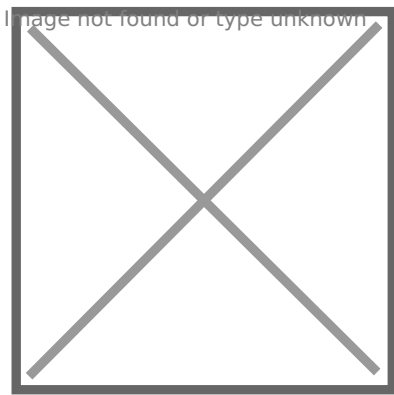


# Epicureans On Kingship

Post by "Cassius" of August 2, 2022 at 10:16 AM

We have been talking a lot recently (summer 2022) about the "natural and necessary" distinction, and I think most of us agree that extreme political power is going to be way down on the list of things Epicurus would advise pursuing, regardless of how we classify it. That's why the article I am linking here caught my eye, as it may contain some hints on how Epicurus viewed even such things that are superficially dangerous such as "kingship." Looks to contain some surprising information. Written by Sean McConnell of Cambridge.



[Epicureans on kingship](#)

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## EPICUREANS ON KINGSHIP

Diogenes Laertius lists in his catalogue of Epicurus' works (10.28) a treatise *On Kingship*, which is unfortunately no longer extant. Owing to the Epicureans' antipathy to politics, such a work might be viewed with surprise and presumed to be virulently negative in outlook. Indeed, Plutarch reports that the Epicureans wrote on kingship only to ward people away from living in the company of kings (*Adv. Col.* 1127a) and that they maintained that to be king oneself was a terrible mistake (*Adv. Col.* 1125c-d). However, the scattered evidence that remains suggests the Epicurean views on kingship were both nuanced and sophisticated. In this paper I seek to reconstruct a viable account of the Epicurean position on kingship.

In the first section I argue that Epicurus and other early members of the school held a fundamentally neutral view on the intrinsic good of kingship: they maintained that it is not necessarily either good or bad and that the matter must be judged on a case by case basis. Here I also identify some criteria for judging that a particular instance of kingship is a good thing. I then attempt to refute two alternative accounts of the Epicurean position that appear in the literature: the negative view reported by Plutarch, which at first blush appears to accord closely with what we see in the fifth book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and which is argued for by Fowler,<sup>1</sup> and a positive view, argued for by Gigante and Dorandi<sup>2</sup> on the basis of a controversial passage in Diogenes Laertius' account of the Epicurean wise man (10.121b). I argue that Lucretius' account of kingship and the passage from Diogenes Laertius ultimately accord with the earlier Epicurean views. These two sections cover much familiar territory, but they lay the foundation for further enquiry into more neglected aspects of Epicurean thought on kingship. In the third and final section I argue that the Epicureans considered kingship to be the form of government most suited for the pursuit of the Epicurean life in 'mixed' societies. Here I show how we can recover an account of the Epicurean ideal king that offers valuable new perspectives on other aspects of their ethical system: the Epicureans in all likelihood made an ethical distinction between two sorts of people—those 'normal' people with a disposition suited to be Epicureans and those of such a nature that they could not follow fully Epicurean tenets but who could be of use ruling—and developed their views on how kingship could be