

The Epicureans on happiness, wealth, and the deviant craft of property management

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Ancient ethics concentrates on what the good life is and how to attain it.

Therefore it's no surprise that the proper attitude toward acquiring wealth was an ethical topic, any more than it should be a surprise that alongside virtues like courage and magnanimity Aristotle discusses the virtue of having a proper sense of humor. (*NE IV 8*)¹ The virtues we need to live well encompass both lofty and humdrum matters. And because the virtues are often conceived of as a sort of practical skill that allows us to live well and attain the good life, ancient ethicists, beginning with Plato, were also attracted to analogizing the virtues to crafts like shoe-making and medicine. So while financial planning and property management may initially seem to be mundane practical topics that don't *per se* raise ethical issues, it's also not surprising that ancient ethicists would be concerned with the place of the craft of financial planning or property management (*oikonomia*) in the good life.

The Epicureans stake out distinctive and plausible positions on these issues. The primary focus of this paper will be what the later Epicurean Philodemus has to say about the craft of property management in his treatise *Peri Oikonomias*. He contends that there is indeed a craft that allows you to obtain and manage wealth skillfully, but that

¹ Henceforward, references to these and other texts will be made according to the following conventions: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* = *NE*; Cicero, *De Finibus* (On Goals) = *Fin.*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* = *DL*; Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* (Principle Doctrines) = *KD*; Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* (Vatican Sayings) = *SV*; Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus = *Ep. Men.*; Philodemus, *On Property Management* = *De Oec.*; pseudo-Aristotle / Theophrastus, *Economics* = *Oik.*; Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* = *Oec.*.

cultivating and exercising that craft is incompatible with being a virtuous person and obtaining happiness. Philodemus' views are an advance on the Socratic and Aristotelian positions on the craft of property management that he is reacting against—or so I will argue. Before turning to Philodemus, however, I will start by giving a thumbnail sketch of the Epicurean ethical position in general, and then summarizing what the Epicureans have to say about acquiring wealth in particular.

1. The Epicureans on Wealth and the Good Life

1.1 A quick overview of Epicurean ethics

Epicurus accepts the eudaimonist ethical framework articulated by Aristotle: the highest good is *eudaimonia*, or happiness.² Some goods are only instrumentally valuable, for the sake of obtaining some other good, such as taking medicine for the sake of health. Other goods are intrinsically valuable: Aristotle believes there is a wide variety of intrinsic goods, such as pleasure, honor, and friendship. But these are not the highest good, as they are not valuable merely for their own sake, but also because by obtaining them we thereby help make our lives happier. Since all other goods are valuable for the sake of happiness—either as an instrumental means to happiness, such as medicine, or as a partial constituent of happiness, such as friendship—happiness is the highest good.

Epicurus disagrees with Aristotle on the content of *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is an *activity*, not a state of mind, and the primary constituent of *eudaimonia* is virtuous action.³ (Nonetheless, Aristotle believes that the *eudaimôn* life will be

² “Happiness” is the customary and probably best translation of *eudaimonia*, but it is far from perfect, since *eudaimonia* applies to one's life as a whole and need not be a state of mind, e.g., Aristotle thinks *eudaimonia* is a kind of activity. See chapter 1 of Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for more on these issues.

³ At *NE I 7*, Aristotle's definition of *eudaimonia* seems to make virtuous activity the sole constituent of *eudaimonia*, but other passages appear to include other goods (such as good health or a good reputation) also as partial constituents. See Eric Brown, “Wishing for Fortune, Choosing Activity: Aristotle on

pleasant, as the virtuous person enjoys acting virtuously; see *NE* 1099a13-21.)

Epicureanism is a form of egoistic hedonism, where only one's own pleasure is intrinsically good, only one's own pain intrinsically bad (*Fin.* I 30), and the happy life is the pleasant life. But hedonism does not license reckless dissipation. While all pleasures are good and all pains bad, not all pleasures are choiceworthy, and not all pains are to be avoided. Many pleasurable activities, such as shooting up heroin or punching out people who annoy you, have bad long-term consequences, and the wise person avoids these misguided pleasures, picking and choosing among pleasures and pains in a way that makes her life as a whole pleasant. (*Ep. Men.* 129–130)

Epicurus has an idiosyncratic understanding of pleasure, which significantly influences his recommendations on how to live your life. The absence of pain, he holds, is not merely a neutral state between pleasure and pain. Instead, absence of distress is something we rejoice at, and hence a sort of pleasure. (*Fin.* I 37) In fact, the removal of all pain is the limit of pleasure (*KD* 3), and once we reach this state of 'static' pleasure, our pleasure can be varied but not increased. (*KD* 18) Specifically, 'static' pleasures come in two varieties. The first is bodily static pleasure (*aponia*), not being hungry, thirsty, cold, etc. The second is mental static pleasure (*ataraxia*, or tranquility), not being anxious, fearful, full of regret, etc. Both are good, but *ataraxia* is by far more important for having a pleasant life.⁴

In order to face the future free from fear and anxiety, Epicurus advocates reducing

External Goods and Happiness" (*Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2006): 221-256) for more on this issue and a defense of virtuous activity as *eudaimonia*'s sole constituent.

⁴ In a letter dictated while he was dying and in physical agony, Epicurus claims that he is still supremely happy, in part because of the joy he has because of the memory of his past philosophical conversations. (*DL* X 22)

our desires. He divides desires into three classes: natural and necessary, natural and not necessary, and vain and empty. (*KD* 29) Desires for food, drink and shelter are natural in the sense that human beings congenitally have them rather than learning them, and they are necessary in that fulfilling them is needed either to live at all or to free the body from troubles. (*Ep. Men.* 127) We should seek to fulfill these desires (*SV* 21) and to arrange our lives so that we will be confident that they will be fulfilled. (Having a group of trustworthy friends that help one another out in times of need is crucial for this confidence.⁵) A desire for *expensive* food in particular, though, e.g., filet mignon, he says is natural but not necessary, because many kinds of food can quell your hunger, and filet mignon in particular is not necessary. These desires, which typically require intense effort to fulfill, are based on “groundless opinion,” (*KD* 30) i.e., by thinking we need things we don’t really need. Even worse are the vain and empty desires for things like fame and power. These desires have no natural limit, and pursuing them brings us into conflict with other people and leaves us vulnerable to fortune.⁶

We should sharply reject any harmful desire. (*SV* 21) This is compatible with fulfilling merely natural desires when doing so doesn’t harm us, and Epicurus says that the person who is self-sufficient and least needs extravagance is the one who enjoys it most when it happens occasionally to come along. (*Ep. Men.* 130-1) So you attain tranquility by reducing your desires and living a quiet and moderately ascetic life among a group of trusted friends.

⁵ See Matt Evans, “Can Epicureans Be Friends?” (*Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004): 407-424) for a good discussion of the place of friendship in the Epicurean life.

⁶ It’s worth noting that, in order to eliminate anxiety, this practical wisdom about the natural limits of your desires is not sufficient. To remove the fears of death and of the gods, you must also have correct beliefs about the nature of things, so that you are confident that death is annihilation and that gods have nothing to do with the workings of the world.

1.2 Natural wealth and the good life

Because of her reduced desires, the wise Epicurean will not need great wealth, and her recognition of the natural limits of her desires will bring her temperance and the other virtues. Seneca reports that Epicurus boasted that he could be fed for less than an obol but that his disciple Metrodorus, who hadn't made as much progress, needed an entire obol. (*Letters on Ethics* 18.9)⁷

But this still leaves open some questions. Isn't wealth still instrumentally valuable, even for the wise Epicurean? And if so, wouldn't she still pursue wealth, at least insofar as she can do so in a way that doesn't disturb her tranquility? After all, if you have \$1,000,000 in a trust fund, it seems initially that the one million dollars would help secure your peace of mind. Even if things go seriously wrong, you'd have that one million dollar backstop to obtain the meager food and shelter you need, plus any medical care you might require, as well as being able to help your friends meet their limited needs. For a wise Epicurean, there obviously will be limits on what you do to obtain wealth. Because of the anxiety associated with possibly getting caught and punished, an Epicurean wouldn't steal a bunch of money.⁸ And a high-stress occupation such as being a hedge fund manager working long hours in cutthroat competition with her co-workers for the largest annual bonus would be ruled out too. But considering the money on its own, it would still seem to be instrumentally valuable, and if so, it would seem useful for an Epicurean to have the skills needed to gain and preserve wealth well.

⁷ An obol was the most common low-denomination Greek coin, worth 1/6 of a drachma.

⁸ The Epicureans hold that it's never prudent to act unjustly, because of the fear of getting caught and punished, although hostile critics like Cicero found this implausible. (See *KD* 34 and *Fin.* II 58-9.) For more on the Epicureans' justification for acting justly and their replies to folks like Cicero, see Tim O'Keefe "Would a Community of Wise Epicureans Be Just?" (*Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 133-146) and John Thrasher "Reconciling Justice and Pleasure in Epicurean Contractarianism" (*Ethical Theory & Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 423-436).

The suspicion that the wise Epicurean would strive to accumulate wealth is reinforced by their polemics against the Cynics, as recounted by Philodemus.⁹ Although the Cynics repudiate pleasure, with the founder of the Cynic movement, Antisthenes, asserting that he'd rather go mad than feel pleasure (*DL VI 3*), the Epicureans and Cynics do share a fair amount of common ground ethically. Both find the conventional valorization of wealth and fame pernicious and assert that the wise person will instead pursue what is valuable by nature. And both agree that worrying about things like pursuing wealth is irksome. But the Cynics advocate that the wise person should heedlessly “live in utter poverty so as to be carefree” (Tsouna *Ethics of Philodemus* 177), whereas the Epicureans think that you should take some care to provide for yourself. The Epicurean Metrodorus argues that, in order to achieve tranquility, you shouldn't avoid all things that involve difficulty and distress, because the absence of some of those things will cause more pain than the pain caused by striving to obtain them. (*De Oec.* XIII 1-11) He gives the example of health: “health does involve some care and effort for the body but causes unspeakably more distress when absent.” (*De Oec.* XIII 11-15) It may occasionally be a hassle to brush your teeth or pick up a new tube of toothpaste at the store, but the hassle is easily worth avoiding the agony of badly rotting teeth. And in this regard wealth is like health: obtaining what you need in order to satisfy your natural and necessary desires for food, drink and shelter involves some pain, but far less than the pain you'll experience if you heedlessly disregard wealth and end up on the street, hungry and

⁹ Translations of Philodemus are from Voula Tsouna, ed. and trans., *Philodemus, On Property Management* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), and of other Epicurean texts from Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, trans. and eds., *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). My understanding of Philodemus on *oikonomia* is deeply indebted to Tsouna's edition of *On Property Management* and chapter 8 of Voula Tsouna, *The Ethics of Philodemus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

disease-ridden. The Epicurean wise person “will take thought for his possessions and for the future,” (*DL X 120*) and not only for his own sake: “One must philosophize and at the same time laugh and take care of one’s household and use the rest of our personal goods...” (*SV 41*)¹⁰

Despite this, the Epicureans want to deny that the wise person would have a million dollar trust fund. The “natural wealth” that is needed to satisfy our natural and necessary desires is limited and easy to obtain (*KD 15*), whereas “a free life cannot acquire great wealth, because the task is not easy without slavery to the mob or those in power,” and Epicurus adds that if the wise person somehow lucked into great wealth, she’d give it away in order to obtain the good will of her neighbors. (*SV 67*)

The Epicureans’ attitude toward great wealth parallels their attitude toward political power and fame. The “natural good” of political power and fame—what’s actually valuable for us that these things might provide—is security from other people. So if the lives of people with political power or fame aren’t secure, then pursuing these things would be practically irrational. (*KD 6-7*) Now, as it turns out, political power can bring us *some* security, but far better security “comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many,” (*KD 14*) and so the Epicureans recommend avoiding involvement in the business of politics. (*DL X 119; SV 58*) Likewise, while the limited “natural wealth” needed to satisfy our natural and necessary desires is easy to obtain and worth pursuing, wealth as defined by “groundless opinion” stretches without limit (*KD 15*), and pursuing such wealth is misguided and counterproductive.

In fact, the Epicureans believe that if we build into our conception of wealth that

¹⁰ The Epicureans say that the wise person cares for her friends as much as for herself (*Fin. I 65-70*). See Evans’ paper (fn. 5) for an argument that such concern can be squared with the Epicureans’ egoism.

wealth is a valuable thing that helps us obtain what is good for us, then what is commonly thought of as wealth turns out not to be wealth at all: “Poverty, if measured by the goal of nature, is great wealth; and wealth, if limits are not set for it, is great poverty.” (*SV* 25)

And if the wealthy person is the one who has what he needs to satisfy his desires, then, as Epicurus recommends, to make somebody wealthy you should not give him money; instead, you should reduce his desires. (Stobaeus *Anthology* 3.17.23)

2. Philodemus on the craft of property management

While the overall Epicurean position on wealth, as sketched above, is tolerably clear, it leaves several important questions open. What are the details on how one should comport oneself with regard to material goods? The Epicureans condone the pursuit of “natural wealth,” but in addition to wondering about how *much* wealth one should have, a person concerned with the place of wealth in the good life should inquire into the manner in which one procures wealth, manages wealth, uses wealth, and disposes of it. These sorts of questions are the concern of the craft of *oikonomia* (Tsouna (2012) xiii ff.), and in his treatise *Peri Oikonomias* Philodemus asks if there is such a craft (yes), and if so, whether the wise person would learn it (no).

A small bit of historical background: Philodemus was a prominent and prolific Epicurean of the 1st century BCE, well-known to Cicero. However, none of his work was transmitted to us through the medieval manuscript tradition. In the mid-18th century, an Epicurean library containing a large number of Philodemus’ treatises was uncovered in a villa in Herculaneum, which had been destroyed (along with Pompeii) in the eruption of

Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE. The work of deciphering the badly-damaged and often fragmentary papyri continues today, with the help of modern technology.¹¹

Philodemus considered himself a faithful disciple of Epicurus, but Epicurus' followers disputed how to understand his teachings, and it is quite possible that Philodemus sometimes strays into inadvertent unorthodoxy.¹² So it's not guaranteed that everything Philodemus says about the craft of property management is consistent with Epicurean ethics, but I will leave aside questions of this sort.

Oikonomia is the etymological ancestor of “economics,” and there are conceptual (and not merely etymological) links between the two, but it differs significantly from contemporary economics. *Oikonomia* concerns the management of one's *oikos*, or household. So a decent translation would be “household management,” or—because *oikonomia* is often concerned more narrowly with the management of one's household *goods*, rather than everything that goes into being a good member of a household—“property management.” Both *oikonomia* and economics are bodies of knowledge about wealth. But “an inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations” and related topics like trade imbalances and inflation would have been considered not a part of *oikonomia*, but of *politikê*, the study of how to manage the *polis*, or city-state. *Oikonomia*

¹¹ A good introduction to Philodemus and other Epicureans of the period is David Sedley's “Epicureanism in the Roman Republic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, edited by James Warren (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29-45.

¹² For Epicurean reverence of the master, see David Sedley, “Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, edited by Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford University Press, 1989), 97-119. My own view is that Philodemus does shade Epicurean views in the direction of making them less out of touch with contemporary Roman views, sometimes with the result of making them inconsistent with overall Epicurean doctrine, but this is controversial. For possible unorthodoxy with regard to friendship, see Tsouna, *Ethics of Philodemus* 27-31, and with regard to death, see Tim O'Keefe, Review of *Philodemus, On Death*, ed. and trans. W. Benjamin Henry, Society of Biblical Literature. (*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2011), <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=24309>>.

overlaps more with some parts of microeconomics, such as opportunity costs, but it's important to keep in mind that *oikonomia* is supposed to be primarily a kind of *practical* knowledge, a skill about how to use your own property successfully. So it would be most akin to advice books on personal finance, budgeting, and money management, albeit with its advice (sometimes) rooted in theorizing about human nature and human happiness. I will follow Tsouna in translating *oikonomia* as “property management,” but “property management” in this sense is not what property management companies do, administering residential, commercial, or industrial real estate on somebody else's behalf.

I'll start by giving some background on *technê* (craft) and the dispute between Gorgias and Socrates as to what counts as a genuine *technê* in Plato's dialog *Gorgias*. I'll then lay out the positions of Xenophon and Theophrastus on the craft of property management, as Philodemus builds his own position in reaction to theirs, before closing with Philodemus' criticisms of Socrates, Xenophon and Theophrastus and his reasons for asserting that the craft of property management is pernicious.

2.1 What is a genuine technê?

Although Socrates would disapprove of the method, let's start by enumerating some examples of crafts: shoe-making, medicine, bridle-making, horsemanship, and military strategy. Crafts aim at some end, they have a product, which can be more or less tangible: shoes, bodily health, bridles, skillful riding, or military victory. This end is the good of the craft, and the craft is organized around producing that end well. A craft is a skill, a kind of practical knowledge, that can be learned and taught.

The *Gorgias* opens with Socrates asking Gorgias to define his supposed area of expertise, rhetoric. Rhetoric, says Gorgias, is the art of persuasive speaking, of getting

people to believe what you want them to believe and do what you want them to do. It is a *morally neutral* skill, which can be used for good or for ill. But this does not show that there is anything wrong with rhetoric or teachers of rhetoric, any more than it's a problem for boxing or boxing instructors that boxers can use their skill either to defend the innocent or to pummel small children for fun. Socrates presses Gorgias on how rhetoric differs from other crafts that allow you to speak persuasively, e.g., a doctor can persuade a sick patient to take a drug by explaining to him the reasons why doing so is a good idea, and Gorgias concedes that rhetoric is persuasion in the absence of knowledge, but is no less useful or effective as persuasion for that. (*Gorgias* 456a-459c)

In response, Socrates proposes two constraints that an ability must satisfy to count as a genuine craft. If a *technê* is a kind of practical *knowledge* that brings about some *good*, we should accept the *theoretical sophistication constraint*, i.e., that it is based on a knowledge of the nature of its subject, and the *normative constraint*, i.e. that it brings about some genuine good. Medicine would be a paradigm craft for Socrates.¹³ It aims at producing health, the genuine *good* of the body, and hence satisfies the normative constraint. And the craft's prescriptions are based upon a *knowledge* of the nature of the body, and hence meets the theoretical sophistication constraint. The two constraints are distinct, but not entirely unrelated: it is a grasp of something's nature that allows a craftsman to understand what its good is and how to promote it effectively. Any purported 'craft' that fails to meet these criteria is merely an *empeiria*, an empirical 'knack.' Pastry-baking, for instance, is given by Socrates as a knack, the counterpart to the craft of medicine. The baker of Krispy Kreme doughnuts doesn't aim at producing

¹³ For understanding Socrates' position, it does not matter whether medicine as actually practiced in his day met (or would have been thought to meet) Socrates' standards.

what's genuinely good for the body, but merely at gratifying a person's appetites for what is yummy and pleasant. And the practices of pastry-baking aren't based on an understanding of the body's nature; instead, through empirical guesswork and trial and error, bakers have discovered *what* works without understanding *why* it does. (*Gorgias* 462b-465e)¹⁴

2.2 Xenophon and Theophrastus on the craft of property management

The surviving portions of Philodemus' *On Property Management* open with a recapitulation of the views of Theophrastus and Xenophon, before going on to criticize their views and offering his own account. Fortunately, we do not have to rely on Philodemus' (often fragmentary) summary, as both treatises survive independently.¹⁵

Although the two treatises differ considerably in their particulars, their overall positions are consistent. Both try to preserve an important place for the craft of property management, conceived of as aiming at maximizing your wealth, within the Socratic and Aristotelian ethical tradition that puts virtue and virtuous activity at the center of the happy life. Xenophon was one of the young men who followed Socrates around, and many of his treatises feature Socrates as a speaker. Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* has Socrates speaking with Critoboulos, a wealthy Athenian living beyond his means.

¹⁴ Socrates uses these standards to condemn rhetoric as a mere knack. Although he condemns knacks both for being mere empirical guesswork and for aiming at what's merely apparently good, it's not difficult to think of practices that meet one of his criteria but not the other. (For instance, Ignaz Semmelweis instituted the practice of having medical students wash their hands between visiting the autopsy room and the delivery rooms prior to the development of germ theory, conjecturing that the medical students carried some unknown "cadaverous particles" on their hands, and one can imagine advertising techniques that aim to persuade people to buy harmful things that they find pleasing, where these techniques are based on a sophisticated psychology.)

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Oikonomikos*, and Theophrastus, *Oikonomika*. The identification of Theophrastus as the author of the *Oikonomika* is uncertain, but I will follow Philodemus here.

Theophrastus was a student of Aristotle's and assumed the headship of the Lyceum after Aristotle's death.

Both Xenophon and Theophrastus accept Socrates' normative condition on a genuine craft: a genuine craft aims at the genuine good. Xenophon has Socrates claim that the good property manager knows how to use things so as to derive benefit from them (*Oec.* I 15), and Critoboulos and Socrates agree that on the assumption that wealth is a good thing, only what a person can derive benefits from is wealth. It follows that the same thing can be wealth for the person who knows how to use it well, and not be wealth for the one who doesn't. (*Oec.* I 7-13) Later, in a passage strongly reminiscent of what Epicurus says about natural wealth and poverty, Socrates claims that he is rich while Critoboulos is poor, even though his possessions are less than a hundredth of Critoboulos', because he has enough to provide himself with what he needs, whereas Critoboulos does not. (*Oec.* II 2-10) Theophrastus does not engage in this sort of linguistic revisionism, but he does open the *Oikonomika* by comparing household management to politics, where politics concerns the right constitution and use of the city-state as a whole for the sake of attaining the good life, whereas the function of household management is to found and make right use of a household for the sake of the good life. (*Oik.* I 1, cf. Aristotle's discussion of politics as the master-craft of the good in *NE* I 2)

On Xenophon's account, it may seem to follow that Socrates is himself the expert property manager, as he knows how to use things so as to benefit himself. But Socrates denies this, saying that because he's never had many possessions, he's never had the opportunity to learn how to manage estates well, just like a person who has never owned or borrowed flutes wouldn't develop the talent for playing them well. (*Oec.* II 12-13) So

in the latter part of the dialogue, the humdrum everyday advice about matters like how to choose an effective foreman, or when to sow grain, is not given by Socrates himself. Instead, he recounts what he was told by Ischomachus, a virtuous gentleman who has had the relevant experience. Both Xenophon and Theophrastus accept the traditional view of property management as an autonomous discipline with its own distinctive norms and aims, just as is true with other crafts, such as shoe-making or flute-playing, rather than collapsing it into being merely one application of practical wisdom writ large.

Neither Xenophon nor Theophrastus think that there is a tension between the autonomy of the craft of property management and the normative constraint that genuine crafts aim at what's genuinely good. Theophrastus maintains that the habits needed to manage your property well also help you develop the virtues (*Oik.* 1345a13-14), while Xenophon says that the expert property manager pursues and maintains possessions only by fair and honorable means. (*Oec.* VII 15) As noted above, Xenophon believes that genuine wealth must be beneficial for the person possessing it. And on the further assumption that only the virtuous person knows how to use things well so that they are beneficial for them, virtue is necessary to be a skilled property manager, even if property management has additional skills peculiar to it. And because Theophrastus situates the narrower skills of managing your property well within the wider context of managing your household well, which would include having developed the proper sorts of character traits regarding interacting with your wife, children, and slaves, it's reasonable to suppose that only the virtuous person has fully realized the craft of property management, even though learning how to manage property well is a specialized skill distinct from

developing virtuous character traits.¹⁶

Both Xenophon and Theophrastus combine their general account of property management with everyday advice about the practices of the skilled property manager, concerning matters like regulating your monthly expenses, what sort of food and drink to give to your slaves, and how to select a suitable overseer for your household. For instance, Xenophon recommends arranging things in the house so as to find them easily (*Oec.* VII 37-45), while Theophrastus says the household manager and his wife should arise before the servants and retire after them and should never leave the house unguarded, so they sometimes will need to get up in the middle of the night to check on things. (*Oik.* 1345a12-18)

The upshot, then, is that the skilled property manager has, over time and with practice, developed a set of skills related to maximizing his income and preserving his property, albeit in a way that is directed by his virtue and constrained by his ethical commitments to what is noble, and the exercise of this skill allows him to obtain wealth in a way that facilitates a happy life.

2.3 *Philodemus against Socrates, Xenophon, and Theophrastus*

Philodemus' explicit foils are Xenophon and Theophrastus, but he also implicitly rejects Socrates' constraints in the *Gorgias* on what counts as a genuine *technê*. He rejects the normative constraint—that crafts aim at what is genuinely good—as going against our usual linguistic practices. This is part and parcel of Philodemus more generally objecting to building in normative constraints where they don't belong. To call a rich person like Critobolous poor and a poor person like Socrates rich is not “in

¹⁶ See also *NE* 1140b7-11: people with practical wisdom know what is good for them and for others, which allows them to manage households or states.

accordance with ordinary usage” but merely “a matter of opinion.” (*De Oec.* V 1-4)

Likewise, he objects to Socrates (in Xenophon) calling the vicious masters of a household ‘slaves’ to their vices as a violation of ordinary language. (*De Oec.* IV 1-16) Critobolous has lots of goodies, and Socrates few, so Critobolous is the rich guy and Socrates the poor one, even if we think that Socrates is living well and Critobolous badly. Rather than confusingly saying that Socrates is “genuinely rich” and Critobolous “genuinely poor,” it would be better to say that Socrates is poor but happy, and Critobolous rich but miserable.

Philodemus’ criticisms of Socrates here would seem also to apply to much of what Epicurus says, e.g., that you make a person wealthy by reducing his desires. But as Tsouna notes (*Ethics of Philodemus* 170 n. 18), Philodemus should not be understood as flat-footedly objecting to all metaphorical usages of terms. Instead, he is objecting to Socrates’ particular linguistic revisionism. When used literally, ‘possessions’ and ‘wealth’ refer to your stuff like your shoes, house, and gold, without prejudging whether or not that stuff is good for you, and *oikonomia* is the craft aimed at the acquisition and preservation of that sort of stuff. To stipulate that this craft must produce what is genuinely good for you is misguided.

Philodemus’ description of *oikonomia* also implicitly rejects Socrates’ theoretical sophistication constraint. Recall that Socrates contrasts a *technê*, a skill that is based upon a grasp of the nature of its subject, with an *empeiria*, a mere empirical knack whose practices are based on guesswork without an understanding of why they work. Rather than contrasting *technê* and *empeiria*, Philodemus runs them together. He calls *oikonomia* a craft (*technê*), an empirical practice (*empeiria*), and an empirical practice

involving expertise (*empeirias entechnou*). He allows for there to be empirical expertise even in practices like making bread.¹⁷ Philodemus says that a craft arises from the observation of what is common in particular cases, and it allows a person to accomplish things in a way that cannot be accomplished by those who have not learned it.¹⁸

Philodemus' characterization of a craft does not preclude crafts, like Socrates' (idealized) vision of the craft of medicine, whose practices proceed from a grasp of their subjects' natures. But neither does it require such a grasp. Instead, it allows for a continuum of crafts that are more or less theoretically informed, but all of which can be contrasted with mere guesswork.

At this point, it may seem that Philodemus should endorse Gorgias' position. Property management, like rhetoric, is an empirically-based, morally neutral skill that can be used for good or for ill, depending on the character of the craftsman. But insofar as wealth, like persuasive speeches, is often useful—and the Epicureans admit that it is—then it looks like the Epicureans should admit that having this skill is worthwhile, at least for the wise person who knows how to deploy it appropriately. But Philodemus rejects Gorgias' position, saying that the wise person won't acquire or exercise the skill of property management. (*De Oec.* XVII 6-14)

Philodemus has practical objections to the advice regarding property management given by Xenophon and Theophrastus, but more fundamentally he believes that becoming

¹⁷ *De Oec.* XVII 2-40. I follow Tsouna's translation: although *empeiria* is most commonly rendered as 'knack' in translations of the *Gorgias*, given that Philodemus' estimation of *empeiriai* is higher than Socrates', 'empirical practice' is more suitable here.

¹⁸ *Rhet. 2a, PHerc.* 1674.xxxviii.2-18. Text in Francesca Longo Auricchio "Edition of Philodemus *Rhetorica I and II*," in *Ricerche sui papiri ercolanesi*, vol. III, edited by Francesco Sbordone, (Naples: Giannini, 1977), 132. See David Blank, "Philodemus on the Technicity of Rhetoric," in *Philodemus & Poetry*, edited by Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 178-188 for further discussion of this passage and of Philodemus' understanding of *technê*.

an expert property manager involves adopting a destructive set of attitudes. For instance, targeting Theophrastus, Philodemus writes that it's "wretched and unfitting for the philosopher" to wake up before the servants and go to sleep after them, and that getting into the habit of getting up in the middle of the night is bothersome and probably bad for your health and for studying philosophy. (*De Oec.* XI 30-41)¹⁹ It's important to note that Philodemus doesn't dispute that developing these habits would be an effective means of preserving your wealth—in fact, given what he says elsewhere about the craft of property management, he'd probably concede that they're effective. His objection, instead, is that doing things like getting up in the middle of the night to check on your property is a real drag, and the possible financial gain isn't worth the trouble. Being willing to do such things and developing such habits show that you're a money-lover (*philochrêmatos*, *De Oec.* XVII 13), and having such an anxious attitude is destructive. Eagerly watching over your possessions at all times is troubling and "is accompanied by bitter worry," (*De Oec.* XIX 10-16) and wanting to increase your property as much as possible makes you agonize over your losses. (*De Oec.* XIV 30-37)

2.4 *The Expert Manager of Property versus the Epicurean Sage*

At this point, it seems like Xenophon and Theophrastus would have an obvious response to Philodemus' objections against the craft of property management. They would agree that the anxious, money-grubbing craftsman of property that Philodemus depicts would live a horrible life. But they would deny that there is any reason to suppose that the person who acquires the skill of managing his property expertly need acquire the destructive attitudes that Philodemus describes. Instead, the virtuous person who acquires

¹⁹ See chapter 8 of Tsouna *Ethics of Philodemus* for some further examples of disagreements about e.g., the proper profession of a philosopher and the proper treatment of slaves.

this skill would understand the appropriate place of property within the happy life, and its relative importance compared to other goods like the welfare of one's friends and justice, so that his acquisition and preservation of property would not interfere with his overall pursuit of happiness.

Philodemus distinguishes between the expert property manager and the Epicurean sage, and this distinction allows him to parry this response.²⁰ As noted above, a craft is a skill whose practices and norms are organized around producing some end. Philodemus takes the end of property management to be maximizing your wealth. Philodemus repeatedly refers to the expert property manager as concerned with the “more and less,” i.e., with measuring how much wealth he has and with doing what he can to maximize his gains and minimize his losses. Philodemus is willing to concede to Xenophon and Theophrastus that the expert property manager will pursue the accumulation and preservation of his wealth only within the bounds of what is lawful and not shameful (*De Oec.* XX 22-32), so that he won't do things like embezzle money or break his promises to his friends in order to make more money. Nonetheless, in devoting himself to becoming as skillful as he can in accumulating property, the expert property manager will acquire habits and attitudes that distort his personality and disturb his peace of mind.

On Philodemus' behalf, we may draw an analogy to Aristotle on the virtues of character, such as generosity. A virtue of character is not just a developed disposition to do the right thing, e.g., to help out your friends financially in an appropriate manner, but

²⁰ To be clear: Philodemus himself does not present this distinction as a reply to such an objection, and he does not explicitly raise the above objection. And below I present Aristotle's doctrine about what feelings the virtuous person would have as a way of helping to justify Philodemus' contentions regarding the attitudes the expert property manager would have; Philodemus himself does not do so. All of this is my attempt to understand Philodemus' position and assess its strength.

also to have the right sorts of feelings, e.g., to want to help them when they need it, and to find helping them pleasurable. (*NE* II 3) This is true in part because inappropriate feelings are themselves indicative of a character flaw: if I hate parting with my money in order to help my sick friend, there is something morally wrong with me, even if I manage to overcome this inappropriate feeling. But also, having the right sorts of feelings helps you realize the mean in action and perform virtuous action in a smooth, savvy, unimpeded manner. Likewise, crafts have ends—and therefore goods—internal to them. And being a skilled craftsman involves, in part, having the proper set of attitudes, taking pleasures and pains in the right sorts of things, in order to perform well *qua* craftsman. Philodemus, however, thinks that the attitudes that make you better *qua* property manager make you worse *qua* human being. As Epicurus puts it, “It is impious to love money unjustly, and shameful to do so justly; for it is unfitting to be sordidly stingy even if one is just.” (*SV* 43)

Philodemus contrasts the attitudes of the expert property manager with those of the Epicurean sage. The sage realizes that she needs little to live well, and that even if hard times befall her, she can count on her friends to come to her aid. So she won’t have an obsessive zeal concerning the more and the less, and she won’t feel distressed about what she loses. (*De Oec.* XIV 23-30). The sage isn’t bound by her wealth in a way where she’ll be willing to endure great toils to preserve it, and she has no heavy cares about preserving it. (*De Oec.* XV 31-45).

Philodemus admits that the sage will be worse *qua oikenomikos*: she cannot acquire a very large quantity of money in a short time (*De Oec.* XIX 4-10), and even if she does, it won’t be easy for her to keep it. (*De Oec.* XVIII 37-9) But unlike the heedless

Cynic, she isn't a *bad* property manager. She doesn't waste her property rather than keep it. This good enough know-how isn't hard to attain and isn't pernicious. (*De Oec.* XVI 21 ff.) Such know-how is the "common experience that is adequate for the management of one's possessions, though not for excessive moneymaking." (*De Oec.* XVI 35-39).²¹

Philodemus stakes out a distinctive position on craft knowledge. A craft like property management does have an internal 'good,' and it does display genuine skill, so Socrates is wrong to dismiss it as a mere pseudo-craft. At the same time, Gorgias is wrong to think that crafts are morally neutral skills that can be used for good or ill. We cannot detach the skills we cultivate from the sort of person we become. Developing these skills takes time and effort, these skills have goals internal to themselves that the person acquiring them will tend to accept, and acquiring the skills involves cultivating a set of attitudes that can be beneficial or harmful.

So Philodemus would also dissent from the picture of the crafts that Aristotle sketches in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle himself, rightly, thinks that craft knowledge, while a genuine form of human intellectual excellence (*NE* VI 4), does not require that the craftsman be a virtuous person—a person can be both a skilled saddlemaker and a cowardly jerk. But when discussing the crafts, he posits a hierarchy of goods such that all forms of craft knowledge can be subsumed and coordinated toward the achievement of the highest good, *eudaimonia*. Saddlemaking is subordinate to horsemanship, which is subordinate to military strategy, which is subordinate to politics. And politics coordinates all other skills and bodies of knowledge for the sake of having the members of the community achieve happiness. (*NE* I 1-2) Philodemus challenges this

²¹ Philodemus thinks that the wise person won't become an expert property manager, but she may be willing to take advantage of the financial acumen of the poor sap who is an expert. (*De Oec.* XIX 23-32)

optimistic assumption. Because we live in a sick society with widespread false beliefs about the place of wealth in the good life, we have developed deviant crafts like property management that embody these false beliefs. These deviant crafts cannot be subsumed and coordinated toward the achievement of happiness, because they aim at ends, or aim at them in such a way, that detract from the good.²²

Conclusion

When it comes to wealth, then, the Epicurean Sage is a satisficer and not a maximizer: she will not spend a lot of time worrying about finding the option that gets her the best financial return, but will go ahead and act once she's found an option that's good enough. And given the Epicurean conception of what we need in order to satisfy our natural and necessary desires, "good enough" is easy to achieve. We should be satisficers because worrying a lot about material goods and trying to maximize them, and acquiring the craft expertise and associated attitudes to do extremely well with regard to financial gain, leads to unhappiness. Having many choices and worrying about them generally leads to anxiety and unhappiness, but especially when it comes to wealth.²³

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²² This label of "deviant crafts" is my own, not Philodemus', although I believe it is faithful to Philodemus. It's worth noting that nothing in Aristotle's overall ethical position should preclude him from granting Philodemus' revision to his claim concerning the crafts. In fact, Aristotle says that the politician will ordain which sciences should be studied in a state and to what extent (*NE* 1094a28-30), suggesting that the wise politician could exclude some crafts as pernicious. (I thank Jennifer Daigle for pointing this out.)

²³ See Michael Slote, *Beyond Optimizing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) for an in-depth discussion of issues related to maximizing vs. satisficing and a defense of the rationality of satisficing, and Barry Schwartz *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) for evidence that satisficing is a hedonically superior strategy to maximizing.

²⁴ I'd like to thank Jennifer Baker, Jennifer Daigle, Anne Farrell, Hal Thorsrud, Mark White, and the colloquium audience at UT-Knoxville for their thoughtful feedback on this paper.

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