

Epicureans On Kingship

Post by “Cassius” of August 2, 2022 at 11:27 AM

Here is a KEY passage that we'll want to be sure to keep in mind and discuss:

But just what sort of person would place himself in the position of king given the natural end of pleasure with which all humans should identify (Epic. Men. 128-9; Cic. Fin. 1.42), and to which political life is typically not conducive? A comment from Plutarch may hold the key to answering this question:

οὐδ' Ἐπίκουρος οἶεται δεῖν ἡσυχάζειν, ἀλλὰ τῇ φύσει χρῆσθαι
πολιτευομένων καὶ πράσσοντας τὰ κοινὰ τοὺς φιλοτίμους καὶ
φιλοδόξους, ὡς μᾶλλον ὑπ' ἀπραγμοσύνης ταραττεσθαι καὶ
κακοῦσθαι πεφυκότας, ἂν ὧν ὀρέγονται μὴ τυγχάνωσιν.

(Plutarch, De tranquillitate animi 465f-466a)

Epicurus does not think that it is necessary for the lover of honour and the lover of fame to be tranquil but to employ their nature in political participation and prosecuting public business because, given their nature, by not taking part in public matters they are harmed and disturbed more, if they do not obtain the things which they seek.

Although Epicurus calls everyone to a life of tranquillity and abstention from public affairs (e.g., fr. 548 Usener), Plutarch reports that he advocates political participation for those who are by nature positively disposed towards fame and honour. Immediately following this comment, Plutarch claims that it is absurd for Epicurus to urge the most eager people who are unable to lead a tranquil life rather than the most qualified to enter politics (ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνος μὲν ἄτοπος οὐ τοὺς δυναμένους τὰ κοινὰ πράσσειν προτρεπόμενος ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν μὴ δυναμένους, 466a). It seems, however, that Epicurus could readily defend himself from such criticism. One can envisage an argument along the following lines: in the current socio-political conditions it benefits the Epicureans to have the lovers of fame and honour rule, even though it is the Epicureans who know best how to rule. On the one hand, this allows the Epicureans to avoid active participation in politics and pursue a tranquil life, although they can still reap the benefits such as security provided by political institutions. On the other hand, as Plutarch himself states, this situation also benefits the lovers of fame and honour: owing to their nature, they would be more disturbed by doing nothing and so they are actually increasing their calm and happiness by involvement in public life. Thus, they too can be seen as applying correctly the 'hedonic calculus' (Epic. Men. 129-30) 56 given their specific circumstances (cf. Lactantius

Div. Inst. 3.6) and everyone wins. 57 But clearly there are some important outstanding issues.

First, why are there people with this special nature who warrant a different sort of advice from the norm? Secondly, why should we think that letting these eager but unqualified people rule will be beneficial rather than detrimental?

It is striking that Plutarch's report contains a clear distinction between those people who have a nature disposed towards fame and honour and who should pursue such things, and those 'normal' people, of a nature suited to be Epicureans, who should eschew fame and honour. If we accept that Plutarch's report is accurate, then it seems

that Epicurus did acknowledge that there are two distinct sorts of people: some just have a certain natural (τῆ φύσει, πεφυκόταξ) disposition for fame and honour, which leadership can provide, and will never be satisfied without fulfilling it; some people are unable to live a tranquil life, the life of the Epicurean, and should instead practise

politics. However, in the normal context of Epicurean ethics, the man who wanted fame or power would be misguided—he would desire an empty end, have an unnatural and unnecessary desire (Lucr. 3.995–1002, 5.1131–5). Moreover, such a twisted view on the world should always be able to be cured by reason, meaning the innate part of one's nature will not influence one's pursuit of ataraxia (Lucr. 3.307–22). In order to reconcile these conflicting claims, we need to look more closely at what 'nature' means in Plutarch's report.