

Cineas the Epicurean

Post by “Maciej” of February 7, 2018 at 3:52 PM

Little is known about epicurean philosopher and orator Cineas, who was advisor and diplomat to king Pyrrhus of Epirus. His diplomatic career is recorded by Plutarch in Life of Pyrrhus http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman...s/pyrrhus*.html

Parts interesting from epicurean perspective are 20.4 and 14.1-8 quoted below:

Quote

Again, at supper, where all sorts of topics were discussed, and particularly that of Greece and her philosophers, Cineas happened somehow to mention Epicurus, and set forth the doctrines of that school concerning the gods, civil government, and the highest good, explaining that they made pleasure the highest good, but would have nothing to do with civil government on the ground that it was injurious and the ruin of felicity, and that they removed the Deity as far as possible from feelings of kindness or anger or concern for us, into a life that knew no care and was filled with ease and comfort.

Quote

It was this Cineas, then, who, seeing that Pyrrhus was eagerly preparing an expedition at this time to Italy, and finding him at leisure for the moment, drew him into the following discourse.

"The Romans, O Pyrrhus, are said to be good fighters, and to be rulers of many warlike nations; if, then, Heaven should permit us to conquer these men, how should we use our victory?"

And Pyrrhus said: "Thy question, O Cineas, really needs no answer; the Romans once conquered, there is neither barbarian nor Greek city there which is a match for us, but we shall at once possess all Italy, the great size and richness and importance of which no man should know better than thyself."

After a little pause, then, Cineas said: "And after taking Italy, O King, what are we to do?"

And Pyrrhus, not yet perceiving his intention, replied: "Sicily is near, and holds out her hands to us, an island abounding in wealth and men, and very easy to capture, for all is faction there, her cities have no government, and demagogues are rampant now that

Agathocles is gone."

"What thou sayest," replied Cineas, "is probably true; but will our expedition stop with the taking of Sicily?"

"Heaven grant us," said Pyrrhus, "victory and success so far; and we will make these contests but the preliminaries of great enterprises. For who could keep his hands off Libya, or Carthage, when that city got within his reach, a city which Agathocles, slipping stealthily out of Syracuse and crossing the sea with a few ships, narrowly missed taking? And when we have become masters here, no one of the enemies who now treat us with scorn will offer further resistance; there is no need of saying that."

"None whatever," said Cineas, "for it is plain that with so great a power we shall be able to recover Macedonia and rule Greece securely. But when we have got everything subject to us, what are we going to do?"

Then Pyrrhus smiled upon him and said: "We shall be much at ease, and we'll drink bumpers, my good man, every day, and we'll gladden one another's hearts with confidential talks."

And now that Cineas had brought Pyrrhus to this point in the argument, he said: "Then what stands in our way now if we want to drink bumpers and while away the time with one another? Surely this privilege is ours already, and we have at hand, without taking any trouble, those things to which we hope to attain by bloodshed and great toils and perils, after doing much harm to others and suffering much ourselves."

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Cineas's question is one we must all answer. Why are we doing what we are doing? We live such busy lives with so many pressing matters that we never pause to consider what the point of it all is. Might we not be like Pyrrhus, rushing to act before we know why we doing anything at all?

This is the lesson of Cineas that is often either unknown or forgotten: Happy life is neither about conquering land under our feet nor sky above our heads. Happy life is about peace, safety and pleasure that grows from sober reasoning.