

Updated Thoughts on the Question of "Peace and Safety" in the Works of Norman Dewitt

Post by "Joshua" of June 6, 2025 at 10:55 PM

Introduction

Item number 6 on the [Getting Started](#) page here at the forum reads as follows;

Quote

Read The Two Books We Most Recommend - *Epicurus and His Philosophy* by Norman DeWitt, and *Living For Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* by Emily Austin. Austin's book provides an attractive and practical introduction geared toward those who are just starting with the philosophy, and DeWitt's book provides a sweeping overview of the philosophy with many additional details.

We continue to recommend Norman Dewitt's book on Epicurus for many reasons, not least among them being, first, his comprehensive, well-ordered, and systematic treatment of the subject at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels, and, second, his rare, early, sustained defense of Epicurean philosophy against a parade of hostile critics stretching back into antiquity. That he achieves this while remaining both accessible and *insightful* is something to be remarked upon, and he has earned a small but devoted readership among us.

Nevertheless, the text does have weaknesses.

"You are too timid in drawing your inferences," says the scolding Sherlock Holmes to friend Watson. This is a charge that will never be laid at the feet of Prof. Dewitt. I said that his work was insightful; the truth is that his work is insightful in part *because* he is not timid in drawing his inferences. This is a problem in places, and the problem is compounded when his endnotes are less fulsomely thorough than we might hope, which, for some of us, is frequently. One area of particular contention is on the question of 'Peace and Safety'.

Peace and Safety; The Dewitt Citations

Epicurus and His Philosophy contains 18 mentions of the phrase 'Peace and Safety', with salient examples on pages 85, 189, 190, 194, 285, 304, and 338. Here is the passage (and associated endnotes) from page 85 in Chapter IV, *Mytilene and Lampsacus*:

Quote

It was the mature judgment of Epicurus after his escape to Lampsacus that Peace and Safety were essential conditions not only for the tranquillity of the individual but also for the successful promulgation of a new philosophy. It was from this time that the word Safety, *asphaleia* [[ἄσφαλειᾶ](#)] in Greek, attained the status of a watchword. Eventually it conferred a new vogue upon *securitas* [[sēcūritās](#)] in Latin,⁶⁸ as also upon *praesidium* [[praesidium](#)]. When the poet Horace in his first ode hails Maecenas as his *praesidium*, he recognizes him as the assurance of his safety from attacks by enemies.

It may be observed in passing that St. Paul quoted the words Peace and Safety as catchwords of the Epicureans, to whom he refused the honor of mention by name.⁶⁹ In this collocation Peace signified harmonious relations with neighbors while Safety meant the security of the man as a citizen, the sort of safety that Paul himself enjoyed by virtue of Roman citizenship.

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⁶⁸ It may denote *akedia* [[ἀκηδία](#), [acēdia](#)], freedom from a feeling of responsibility; *aponia* [[ἀπονία](#)], exemption from responsibility; or ataraxy, freedom from turmoil of soul. See Latin lexicon.

⁶⁹ [I Thess. 5:3](#). [I link to the USCCB only because it is the least user-hostile Bible reference website I can find.]

For the sake of completeness, I will include the following passages with their endnotes. First, page 190 in Chapter X, *The New Freedom*.

Quote

It is also manifest that he looked chiefly to friendly diplomacy to keep the environment in control. Good will is a catchword of his creed no less than Peace and Safety. It is a precondition of Peace and Safety. He wrote, for instance: "A life of freedom cannot amass great wealth because of success in this being difficult apart from servitude to mobs or monarchs but it does enjoy all things in uninterrupted abundance; if, however, now and then great wealth does fall to its lot, it would gladly disburse this to win the good will of the neighbor." ⁵³

* * *

⁵³ Ibid. 67. [Ibid here refers back to "SV", *Sententiae Vaticanae* - That is, the [Vatican Sayings](#), number 67]

Next, page 194 in the same chapter.

Quote

It is easy also to find place in this context for the calculus of advantage. Anger is a turmoil in the soul and as such is destructive of serenity or ataraxy. There is more to be said, however: angry reprisals invite reprisals and would be destructive of that peace and safety which Epicureans raised to the rank of a practical objective. As a sect, Cicero informs us, "they were to the least degree malicious."⁶⁸ They were not revengeful; even while attacking them Plutarch ascribes to them the saying "Let this too meet with forgiveness."⁶⁹

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⁶⁸ [Tusc. Disp. 3.21.50.](#)

⁶⁹ [Adv. Colot. 1118e.](#)

Page 285 in Chapter XIII, *The True Piety*:

Quote

The followers of Epicurus after his death, though diligent cultivators of peace and safety, continued to display the same belligerency as their founder. According to Lucian it was chiefly the Epicureans who summoned up courage to defy Alexander the False Prophet, and the only man to accuse him to his face on a specific charge was an Epicurean, who almost paid for his daring by his life.¹¹⁷ Upward of a century before the date of this alleged occurrence it was the Epicureans in Thessalonica who by their derision aroused the indignation of St. Paul, then prophesying the second coming of Christ. In his retort he denied them the honor of mention by name but identified them adequately by those catchwords of their creed, "Peace and Safety."¹¹⁸ It may be added that the Epicureans, as usual, were in the right; the prophecy was not fulfilled.

* * *

¹¹⁷ [Alexander 25,44-46.](#)

¹¹⁸ [1 Thess. 5:3.](#)

Page 304 in Chapter XIV, *The New Virtues*:

Quote

While this conjunction of faith in doctrine with faith in the leader introduces a dynamic emotional element, it still falls short of making a complete picture. The disciple cannot

live to himself. Epicurus thought of his oracular teachings as "beneficial for all men," and he planned coherence for all the local brotherhoods in which his disciples were enrolled. All members depended upon one another for what St. Paul referred to as Peace and Safety. This means that the Epicurean must not only feel faith in doctrine and leader but also in friends and friendship. The authority for this is Vatican Saying 34, which exhibits a play upon words that is characteristic of the master's style: "We do not so much have need of help from friends in time of need as faith in help in time of need." This is an excellent commentary upon the words of St. Paul, "faith which worketh by love."⁴⁷

* * *

⁴⁷ [Gal. 5:6.](#)

Page 338 in Chapter XV, *Extension, Submergence, and Revival*:

Quote

Both Thessalonica and Corinth must have been strongholds of Epicureanism. We must learn to read between the lines. Paul had been preaching at Thessalonica about the second coming of Christ, and prophecy always aroused the scorn of the Epicureans, who denied all participation of the gods in the affairs of man. The answer of Paul to these scoffers is to condemn them to instant annihilation: "For when they shall say Peace and Safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape."³⁶ The Epicureans were not accorded the honor of mention by name, but Peace and Safety were catchwords of their sect. It was part of their ethics to live a retired life apart from the turmoil of the courts and the market place and so to seek security from the malice and injury of other men. Paul follows up the quarrel and predicts the coming of Antichrist, the model for which was Antiochus Epiphanes, the archenemy of his race and the patron of the hated Epicureans.³⁷

* * *

³⁶ [I Thess. 5:3.](#)

³⁷ [II Thess. 2:3-4.](#)

It will be shown that none of the texts cited in the endnotes are sufficient to satisfy the claim that 'Peace and Safety' were watchwords or catchwords among Epicureans, and that Dewitt does not offer substantial evidence in support of this claim.

However, as we move forward in this analysis we will explore sources hitherto unexamined in connection with this question, and these sources might give us a hint as to why Dewitt makes

this claim - and why we should dismiss it.

Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2025 at 10:55 PM

St. Paul and Epicurus

Prof. Dewitt cites the scriptures of the Christians many times in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, but a longer and more focused treatment is in another work entitled *St. Paul and Epicurus*. Both were published in 1954, and, while a thorough critique of either text is well outside the scope of this investigation, it is clear that he must have had the latter text in mind while researching the former. His study of the 'Peace and Safety' question is in the section of that text entitled *Thessalonians*. The plain fact is that he does not substantiate his claim anywhere in these books; nevertheless, I include this here for those who wish to read further into his thoughts. Here is the passage in which he again asserts that Peace and Safety were catchwords;

Quote

By good luck [Epicurus] arrived safely at the refuge of his choice, the city of Lampsacus on the Hellespont, now the Dardanelles; but on the way he was in danger of death by exposure or of capture by pirates, and he narrowly escaped shipwreck. This painful experience was taken to heart. Never again did he invite persecution.

Instead he took the determination to confine himself to peaceful methods and even prescribed rules of safety for his followers in his Authorized Doctrines. Thus the words Peace and Safety became catchwords of his sect and unless we are aware of this fact we shall fail to recognize the meaning of Paul in First Thessalonians 5:3: "For when they shall say Peace and Safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them." This version, however, leaves something to be desired; it would be more accurate to read: "For at the very time that the words Peace and Safety are on their lips, sudden destruction is hanging over them."

And here, a further claim is used to justify his work to 'correct the translation'. If you read *St. Paul and Epicurus*, you will find a lot of correcting, emending, and substituting. I leave it to others to judge his translations of the New Testament; I pause only to note that there is again no evidence furnished to support the claim that Peace and Safety were catchwords.

Quote

No person of ordinary intelligence at the date when the letter was written would have been ignorant that peace and safety were objectives of the Epicurean way of life. Recognition of this fact will enable us to correct the translation. To this end it must be remembered that the second coming and the destruction of unbelievers are events in the future but the threat is present and perpetual. With this knowledge kept well in mind we shall be able to set the tenses to rights: "At the very moment that they are saying 'peace and safety' sudden destruction is hanging over them."

First Epistle to the Thessalonians

Five of the ten endnotes cited above reference the New Testament, and three of the five cite St. Paul's *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, chapter 5, verse 3:

- Society of Bible Literature Greek New Testament
 - ὅταν λέγωσιν · Εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὄλεθρος ὡσπερ ἡ ὠδὶν τῆ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ, καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐκφύγωσιν.
- Latin Vulgate
 - cum enim dixerint pax et securitas tunc repentinus eis superveniet interitus sicut dolor in utero habenti et non effugient
- King James Version
 - For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.
- New International Version
 - While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, pax et securitas, peace and safety. This is the verse on which Dewitt hangs his argument, and it is worth seeing where it leads. The *Epistle* does not contain any mention of Epicureanism, though there are references which might be taken as allusions; Dewitt has his own list, but these are mine. Chapter 2, verse 4 has Paul writing "*not as trying to please human beings, but rather God, who judges our hearts.*" Chapter 4, verses 3-5 constitutes an exhortation for the readers to be chaste and take a wife, "*not in the passion of lust like heathen.*" Verse 11 in the same chapter instructs the readers to "*aspire to live a tranquil life [[ἡσυχάζειν](#)], to mind your own affairs, and to work with your [own] hands, as we instructed you,*" and verse 12, "*conduct yourselves properly toward outsiders and not depend on anyone.*"

The problem with trying to connect any one of these to Epicureanism is that they are commonplaces in the writings of St. Paul, and only one of them (4:11, *live quietly*) is remotely

specific enough even to explore further. Here is that full passage:

- Greek New Testament
 - καὶ φιλοτιμεῖσθαι ἡσυχάζειν καὶ πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια καὶ ἐργάζεσθαι ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσὶν ὑμῶν, καθὼς ὑμῖν παρηγγείλαμεν,
- Latin Vulgate
 - et operam detis ut quieti sitis, et ut vestrum negotium agatis, et operemini manibus vestris, sicut praecepimus vobis:
- King James Version
 - And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you;
- New International Version
 - and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you,

As you will perceive, there are superficial similarities between Paul's injunction to 'live quietly (ἡσυχάζειν)' and the Epicurean dictum 'live unknown (λάθε βιώσας)', as salvaged for us by Plutarch in fragment [U551](#). The really striking thing about Dewitt's commentary on this verse is the total absence of *any* commentary on this verse. In *St. Paul and Epicurus* he writes the following, not in connection with this citation, but in general;

Quote

The courts of law, [Epicurus] well knew, though ostensibly existing for the sake of justice, were only too often employed as an agency of envy to rob the rich of their wealth, politicians of their power, and famous men of their prestige. The obscure citizen was the safest. It was consequently his general advice "to live and die unknown," and in particular "to shun the political career."

So Dewitt does not claim that St. Paul instructed his readers to 'live unknown', and the reason, I think, is clear. Had St. Paul done so, it would seem to have been advised in open contradiction of the Great Commission, enshrined in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16-20;

- 16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
- 17 When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
- 18 Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
- 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,
- 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Is the advice of Epicurus to 'live unknown' in open contradiction of his own desire to bring the fruits of the philosophy to others? That question, too, is outside the scope of this investigation.

The Noonday Demon

It will be enough to say here that neither *Vatican Saying 67*, nor Lucian's *Alexander the Oracle-Monger*, nor the remaining scriptural citations are of any real relevance to our main question. Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* are quoted by Dewitt. Cicero he uses to demonstrate that even hostile critics of Epicureanism could not, with reason or justice, admonish the *behavior* of the Epicureans, though they admonished the philosophy. Cicero is a reliable authority on this question, and he speaks against self-interest; I have no quarrel with Dewitt on this point.

His citation to Plutarch on forgiveness is confirmed by the Loeb edition of *Adversus Colotem*, edited and translated by Benedict Einarson and Philip Howard De Lacy, where a footnote in that text on page 259 in volume XIV suggests that Plutarch is indeed echoing Epicurus himself. The citation there is to *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, book 10, 118. This passage in *Lives* is on forgiving or excusing the mistakes or trespasses of slaves.

There is, I think, only one of the remaining endnotes meriting detailed exposition, and that is endnote 68 in Chapter IV. Here is the passage again:

Quote

It was from this time that the word Safety, *asphaleia* [ἀσφάλεια] in Greek, attained the status of a watchword. Eventually it conferred a new vogue upon *securitas* [sēcūritās] in Latin,⁶⁸ as also upon *praesidium* [praesidium]. When the poet Horace in his first ode hails Maecenas as his *praesidium*, he recognizes him as the assurance of his safety from attacks by enemies.

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this collocation Peace signified harmonious relations with neighbors while Safety meant the security of the man as a citizen, the sort of safety that Paul himself enjoyed by virtue of Roman citizenship.

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⁶⁸ It may denote *akedia* [[ἀκηδία](#), [acēdia](#)], freedom from a feeling of responsibility; *aponia* [[ἀπονία](#)], exemption from responsibility; or ataraxy, freedom from turmoil of soul. See Latin lexicon.

I claim the following insight as original, but concede that without Stephen Greenblatt's work in his book *The Swerve* I would not have hit upon it. *Acedia*, a kind of cabin fever, sometimes described as a state of listlessness or torpor, is a sin in the Christian religion, and connected with the sin of sloth. Why is Dewitt mentioning it here, as if it were a synonym of *securitas* or ἀσφάλεια? My answer; he is calling to mind *this word specifically* because it serves his purpose of delineating the boundary between Epicureanism and Christianity on the subject of safety, and between Epicureanism and Stoicism on the use of the word ataraxia (ἀταραξία). In *acedia*, he finds a word, in both Greek and Latin, that *no one else will ever claim*. This is not the eternal peace of the Christians which they claim is only found in Christ. It is not the *apatheia* of the Stoics, who will never tolerate idleness, nor is it the *otium* of the Roman elite, a kind of healthful leisure focused on restorative cultural pursuits. Neither does Dewitt mean to remind us of the negative meaning of *acedia*; he doesn't even mention that there is any other meaning.

Greenblatt touches on *acedia* in chapter 2 of *The Swerve*, which I think is worth quoting at length:

Quote

Though in the most influential of all the monastic rules, written in the sixth century, St. Benedict did not similarly specify an explicit literacy requirement, he provided the equivalent of one by including a period each day for reading—"prayerful reading," as he put it—as well as manual labor. "Idleness is the enemy of the soul," the saint wrote, and he made certain that the hours would be filled up. Monks would be permitted to read at certain other times as well, though such voluntary reading would have to be conducted in strict silence. (In Benedict's time, as throughout antiquity, reading was ordinarily performed audibly.) But about the prescribed reading times there was nothing voluntary.

The monks were to read, whether they felt like it or not, and the Rule called for careful supervision:

- Above all, one or two seniors must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the brothers are reading. Their duty is to see that no brother is so acediosus as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others. (49:17-18)

Acediosus, sometimes translated as “apathetic,” refers to an illness, specific to monastic communities, which had already been brilliantly diagnosed in the late fourth century by the Desert Father John Cassian. The monk in the grip of acedia would find it difficult or impossible to read. Looking away from his book, he might try to distract himself with gossip but would more likely glance in disgust at his surroundings and at his fellow monks. He would feel that things were better somewhere else, that he was wasting his life, that everything was stale and pointless, that he was suffocating.

- He looks about anxiously this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come to see him, and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness.

Such a monk—and there were evidently many of them—had succumbed to what we would call a clinical state of depression.

Cassian called the disease “the noonday demon,” and the Benedictine Rule set a careful watch, especially at reading times, to detect anyone manifesting its symptoms.

- If such a monk is found—God forbid—he should be reprovved a first and a second time. If he does not amend, he must be subjected to the punishment of the rule so that the others may have fear.

A refusal to read at the prescribed time—whether because of distraction, boredom, or despair—would thus be visited first by public criticism and then, if the refusal continued, by blows. The symptoms of psychic pain would be driven out by physical pain. And, suitably chastened, the distressed monk would return—in principle at least—to his “prayerful reading.”

Display More

There is another passage which is of interest here, and it comes from the rediscovered library of Philodemus in Herculaneum. On a charred papyrus scroll, [PHerc. 1005 Col. 4.2-18](#), he writes;

Quote

He who claims to know us and to be instructed by us, who claims to be a genuine reader of various writings and of complete books, even if he says something correctly, he has only memorized various quotations and does not know the multitude of our

thoughts. What he has to do, he looks up in summeries, like people who believe that they [can learn to be] steersman from books and [can cross every ocean].

In Dewitt's translation of *acedia*, it is a virtue, not a vice or sin. It becomes a state of mind and body uniquely Epicurean, where freedom from responsibility gives one time enough, room enough, and leisure enough to pursue pleasure and happiness according to the *vera ratio* or *true philosophy*, and where the best mode of life is most assuredly available to us.

So much for the endnotes. There is one mountain still unmined in the Bibliography to Dewitt's book, and after that I will present my own discoveries and, at last, reach a verdict and conclusion.

Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2025 at 10:55 PM

Placeholder for part 3

Post by “Cassius” of June 7, 2025 at 4:24 AM

Excellent topic for extended treatment, Joshua. Posting as a thread will allow for comment and suggestions while you are composing and thereafter. When it is finished (*am I foreshadowing Christianity there?*) we will post a full copy to the Articles or Blogs section so that it can be featured for ongoing reference.

DeWitt never closes the circle and comes right out and states "and this echo of Epicurus in Christianity illustrates the goodness of Christianity in general and 'peace and safety' in particular," but it is easy to read that implication into the text.

Just as we warn people about questionable aspects of Frances Wright's *A Few Days In Athens*, it will be good to have a balanced treatment of this part of DeWitt's book.

Post by “Joshua” of June 7, 2025 at 2:02 PM

Part II is live. I'll try to finish today, but I do need a break for some good old-fashioned *acediosus*.