

Episode 219 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 26 - Cicero Continues His Attack On Epicurus' Position On Pain

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From "Epicurus In Rome" - Part 1, Chapter 5 - Caesar the Epicurean? A Matter of Life and Death

Scholars have often pointed to and that concerns Caesar's attitude to death. According to Epicurus, of course, fear of death is – together with fear of the gods – the main obstacle to attaining a happy life, and a person cannot achieve ἀταραξία without having internalized the truth that “[death is nothing to us](#)” (ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, KD 1). Whatever his other philosophical beliefs may or may not have been, Caesar on a number of occasions displayed a contempt for death that might be seen as at least Epicurean-inflected. Passing over his well-attested physical courage and death-defying acts during his military campaigns, I will concentrate in what follows on a few attested utterances, which combine to allow perhaps some insight into Caesar's views on life and death.

The first is an argument Caesar reportedly made in his speech on December 5, 63 BC, when the senate debated the fate of the convicted Catilinarians. After the consul-designate Silanus had proposed the death penalty and the subsequent speakers had seconded his motion, Caesar suggested instead lifelong imprisonment without the possibility of parole. While the greater part of his speech as reconstructed by Sallust in his War against Catiline is concerned with cautioning the senators against approving a measure of questionable legality, Caesar also offers a striking argument against the death penalty itself (Sall. BC 51.20):

de poena possum equidem dicere, id quod res habet, in luctu atque miseriis mortem aerumnarum requiem, non cruciatum esse; eam cuncta mortalium mala dissolvere; ultra neque curae neque gaudio locum esse.

About the punishment I can speak according to the facts: in sorrow and misery death is a relief from grief, not a torture. It dissolves all human ills, and beyond it, there is place for neither care nor joy.

While Sallust is not quoting Caesar verbatim, he presumably availed himself of the senatorial archives in reconstructing the speeches, and the historicity of the remarks on death is confirmed not only by the fact that Sallust's Cato, in responding to Caesar,

refers back to them, but crucially also by Cicero's own summary of the discussion in the fourth speech Against Catiline. As for Cato, he begins his attack on Caesar's proposal as follows (Sall. BC 52.13):

C. Caesar a little while ago gave this order a well-phrased and well-structured lecture on life and death, apparently deeming false what is said about the underworld, namely, that divorced from the good, the wicked inhabit horrid, desolate, foul and fearful places.

Cicero, finally, paraphrases Caesar's views on death as follows (Cat. 4.7-8):

The other speaker understands that death was not created by the immortal gods for the sake of punishment, but is either a necessity of nature or freedom from toil and misery. Thus wise men have never undergone it unwillingly, and brave men have often even willingly sought it ... He leaves only life to the criminals. If he had taken that away, he would have removed with one single pain many miseries of mind and body as well as all punishments for their crimes. Therefore, in order that there be some fear left in life for wicked men, those men of old maintained that there were some punishments of this sort set for the impious in the underworld—since of course they understood that without them, not even death would have to be feared.

Even though Caesar's and Cato's words are filtered through Sallust, and it is unclear to what extent Cicero is distorting or embellishing Caesar's argument, there still emerges a reasonably clear image of what Caesar must have said. Apparently, he claimed that the death penalty was not a suitable punishment because death constitutes the absolute endpoint for human experience beyond which a person will be affected by neither good nor ill – and certainly not the punishments of the traditional underworld. As a result, death is not to be feared (*non esse mortem ipsam pertimescendam*, Cic. Cat. 4.8).