

Epicureans On Kingship

Post by “Cassius” of August 2, 2022 at 10:29 AM

Just going to include the opening part of the introduction to this section on "The Epicurean ideal king."

In this final section I argue that the Epicureans were not content simply to identify that kingship might or might not be a good thing: they also developed a sophisticated prescriptive account of how the political institution of monarchy could successfully realise goods, for both kings and Epicurean subjects, in the present sociopolitical conditions.

The ideal Epicurean society is one in which every person is an Epicurean, a situation that ensures justice, tranquillity, and peace for all (KD 40; Diogenes of Oinoanda fr. 56). 38 The next best situation seems to be one in which most people act in accordance with the utility of justice (like Epicureans) and those that do not appreciate the utility of justice are kept in check by fear of punishment, 39 a scenario that the Epicureans presented as having been historically realised (Hermarchus ap. Porphyry, *De abs.* 1.7.1–8.5). 40 In this situation, a knowledgeable ‘governing’ body ensures compliance and punishment via legislation, thus promoting the good of those in the society (Hermarchus ap. Porphyry, *De abs.* 1.10.4–11.2). 41 However, in the present circumstances the Epicureans were small communities, minority groups within wider societies. 42 They may have thought about how they might maximise the goods accruing from this less than ideal situation. 43 They clearly made an effort to live in harmony

with the wider society, by, for example, encouraging involvement in state festivals (Diog. Laert. 10.120). Although we do not have any extant evidence confirming this, there might also have been some consideration of existing political structures most conducive to Epicurean life. 44 At any rate, we can attempt a credible reconstruction of

Epicurean views.

Although not always desirable and certainly not ideal, monarchy is, pragmatically, a very attractive political option for the Epicurean. Democracy or a republic, for example, would require involvement of the citizens every so often in the political process—something the Epicurean does not want to do if it can be avoided (SV 58).

Even if other systems provided the same benefits, the deciding factor would be the need for personal involvement in public affairs. To be sure, an oligarchy in which the Epicurean citizens are not politically involved would be a viable option, but equally so would be monarchy (or any form of autocratic rule). 45 Since it seems that monarchy was a political system singled out for particular attention by Epicurus himself, let us leave aside the possibility of oligarchy and focus on monarchy.