

# Epicureans On Kingship

Post by “Cassius” of August 2, 2022 at 10:23 AM

Excerpt starting page 182:

The view that the Epicureans had an emphatically conditional stance towards the good of kingship contrasts with both sides in a recent scholarly dispute. Gigante and Dorandi take the acknowledged benefits of monarchy further and argue that Epicurus had a genuinely positive attitude towards kingship. 16 To establish their claim, they focus on an important passage in Diogenes Laertius’ account of the Epicurean wise man, which I have delayed discussing until this point. Here is the orthodox presentation and translation of the text:

χρηματιεῖσθαί τε, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ μόνης σοφίας, ἀπορήσαντα. καὶ  
μόναρχον ἐν καιρῷ θεραπεύσειν.

(Diogenes Laertius 10.121b)

He will make money, but only from his wisdom, if he is hard up. He will on occasion pay court to a king. (tr. Long and Sedley 1987)

The passage is traditionally interpreted as saying that the wise man will make money, but in the exceptional circumstance of poverty and only from the source of his wisdom; also, in exceptional circumstances he will pay court to a king. Extraordinary circumstances and actions are the key concerns. This traditional interpretation sits

well within the context of the conditional view I have been advocating: there is no general value judgement made on kingship in this passage, only that the wise man may ἐν καιρῷ (‘at the opportune moment’ or ‘in due measure’) 17 involve himself in kingly rule, perhaps when circumstances are such that benefits will accrue from such an action. The phrase ἐν καιρῷ seems to be strongly indicative of the conditional nature of the Epicureans’ attitudes towards kingship. However, Gigante and Dorandi argue that the traditional way of interpreting this passage is misguided; they claim that it is in fact indicative of quite a different picture.

The key premise in their argument is the emendation of this crucial passage to read: χρηματιεῖσθαί τε, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ μόνης σοφίας εὐπορήσαντα καὶ μόναρχον ἐν καιρῷ θεραπεύσειν. Their rendering and interpretation of the passage suggests that the wise man will make money as normal practice, but being well-resourced from his wisdom

alone he will pay court to a king at an opportune time. 18

Their interpretation of the text has a number of strengths. In particular, the claim that the wise man will make money as normal practice is supported by Epicurean thought on economics, a very important point that is largely ignored by commentators on this passage. 19 Philodemus, in his economic treatises *On Wealth* and *On Household Economics*, for which his major source is Metrodorus, 20 maintains that the Epicurean will make money and acquire wealth as normal practice, at least to some extent. 21

Epicurus states that one must not seek wealth or affluence for its own sake (SV 30); Philodemus also advocates only doing the correct amount of work one must in order to acquire sufficient goods (*On Household Economics* col. 15.45–16.6, col. 16.44–17.2, col. 18.7–20). 22 There is a balance between sufficient work for survival and mental

tranquillity, but the type of work undertaken does not seem overly significant. Philodemus maintains that basic labour such as tending land, and even commercial enterprise involving slaves and commodities (*On Household Economics* col. 23.7–22), is sanctioned so long as one does not do too much. He also declares certain avenues of

wealth to be unfitting or base, such as soldiering (*On Household Economics* col. 22.17–28), horsemanship and mining (col. 23.1–6), and sophistic and competitive discourses (col. 23.22–36). Most significantly, it appears that wisdom is not the sole legitimate source of wealth, as is suggested in the traditional interpretation of Diogenes Laertius 10.121b, although one should unquestionably use one's wisdom in order to judge proper limits of work and expenditure. 23 Gigante and Dorandi successfully capture this idea in their interpretation; but does their proposed emendation of the text stand up to scrutiny?

The strongest case in favour of emending the text rests on the economic considerations attributed to the wise man that immediately precede in the text of Diogenes Laertius, namely that he will not be a Cynic, not beg, that he will be

concerned with his dignity and the future, and that he will acquire the needs of life (Diog. Laert. 10.118–20). 24 Gigante and Dorandi argue that because the wise man has such economic concerns, especially not to live an impoverished Cynic, day-to-day, hand-to-mouth lifestyle, he is allowed to pursue a course of action in accordance with his Epicurean principles that best meets these economic concerns. They claim that the best course is offered by the court of a king since here lies the best chance to secure the economic goods, both now and into the future. The ideal Epicurean relationship to the king would be one of philosophical tutor or advisor, a position in which one

could have an income and productively and pleasurably guide the king's rule in accordance with Epicurean principles: 'Il saggio professorà la sua sapienza per procurarsi i mezzi di sostentamento facendo anche la corte ad un monarca ed insieme alla gioia per il progresso morale del monarca riceverà pure un guadagno materiale.' 25

Their emendation makes sense, they claim, as it ties the idea of money-making with that of tending to the king philosophically, thus uniting the economic and philosophical interests

ascribed to the wise man. 26 Thus, they conclude, the Epicureans have a fundamentally positive view of the institution of kingship, even though the Epicurean himself would not wish to be the king.