

# My struggle with Norman DeWitt

**Post by “waterholic” of August 25, 2023 at 9:54 AM**

I have been reading the book very slowly and I suddenly realised that if this had been my first introduction to the philosophy of Epicurus, I might have given it a pass to the extent such a counterfactual can be a reliable indicator.

Here are two related issues:

1. A frequent parallel or comparison with Christianity (almost as a bragging right that Epicureanism has arrived at one or other tool or idea ahead of Christianity).
2. The description of Epicurus as quite a despotic figure with a strong will to dominate feeble minded and expand his influence by any means necessary, including missionary work.

We know that historically many thinkers would be best read with the motto: "don't do as I do, do as I say". But with Epicurus this approach won't work, since the very point of the philosophy is its usefulness in the daily life (back to the example of a useless doctor who does not cure).

Any thoughts on this? How do I reconcile the "live and let live" liberalism with the missionary indoctrination? Is this a problematic tangent of NDW or am I missing something?

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 25, 2023 at 10:38 AM**

Thanks for the post Waterholic because it raises important points. Just a few comments on point 1, because I think point 2 first is likely the much more significant one.

DeWitt's comparisons of Epicureanism to Christianity are pretty much neutral in terms of what they say about Epicurus, and I see them as much more reflective of DeWitt's own speculations about how they compare. In fact I was thinking about this point the other day and I believe it deserves to be emphasized when we discuss this topic: As frequent as DeWitt's comparisons are in the book, ask yourself: "Do those comparisons really state that Christianity is correct or did anything other than borrow procedures from Epicurus?" Yes he goes overboard in his parallels, but to what result? It's not like he is saying that Christianity is right, just that they were perceptive enough to borrow certain perspectives from Epicurus. If he goes overboard, and I think he does, it's on a topic that really doesn't touch Epicurus himself, and just shows that DeWitt's parallels are stretched too thin, because what he's saying they picked up from

Epicurus they could have picked up anywhere, because the friendliness and charity and honesty etc are just largely common sense.

Compare DeWitt's comments to Gibbon's in his "Fall of the Roman Empire." Gibbon uses sarcasm and false-sounding praise of Christianity to make his derogatory points about the influence of Christianity. DeWitt's comments seem sincere, but then never to my memory rise to a level of saying "the Christians were right!" He's basically just drawing attention to parallels that some will find - and do find - extremely interesting, while others won't.

On point 2 I think the issue is much more important. When you say "Is this a problematic tangent of NDW or am I missing something?" I don't think this is something specific with DeWitt.

The characterization you use does remind me of what Martha Nussbaum says in her "Therapy of Desire," but I don't recall DeWitt being nearly so negative about it. Epicurus clearly thought it was important to combat skepticism, and he thought it important to state firmly what he thought was correct, and there is plenty of evidence in the texts to support that being an accurate characterization. But as far as being "a despotic figure with a strong will to dominate feeble minded and expand his influence by any means necessary, including missionary work," I would say yes he had strong will but never tried to "dominate feeble minded" people or expand his influence by "any means necessary." I do think that the term "missionary work" is probably a fair characterization, though it's hard to say how organized it really was.

I see I've already written a lot and only really set the stage for this, with my main points being (1) that the Christianity parallels are a tangent of DeWitt that some find interesting and some don't, but no reason for worry, and (2) the issue of "dogmatism" vs "skepticism" in Epicurus is definitely there, and dedicated skeptics are definitely going to have a problem with Epicurus. Given that I believe Epicurus' position on skepticism is a correct one, that doesn't personally cause me any problem at all, and makes him more valuable to me. But that's the issue that we will want to discuss in much more detail and I feel sure others will weigh in on as well.

On the parallels with Christianity you're indeed struggling with DeWitt. On the issue with "dogmatism," you're struggling directly with Epicurus, though I think you'll eventually decide that your wording of Epicurus' position is significantly too strong.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 11:05 AM**

This is one place in Nussbaum's "Therapy of Desire" where she makes similar assertions about Epicurus being authoritarian, which I think are simply not a fair reading of the texts, and far too pro-Stoic. Comments like these (and for many other reasons where I think she gets Epicurus

friendship.

Epicureans place the emphasis, here, on the role of the wise teacher, who demands the pupil's trust and "confession," and sometimes uses techniques (such as memorization and repetition) that do not require the pupil's own critical activity. Skeptics go much further, engineering the methods of philosophy to cut away the pupil's active cognitive contribution, leaving her more and more in the grip of motivating forces that do not involve belief.<sup>8</sup> Of all the schools it is the Stoics, I think, who most effectively combine recognition of depth in the soul with respect for the pupil's active practical reasoning, producing a picture of philosophical friendship that combines intimacy with symmetry and reciprocity, a picture of self-scrutiny that supplements, and does not displace, dialectical philosophical procedures. (Lucretius seems to capture this combination in many of his arguments, both forming that sort of friendship with the reader and making friendship an end in itself; he may to this extent diverge from the authoritarianism of what seems to have been the common Epicurean procedure.)

As for the arguments in favor of recognizing the unconscious, these are not above criticism—no such argument could be—but in the case of Lucretius on fear they are extremely impressive. The central problem here is

<sup>8</sup> The Skeptics do not explicitly recognize the unconscious—and of course to have any theory of the structure of the mind is contrary to their procedure.

regarded it is in other

Elena Nicoli has written against Nussbaum's interpretation as per here:

Thread

**[Responses to Nussbaum's Criticism That Epicureanism Is Not A Real Philosophy; That Epicureanism Numbs Intellect And Critical Thinking](#)**

This is a thread to discuss the presentation material posted by Jason Baker entitled "The Pleasure of Knowledge: Reassessing Nussbaum's Interpretation of Epicurean Therapy" by Dr. Elena Nicoli, Radboud University, subtitled "A Contested Influence. Hellenistic Philosophy and Modern Thought from Nietzsche to Nussbaum." This is not the full lecture, but summarizes the main points with some excellent citations to Epicurean literature.

The original post is here:

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Cassius

April 12, 2018 at 6:18 AM

More criticism of Nussbaum's interpretations here:

Thread

[\*\*Nussbaum \(Martha\) - "Therapy of Desire"\*\*](#)

Martha Nussbaum's "Therapy of Desire" is a widely known book with much commentary on the implications of Epicurean philosophy for psychology. These comments are not a review of the book and I do not intend them to be taken too negatively. However I think that a reader can more fairly assess the claims Nussbaum makes about Epicurean philosophy earlier in the book if the reader is aware of the ultimate negative conclusions she draws at the end. Here are several excerpts, mostly from the final...



Cassius

February 1, 2018 at 9:13 PM


**Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 11:14 AM**

I had not visited this issue in a while and now I see Elena Nicoli collected some of the best/worst Nussbaum quotes:

**The Epicurean pupil only needs to be 'converted'**

"Thus this ethical view is pragmatic in some of the same ways that Aristotle's is. But there are some differences that make the use of pragmatic constraints in Epicurus' case seem more disturbing. ... The difference seems to be ... that Aristotle shows respect for and seriously investigates his pupils' full experience of value, viewing all that as material toward the ethical truth. We feel that it is an open question what conception they will choose. This seems less clearly the case with Epicurus. **Nikidion is there not to pursue an inquiry but to be converted.**" (p. 123)

"The physical theory of Epicureanism has a lot of internal elegance and some brilliant argumentation; but there seems to have been no attempt to test it against observed nature with an open mind in the Aristotelian way. **The point is to convince people of its truth; and its practical contribution is again and again brought forward as a reason for our commitment to it... It is not altogether an accident that all and only the disturbing views of the universe turn out false.**" (p. 124)



### Epicurean therapy numbs its pupils' intellect and critical thinking

"The Epicurean pupil is not encouraged to bring objections of her own against the system, or to argue dialectically; and as she becomes more dependent on the text and doctrines of the master, she **may be less adept at reasoning for herself**" (p. 136)

"The passivity of the Epicurean pupil, her habits of trust and veneration, may become habitual and spoil her for the active critical task." (p. 139)



### Is this 'real' philosophy?

"For our account has led us into areas of psychological interaction that do not look much like the give-and-take of philosophical discourse .. **Furthermore, we must also insist that what all argument is, in this community, is therapy.. But if we feel that there is something more than a little odd about calling the whole of this therapeutic interchange philosophy, and its tools arguments, we will not be wrong.**" (p. 127-128)



According to Nussbaum, in the Epicurean community...

#### 1. Theoretical knowledge, practical reasoning, and critical thinking have no *intrinsic* value

- Learning, understanding, judging and knowing are mere instruments to attain pleasure.

#### 2. There is a stark asymmetry of roles

- The Epicurean pupil simply needs to be converted: (s)he is not allowed to reason by herself/himself, but only to trust his/her master.

#### 3. Epicureanism is not 'real' philosophy, but 'mere' therapy



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## Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 11:20 AM

It appears that I can't find a video of Elena Nicoli's presentation re Nussbaum. Here is another video that is also good, but if anyone knows of a video that goes with the Nussbaum material please post:

Post

### [Elena Nicoli - An Excellent Presentation On Epicurean Pleasure](#)

I urge everyone in this group to watch [Elena Nicoli's excellent presentation on Epicurean pleasure](#), which the Dutch Research School of Philosophy has humorously mis-titled as "Atoms in the Renaissance." As quickly as I can I am going to prepare an outline of the major points of her talk and attach that to this thread for discussion and reference in the future. I think you will

find that this talk is easy to follow, very clearly presented, and does a very good job of presenting the "standard"...



Cassius

April 16, 2018 at 4:18 PM

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of August 25, 2023 at 11:20 AM

### [Quote from waterholic](#)

2. The description of Epicurus as quite a despotic figure with a strong will to dominate feeble minded and expand his influence by any means necessary, including missionary work.

The origin of this is from Martha Nussbaum?

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

(2) the issue of "dogmatism" vs "skepticism" in Epicurus is definitely there, and dedicated skeptics are definitely going to have a problem with Epicurus.

When reading and studying the Epicurean maxims, there are two ways to "listen" to them:

1) as if they were a kind of "ultimatum" and "absolute" (this is an incorrect way in my opinion).

-or-

2) something to contemplate and to apply as needed in the manner of a "medicine" or a therapeutic -- for example, "[death is nothing to us](#)" is not some kind of "absolute truth" but a way of thinking after applying reason...and likewise for other maxims.

### [Quote from waterholic](#)

1. A frequent parallel or comparison with Christianity

I do not like this aspect of DeWitt myself, and I know that there are others here on the forum who also feel the same way.

### [Quote from waterholic](#)

I have been reading the book very slowly and I suddenly realised that if this had been my first introduction to the philosophy of Epicurus, I might have given it a pass

I personally think that it is intermediate/advanced reading, because it seems to me that you need to know a little bit already (and it's for people who have time for reading long and "wordy" explanations).

As a study method, I personally think sticking with studying and discussing the extant texts is the best way to go for both beginning and intermediate students of Epicurus.

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### **Post by “burninglights” of August 25, 2023 at 11:21 AM**

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 25, 2023 at 11:22 AM**

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The origin of this is from Martha Nussbaum?

No I would not at all say that she originates the attack, she's just a well-known repeater of it.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of August 25, 2023 at 11:27 AM**

You also have to situate DeWitt's book in its time and place--North America during the early years of the Cold War. In fact, Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate the same year DeWitt published. I presume his endless perceived connections between Christianity and Epicureanism were an attempt to get his Christian contemporaries to take another look at Epicurus.

It is nevertheless rather overbearing!

Regarding Epicureanism as a missionary philosophy, there are a number of issues at play. Since the Epicureans were barred by the Gymnasiarchs from teaching in the Gymnasium, the usual place for philosophy, they were bound by necessity to pursue alternatives; writing letters, teaching in private, and placing statues where passers-by might see them and become curious.

Epicurus was also nearly unique in the ancient world for thinking that philosophy should not be relegated to the high born and their sons, but could be studied profitably by everyone. Then there is the issue of dogma, which I am out of time on break to address!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 25, 2023 at 11:27 AM**

#### [Quote from burninglights](#)

Something tells me that if Epicurus was alive today, and he posited a belief that was contradicted by good science tomorrow, he would consider the results and modify his view the make way for the new information.

I think it's certain he would do that. However, there is a deeper issue at work too that is addressed by Philodemus and goes to the heart of Epicurean canonic regarding "when" it is appropriate to take a position and when it is not, and that question can't be settled by counting numbers of "scientists" or taking the position that a consensus of some number of people at any moment proves a point. The issue of when skepticism is appropriate and when it is not is very subtle, and Epicurus clearly thought that "radical skepticism" of the "nothing is knowable" type is clearly wrong.

If you agree with Epicurus that radical skepticism is clearly wrong, then the issue always comes back to that of "how much evidence is needed and how do you process it." You don't flatly throw up your hands - as many people do - and decide to simply stop thinking about super-important issues like whether there are supernatural gods or life after death.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 25, 2023 at 11:32 AM**

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

I presume his endless perceived connections between Christianity and Epicureanism were an attempt to get his Christian contemporaries to take another look at Epicurus.

I think that is definitely the central motivation. Again, DeWitt never (to my recollection) comes out and says that he is a Christian, or that we should accept Christian dogmas. In fact the more I think about it the more I see him doing what Gibbon did -- talking about the history of Christianity as a means of luring in the conventional Christian thinkers before setting the bait that catches them onto the truth.

Don't forget that DeWitt mentions more than once (and seems to enjoy repeating it) how Augustine would have "given the palm" to Epicurus were it not for (apparently) the immortality / life after death issue. In my mind DeWitt does much the same thing that Gibbon does -- he rims the cup with honey for the Christian with all the historical parallels, while he dispenses the medicine of true philosophy to the patient.

DeWitt wasn't in a position himself (and we don't really know whether he wanted to be or not) of writing an anti-Christian philosophy book. We don't know his motives, but I would say that what he in fact did was to provide the most sweeping and sympathetic overview available of a philosophy that makes holding the Christian viewpoint impossible. I doubt very much that he was blind to the natural result of what he had written.

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## Post by "waterholic" of August 25, 2023 at 1:11 PM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The origin of this is from Martha Nussbaum?

[Kalosyni](#) This was my impression of Epicurus using the Norman DeWitt prism, or to put it differently, what I think I would have concluded had I read about Epicurus only NDW.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Compare DeWitt's comments to Gibbon's in his "Fall of the Roman Empire." Gibbon uses sarcasm and false-sounding praise of Christianity to make his derogatory points about the influence of Christianity. DeWitt's comments seem sincere, but then never to my memory rise to a level of saying "the Christians were right!" He's basically just

drawing attention to parallels that some will find - and do find - extremely interesting, while others won't.

Indeed, the conclusions are drawn from the context, but the book's approach is to implicitly accept that there is a logical progression of philosophy/religion from the basic/archaic (polytheism) to the more modern, benevolent Christianity and Epicureanism can be compared to the latter. The most innocent explanation is the one suggested by [Joshua](#) that NDW attempts to attract regular readers of his epoch, who would consider this a good incentive to study Epicurus.

But I agree that the comparisons to Christianity are tangential and can be ignored altogether, without impacting the text or the conclusions.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

If you agree with Epicurus that radical skepticism is clearly wrong,

I wholeheartedly agree with Epicurus that radical skepticism is wrong - a position I have arrived years ago and with considerable thought and study.

But the point here is not whether it's possible at all to know anything. But rather, whether it makes sense to spend time and effort to indoctrinate people through mindless repetition of maxims. Once again, I will probably extend [Joshua](#)'s idea that everything needs to be understood in the context of the time. Learning methods have evolved and what appears to us a little dogmatic, could have been completely normal for the time and place.

Yet another aspect of this issue is the very point of establishing a missionary style effort. From Epicurus' point of view, I see two reasons: 1. to help people (as that's the ultimate goal of the philosophy), 2. build a community of friends - safety in numbers. My impression is that the intensity of this effort in DeWitt's book comes across a little greater than would be warranted by the nature of the school.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2023 at 1:59 PM**

From Diogenes Laertius: "When once a man has attained wisdom, he no longer has any tendency contrary to it or willingly pretends that he has. ... He will give lectures in public, but never unless asked; he will give definite teaching and not profess doubt."

#### [Quote from waterholic](#)

From Epicurus' point of view, I see two reasons: 1. to help people (as that's the ultimate goal of the philosophy), 2. build a community of friends - safety in numbers. My impression is that the intensity of this effort in DeWitt's book comes across a little greater than would be warranted by the nature of the school.

I think there is a third reason that was actually more important to Epicurus than these two, and comes through especially through the intensity of Lucretius, which does come through in DeWitt. That reason is the earnest desire to be confident in knowing the "Truth" about the way things are, so as to then live according to those conclusions. Epicurus doesn't start out simply deciding he wants to be happy -- he starts out - from his first questioning of "Chaos" - wanting to know what "the truth" is about the universe, so as to then live accordingly. Had Epicurus determined from his search for truth that theism could be confidently established, I would argue that Epicurus would then have turned his energetic and determined mind -- see the opening of Lucretius Book I - to being "more catholic than the pope." He would have engaged his powers of persuasion to whatever course he deemed to be correct, and if living per the instructions of supernatural gods could be proven to be the correct course, then Epicurus would have led the way.

Of course that theistic conclusion cannot be proved to be correct, and in fact the non-theistic conclusion is established by such weight that we can have great confidence in it, and thus we have the confident Epicurus (and Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda) that comes through in the texts. These are personalities that will be mocked by such as Cicero, alleging that they talk as if they just came down from the intermundia, and that they want to avoid nothing so much as seeming to be in doubt, but we all have to make our own decisions about how to evaluate the evidence and then act accordingly.

So accordingly I would definitely not agree that "to help people" is the ultimate goal of Epicurean philosophy. It is a very important aspect of the conclusion, but it is not the starting point or the end point.