

Latest Catherine Wilson Article: "Why Epicureanism, Not Stoicism, Is the Philosophy We Need Now"

Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2022 at 8:11 PM

[Why Epicureanism, not Stoicism, is the philosophy we need now](#)

Philosophers have warned against pleasure since Plato, but Epicurean principles can be the basis of a humane politics aimed at security for all.

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Why Epicureanism, not Stoicism, is the philosophy we need now

Philosophers have warned against pleasure since Plato, but Epicurean principles can be the basis of a humane politics aimed at security for all.

By Catherine Wilson

MY RESPONSE TO THIS ARTICLE:

Catherine Wilson continues to be one of the better writers on Epicurus today. Who could disagree with the title of her article? 😊 Aside from her willingness to accept the church fathers and Plato as "greats" I agree there is a lot of good material in this. However I'd like to talk about her final two paragraphs:

"Epicurus made it clear from the start that he did not advocate the direct pursuit of personal pleasure in the forms of gluttony, indiscriminate sex or overconsumption of intoxicating substances. This was foolish, as it ultimately produces pain. Real pleasure arises from judicious – though not overly fussy – "choice and avoidance", and avoidance is as important as choice.

Epicurean ethics reduces to a few simple principles: avoid harming others and live so that others have no motive to harm you. Form agreements with them for mutual aid and protection. The greatest good for a human being, Epicurus thought, is friendship – pleasure in the presence of another individual, and the security of knowing that help will be given if ever it is needed."

My response:

(1) Epicurus did endorse the pursuit of food, sex, and other pleasures, but not (as she correctly observes) to the point of gluttony which ultimately produces more pain than pleasure. But to talk about "real pleasure" is something else: I would submit that Epicurus clearly says that "all

pleasures are desirable" and there is really no such thing as a "false pleasure" --- if you want to talk about pleasures to be avoided, the point is that some pleasures produce more pain than pleasure in the end, when summed all together.

(2) I have even more concern about saying that "Epicurean Ethics reduces to a few simple principles" wherein she lists a series of things in which pleasure is almost an afterthought. As she often does, Catherine Wilson is playing to current social norms and attempting to justify in modern terms. The goal of Epicurus is unwavering: pleasure for yourself and those who are your friends. Yes, a good way to do that is to live justly and honorably, but that is not the goal - the goal is the pleasure. Even less well stated is the statement that "the greatest good for a human being is 'friendship.'" Epicurus is very emphatic in defining the greatest good in philosophic terms as pleasure -- and Wilson is mixing the means and the ends in saying that he held the greatest good to be friendship. Epicurus clearly stated that of all the things that the wise man will seek in order to procure a life of pleasure, the greatest is friendship. That makes friendship, like virtue itself, a tool toward pleasure, and not the end in itself. Wilson is no doubt well aware of this, but not content to point out that Epicurus said that one would die for a friend, or be as hurt at the torture of a friend as when tortured himself, she mixes the end and the means so as to appeal to a wider audience.

Time for the reminder from Diogenes of Oinoanda, who perhaps one day will have shouted loud enough for even Ms. Wilson to hear:

Fr. 32

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

Post by “Don” of January 6, 2022 at 10:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

her final two paragraphs

You do realize there's more article below those paragraphs, right?

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 10:33 PM

Uh oh!

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 10:34 PM

Thanks Don I missed the break but too late for more tonight. I will wrap up tomorrow

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 5:53 AM

Well after reading the rest I don't see to much reason to revise my prior opinion or add to it too much. As I see it she largely continues in the same vein, deserving some praise and some caution.

For example, I think I know the section in Lucretius that supports this, but I would not say that this is really true of the big picture of the philosophy: "According to Epicurus, cold, hunger and illness are the main causes of human misery, but we are liable to other forms of suffering and deprivation."

Same here: These are largely true as well, but doesn't the writing seem at least just a little "overbroad"?

"Keep your worldly ambitions modest, he advised. Unrequited love, he recognised, is terrible to endure, as are the torments of jealousy, so keep away from anyone threatening to make you miserable before you are in over your head.

Here's another example where I bet [Martin](#) would agree with me:

"The Epicureans thought this was wicked nonsense, and their later followers, especially Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, agreed." Yes each of these had certain good things to say about Epicurus (or at least I think they did). But is it really a good idea to call

them "later followers" of Epicurus - *especially Karl Marx*? If you're trying to write a generalist article encouraging interest in Epicurus, do you really want to do that? Maybe in the New Statesman, I suppose (not really familiar with exactly where that is on the political spectrum, but it's somewhere on the left so maybe that explains her choice.)

Also, I think we've previously here on the forum confronted the bliss drug issue, possibly in discussing prior Wilson references to it, and come to the same criticism that I would restate here: She's not describing this exactly right:

Quote

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.

And the problem here is again that Wilson seems to like to talk in terms of "real pleasure" which I think is a major error in terminology. Again, pleasure is pleasure and pain is pain, and the feeling is very difficult to the point of impossible to "mistake" -- the issue is that some pleasures are not to be chosen because they lead to great pain later, and vice versa. IF IN FACT A BLISS DRUG WORKED THEN AN EPICUREAN WOULD CHOOSE IT! In fact that's largely what Epicurean philosophy is, and why we use the "Tetrapharmakon" analogy -- Epicurean philosophy is medicine for the soul and for the human life and helps us live more happily and less painfully.

It's difficult to understand why Wilson does not seem to want to embrace this point, and make it clearly, except that her articles are generally weighted with politics and she seems to want to appeal to a particular political viewpoint more than anything else. I see this as a significant hazard in being too consumed with politics and that's part of our "no-politics" rule here, though not our primary reason for it.

Post by "Don" of January 7, 2022 at 5:59 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2317-latest-catherine-wilson-article-why-epicureanism-not-stoicism-is-the-philosophy/>

IF IN FACT A BLISS DRUG WORKED THEN AN EPICUREAN WOULD CHOOSE IT!

Ad nauseum, I come to the exact OPPOSITE conclusion (in capital letters, too 😏). If you wanna reopen this can, I'll be happy to engage in a separate thread. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 6:02 AM

Best thing would be to start with a link to where we discussed it before if you can find that, and second just to state a summary of why you think this is incorrect (and we can eventually find a link to past discussion).

What I recall is that where we went down the rabbit hole in the past, and may well again, is the issue of this being a HYPOTHETICAL and that for a hypothetical the presumptions are accepted as true.

(And since you commented on the all-caps i will apologize to new users and explain that I am so incredibly lazy that I find it easier often to use all caps for emphasis rather than underlining or italics and that I do not mean to imply "shouting" 😊)

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 6:07 AM

Don I think you're talking about THIS thread; [Interpretations of PD 10 Discussion](#) for the prior "bliss pill" discussion.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 6:19 AM

Quote

who perhaps one day will have shouted loud enough for even Ms. Wilson to hear

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(And since you commented on the all-caps i will apologize to new users and explain that I am so incredibly lazy that I find it easier often to use all caps for emphasis rather than underlining or italics and that I do not mean to imply "shouting" 😊)

Ah, now that makes sense, I always wondered about that 😄

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 6:24 AM

I think some people infer that mixing all caps with normal case selection is a sign of insanity. 😊 Who knows maybe I am an example of that! 😊 But I know myself pretty well -- laziness is my middle name, though I tend to embellish it as a form of "hedonic calculus." 😊