

Catherine Wilson's List of Wrongs (From How To Be An Epicurean)

Post by “Bryan” of September 8, 2024 at 8:27 AM

I was amused today reading Catherine Wilson's list (pg. 121, of How to be and Epicurean) of the many things that "It is wrong to do."

"It is wrong to do this..." "It is wrong to do that..." On and on!

I cannot say "It is wrong to write such a book" -- but it sure was not necessary!

Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2024 at 8:51 AM

Bryan --

I have the epub version and I am not sure what exactly is on page 121. Is it this paragraph, or can you give another marker so it will be possible to see what you're referring to?

I am presuming that this is part of it, but maybe not all (?)

I haven't revisited her book in several years but i think what you are saying is what I recall - that while there are some good aspects to the book, especially as to negative commentary on Stoicism, she writes in terms of "right" and "wrong" without making clear that pleasure and pain are subjective and impossible to distill down to universal rules that apply to all times, places, and people.

Even when she reaches conclusions that most of us would agree with, such as superficially in the list quoted below, her manner of presenting them as if they are "absolutely" right or wrong undermines the more basic point that the world is not "absolute" and actions always have to be evaluated circumstantially.

Quote

The Epicurean will be moral as well as prudent. Morality directs us to try to minimise harm to others, even when inflicting such harm has clear prudential advantages for the perpetrator. It is wrong to engineer sex by force, or by offering a quid pro quo to

someone who finds you unattractive, as the subsequent experience is bound to be exceedingly unpleasant for them. It is wrong to raise false expectations of permanence in another to obtain sex for a short run. It is wrong to try to control another person's behaviour while enjoying a secret freedom oneself. It is wrong to turn a spouse into a wage slave or a domestic servant.

Post by "Bryan" of September 8, 2024 at 2:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Thank you Cassius, that is well said! Yes the book has a very nice cover, and I occasionally enjoy antagonizing myself by randomly looking inside. I just did it again... three pages on saturated and trans-fats (starting at 195). At least it *looks* like it belongs in my library!

Post by "Kalosyni" of September 8, 2024 at 7:33 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Yes the book has a very nice cover, and I occasionally enjoy antagonizing myself by randomly looking inside. I just did it again... three pages on saturated and trans-fats (starting at 195). At least it looks like it belongs in my library!



Post by "Kalosyni" of September 8, 2024 at 7:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the world is not "absolute"

The world is subject to causes and conditions, uniquely specific to a given situation.

Yet we can generally expect that if someone does something unpleasant to another person that causes pain, then the victim usually (with some exceptions) is no longer feeling congenial toward the perpetrator (to put it mildly), and most of the time will seek out justice (either through the law or by other means). So the perpetrator loses out on any future chances to interact with that person in a pleasant and friendly manner. And the victim may also harbor resentment for the rest of their lives, no longer being on speaking terms. The perpetrator will have to suffer the consequences enacted by trial and incarceration. And they will also suffer the internal guilt and regret. It is not a fun way to go through life.

...Thus we have PD 5.

I did briefly glance at the book a while ago (checked out from the library back in Oregon in 2021) but didn't get very far.

Directly reading and studying the [Principal Doctrines](#) and Vatican Sayings seems better.

Post by “Don” of September 9, 2024 at 10:58 PM

What are your thoughts on this revision?

Quote

The Epicurean will be moral as well as prudent. Morality *and prudence* directs us to try to minimise harm to others. It is *imprudent* to engineer sex by force, or by offering a quid pro quo to someone who finds you unattractive, as the subsequent experience is bound to be exceedingly unpleasant for them *and detrimental to the perpetrator in the long run*. It is *imprudent* to raise false expectations of permanence in another to obtain sex for a short run. It is *imprudent* to try to control another person's behaviour while enjoying a secret freedom oneself. It is *imprudent* to turn a spouse into a wage slave or a domestic servant.

From my perspective, substituting "wrong" with "imprudent" puts a different spin on each of those behaviors. Those things are imprudent in that there may very well be negative

consequences for the perpetrator. The perpetrator's reputation will most likely be negative, so social consequences. The wife (and let's be honest, the majority of perpetrators in these scenarios is male!) will likely become angry (and, imho, rightfully so) and lash out in unexpected and harmful ways. It is simply prudent to treat people honestly, justly, and honorably. As the old saying goes: *What goes around, comes around.*

btw, I'm using the definition of "imprudent" as "unwise, by failing to consider the likely results of your actions."

Note that I'm not saying that I personally find any of those behaviors any less repugnant by substituting "imprudent", but calling them "wrong" doesn't seem the best way to convey, Epicureanly-speaking, why they aren't generally optimal behaviors.

Post by “Bryan” of September 10, 2024 at 1:01 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

but calling them "wrong" doesn't seem the best way

Yes, I fully agree with your comments. I try to avoid getting caught up in words, but that one change is a big improvement!

Post by “Godfrey” of September 10, 2024 at 1:27 AM

These two passages seem to touch on this subject as well:

[PD26](#): *The desires that do not bring pain when they go unfulfilled are not necessary; indeed they are easy to reject if they are hard to achieve or if they seem to produce harm.*

VS21: *Nature must be persuaded, not forced. And we will persuade nature by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the natural desires too if they cause no harm, but sharply rejecting the harmful desires.*

I find it interesting that, at least in St-Andre's translation, harm is referred to generally and not as specific to the individual. This, to me, correlates to what [Don](#) has described above. Basically, to achieve maximal pleasure you must consider the consequences of your actions.