maybe there's a personality perspective here -- some people are interested only in what they experience as the test of truth, while some people think that the only way to be sure of something is to be able to state it in a logical proposition that is internally consistent.

Post by “Elayne” of January 14, 2021 at 7:42 PM

Logic can never give you primary information about reality, [Cassius](#) . Logic is not _in_ the Canon but supplemental.

Epicurus knew there were 2 basic feelings, pleasure and pain, because he felt them. Not from logic!

Post by “Don” of January 14, 2021 at 11:25 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Don't you did say [PD10](#) was about taking responsibility though-- but that's only in service of pleasure. So that would not be a reason to turn down a true bliss for you pill in an environment free of threats, if you believed it was as advertised.

Yes. Each of us is responsible for our own pleasure through the choices and avoidances each of us decide to follow.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Don't then maybe I misunderstood what you said about "teaching us limits"-- because he didn't use it that way.

PD 10 does explicitly say that "*if, further, they* [that which is productive of pleasures to profligate persons] *taught them to limit their desires* [then] we should not have any reason to censure such persons,..."

So, Epicurus is saying the profligate don't learn to limit their desires and so we should have reason to censure them.

It's actually phrased not as an infinitive "to limit" but:

If, furthermore, "that which produces profligate pleasures" taught '[the limit \(τὸ πέρας\)](#)' of desires/yearnings/lusts' ([τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν](#)) etc."

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2021 at 2:14 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Logic can never give you primary information about reality, Cassius . Logic is not in the Canon but supplemental.

I certainly agree with this, but I don't perceive myself as asserting that. I mean to be saying only that Epicurus was using logical arguments to respond to the Platonists on their own terms, not that he was in any way giving up his own view of the faculties as the means of contact with reality.

That passage I cited where Torquatus was referencing divergent opinions within the Epicurean school has a lot in it to be considered, just like the Diogenes Laertius reference to later Epicureans having four branches of faculties instead of three.

Over time it would be good for us to explore what those divisions were all about.

Post by “Elayne” of January 15, 2021 at 7:43 AM

[Don](#) in the context of everything Epicurus said, he did not mean whatsoever to limit their desire for pleasure to something less than total bliss. That's why I wrote about what he was really talking about. You said you agreed, but it doesn't sound like you do. He wants for them to understand that they can actually achieve complete pleasure, instead of thinking it is infinite, requires infinite desires, and can never be experienced. He means it differently than how we would mean it today. Teaching them the limit means teaching them that they can both desire and achieve total bliss, in the real world. He would censure them for failing to desire and reach total pleasure-- because they are still anxious and partying has not relieved their fear of gods.

He wants them to desire more pleasure than they currently do-- not less.

An analogy would be a coach cheering on a runner near the end of the race-- a runner who thinks the race is endless, even Sisyphean, impossible to complete, and may be giving up. Epicurus the running coach is saying guess what? You are only a few yards from winning, because the pursuit of the goal of pleasure has a finish line!! And to reach it, you need to know there is no reason to fear the gods or punishment in an afterlife.

A pleasure pill that was truly as advertised, trustworthy, in a world with no threat to longevity, would be the wise choice. But I would need to see a huge amount of research.

[Cassius](#) you said the only way for some people to be sure of something is if they can say it with internally consistent logic. Those kinds of people are Platonists. But they will never actually understand EP through logic, because EP is not primarily logical but experiential, evidentiary, and feeling based. So that doesn't do them any favors, to say that our philosophy is logic based.

Remember that [Elli](#) has explained to us that his use of the term "reasoning" did not mean logic at all but prudence. Wisdom, which comes from experience. We must repeatedly bring anyone who wants to learn the philosophy back to their experience of life-- not logic.

Post by “Don” of January 15, 2021 at 8:42 AM

[Elayne](#) what I agreed with was your eloquent description of the "things productive of the pleasures of the profligate" being unable to address the anxiety and fear of the gods, death, etc. When Epicurus is saying if those things did teach the limit of desires, we'd have no reason to censure the profligate. The "limit of desires" I take to refer to the desires one choose and those one rejects. Not every desire leads to pleasure and so those should be rejected. The word translated as "limit" also can have the connotation of the "perfection" of something. So if those things taught the perfection of desire - how to prudently make choices and rejections - we'd have to need to censure the "lost." The fact that he calls them [ἀσώτους](#) along with the commentary on the Menoikeus Letter leads me to believe he's not condoning their choices in any way. I believe he's clearly saying, this isn't the way to choose to live a pleasurable life.

Post by “Elayne” of January 15, 2021 at 9:05 AM

[Don](#) -- use the whole context of the philosophy. Epicurus never places anything greater than pleasure. He is saying we can actually experience total-- perfect-- pleasure. That it's not abstract. The profligates are not going far enough! They are leaving some of their pleasure on the table.

It is hard for people today to drop the middle path ideas they've been inculcated with. EP is not a middle path. It's a path of the most extreme, total pleasure, experienced by humans in reality. Epicurus could testify to it because he lived it.

Post by “Elli” of January 15, 2021 at 10:22 AM

If Epicurus lived today with the tools of technology and all the goods he had in his era.... since for writing the papers/papyri and all the works that had to be done in his Garden, it was a need to have **four** slaves, who treated them with respect, as we read in the sources. Thus, if it could be a way to visit us in our era, he would consider us that **we are living as profligates**.

If we take an accusation by Plato and the hypocritical idealists, for being always apologized in their foolishness what means PLEASURE, we will fall in the same trap with that person who thinks that is an Epicurean, as he is a member in a Garden in Greece, and in every meeting and in every comment he makes and on FB, he is repeating continuously:

"When we say pleasure we do not mean the pleasures of the profligates".

And one day I asked him :

- And what do we mean when we say pleasure ?

We mean ataraxia and aponia.

- What is ataraxia and aponia ?

To not have the pleasures of the profligates!

- Who are the profligates ?

Those people that over pass the limits of pleasure and they feel pain.

- An example? I asked him.

They are those that Epicurus describes in his LTM, that are eating fish, have sexual intercourse with many women and boys, making parties etc.

- Really eh? I said, except the sexual intercourse that you do not have with many women as you're being married now (but I do not take an oath for this HA 😄)... you do not eat fish, you do not drive a luxurious car, you do not have an elegant office in your work, you do not have an elegant house, you do not make parties with your family and friends.. nothing eh? You only eat bread, drinking water inside a cave. Sorry, this is hypocrisy and if Epicurus lived today, he would say to you and to all of us, that we are living as profligates ! HA 😄

In the end I reminded him the PD 3 (that only Cassius made me clear to notice that in the past), and then I told him also :

- who is that person that he would judge telling me what provokes to me pleasure and what pain ? Only my prudence that is all based on my experiences measured by my senses and my feelings. Besides, we have and our trusted doctors, not the charlatans, that when we feel pain in body and soul, we visit them for offering to us their advice that is based on discoveries and the experiences of the science of Medicine that is the Art of all arts. 👍

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2021 at 12:27 PM

Some of the material we are discussing here deserves to be pulled out and discussed in more detail in a separate thread, but the discussion is so integrated here I doubt it makes sense to try to move any of these posts to a separate section.

However on the issue of the relationship of reason and logic and the faculties, and how reason and logic work in Epicurean philosophy, we're going to be coming back to that over and over as long as we discuss Epicurus. I therefore want to set up a new thread which contains the core of Norman DeWitt's treatment of that topic, which I think is the best I have ever seen. I "try" to apply his approach myself, but this is a complex subject and the place to start is DeWitt's own analysis so we can consider his perspective in developing our own.

I have taken excerpts from the book which lead up to Chapter 7, "The Canon, Reason, and Nature" and pasted what appears to be some of the most material here for easy reference: [The Role of Reason and Logic in Epicurean Philosophy](#)

I highly recommend this material as a place to "reboot" one's thinking on this topic - that's what I intend to do myself.

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2021 at 2:06 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Don -- use the whole context of the philosophy. Epicurus never places anything greater than pleasure. He is saying we can actually experience total-- perfect-- pleasure. That it's not abstract. The profligates are not going far enough! They are leaving some of their pleasure on the table.

It is hard for people today to drop the middle path ideas they've been inculcated with. EP is not a middle path. It's a path of the most extreme, total pleasure, experienced by humans in reality. Epicurus could testify to it because he lived it.

My thought is that we're unlikely to make too much more progress in this thread on the "role of logic" question, so what we should really get back to and is more to the point in terms of Wilson's article is this point being made by Elayne here, where she is focusing in on the ultimate conclusion that "Epicurus never places anything greater than pleasure." As I see it, that's exactly correct, and it includes wisdom or prudence -- those are valuable only insofar as they lead to pleasure, and the apparent unwillingness of Catherine Wilson to embrace that conclusion is part of how this thread originated in the first place.

I suspect Don would say that he agrees with that point, so maybe the issue is more "why do we think there is an issue in how to express this?"

Post by “Don” of January 15, 2021 at 3:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I suspect Don would say that he agrees with that point, so maybe the issue is more "why do we think there is an issue in how to express this?"

Quick response, short on time right now, but...:

A) Yes, I agree about pleasure.

B) I think y'all are making PD 10 do way more heavy lifting than it has to.

I'll try and add more detail later.

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2021 at 6:02 PM

Thanks Don! If it turns out that we turn our attention broadly to [PD10](#), maybe we should also branch off and discuss that in more detail somewhere here: [Doctrine 10 - If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates...](#)

Just in case Ms. Wilson ever drops by herself, we should probably at least think about keeping this thread focused on the broader question of whether she is doing a good job of describing Epicurus' position on pleasure is the ultimate goal.

Post by “Don” of January 16, 2021 at 8:40 AM

Good idea, [Cassius](#) . I'm going to move over to the [PD10](#) link to continue that discussion. I really want to understand ya'll's* interpretation of that Doctrine. I'm not saying I agree with it (yet, maybe?), but we may be talking past each other in some ways. I'm going to try and use [Daniel Dennett's presentation of Rapoport's Rules](#). I don't think we're opponents, but I do see us as having different interpretations.

*Note: English really needs an official 2nd person plural pronoun instead of the ambiguity of "you." For now, I'm picking "ya'll" 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 16, 2021 at 8:57 AM

1 - Well for at least Elayne and I in our geographic area of the USA, "ya'll" is by far the preferred and dominant pronoun 😊

2 - I do think it's easy to talk past each other on several of these subjects as I see them as subtle and complex. Sometimes it's a challenge to keep up good spirits and not get discouraged, but I am personally convinced that hammering these things out is one of the most important things we can do and is not only educational for us but could be of great use to other people as well. Good humor is essential as we have to be aware that these discussions can sound come across in the way that Cicero wrote in [On The Nature of the Gods](#):

Hereupon Velleius began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus!

We have to be prepared to both be keep good humor and be able to laugh at ourselves as we struggle forward toward confidence. We shouldn't be afraid to have doubts and questions on difficult issues, but at the same time we shouldn't accept doubt when greater precision is possible.

Now I have to go back to the intermundia for a while.....

Post by “Joshua” of January 16, 2021 at 9:31 AM

I moved to NW Florida a year ago and I'm still resisting the allure of "y'all". In lieu of bringing back "ye", which contrary to popular notions was historically plural, I'm still clinging to "you guys". But more generally I try to reframe my sentences so as to escape the problem altogether!

Post by “Joshua” of January 16, 2021 at 9:32 AM

Quote

Now I have to go back to the intermundia for a while.....

There, by contrast, is a sentence you *don't* often see in Georgia!

Post by “Cassius” of January 16, 2021 at 9:40 AM

Ha - I started to list you along with Elayne and me in the "ya'll" camp but I pulled back and erased that. Probably my doing so and your post are absolute scientific proof of the existence of telepathy in humans. 😊

As as for the intermundia we have lots of odd place names in the Southeast but I am not sure I have ever seen "Intermundia 10 miles" on any of the road signs!

Post by “Elayne” of January 16, 2021 at 10:19 AM

Y'all is definitely one of my favorites words ☐. Although my parents were from Alabama, I was born in CA and didn't live here until age 7. So I initially used "you guys" but quickly adopted y'all... which, interestingly, feels much more inclusive of me as a woman. I know some people roll their eyes at objections to the universal male in language... but just imagine if someone said "you gals" and told you gals means everyone. If that would sound weird, then it gives you a hint of my feeling ☐. Just sign me "notaguy"!