

Episode 282 - TD13 - Is A Trifling Pain A Greater Evil Than The Worst Infamy?

Post by "Cassius" of May 28, 2025 at 9:44 AM

I started to post this in Rolf's "Confusion - The Feelings Are Only Two" thread, because it gets at how Epicurus can at times be speaking in broad philosophical terms. But it comes from this week's podcast, so I will put it here. This is a passage we cover in the upcoming Lucretius Today Podcast from Book 1 of Tusculan Disputations:

Quote

XII.1

But why are we angry with the poets? we may find some philosophers, those masters of virtue, who have taught that pain was the greatest of evils. But you, young man, when you said but just now that it appeared so to you, upon being asked by me what appeared greater than infamy, gave up that opinion at a word. Suppose I ask Epicurus the same question. He will answer, that a trifling degree of pain is a greater evil than the greatest infamy; for that there is no evil in infamy itself, unless attended with pain. What pain then attends Epicurus, when he says this very thing, that pain is the greatest evil; and yet nothing can be a greater disgrace to a philosopher than to talk thus.

I would suggest that this is another example of Epicurus speaking philosophically in ways that contradict our current modern presumptions. We today think of "evil" as supernaturally black-hearted or the like.

But while there is no "evil" in Epicurean philosophy in the sense of supernatural personified devils or sin, Epicurus does use a word that we translate as "evil" to describe pain. How do we reconcile that?

I'd say we reconcile it by saying that Epicurus is telling us to disregard the concept of sinning against gods or supernatural "evil," but instead we can make legitimate use of the word "evil" to describe something that we very much don't want to experience and which we avoid when it makes sense to avoid it.

In unwinding Cicero's statement, to me what Cicero is doing is switching the context to distort Epicurus' intent.

Epicurus could easily be saying, and apparently did say, that:

1. Pain is always "evil," because it is undesirable in itself.

2. But "infamy" is not always "evil." - An Epicurean could say that he doesn't care at all what the crowd thinks, if he thinks what he is doing is the correct thing to do, but he would care if the crowd takes action to inflict pain on him because of it.

Therefore speaking philosophically, even a trifling amount of pain, if experienced for no reason, is always "evil," while the worst "infamy" cannot be with certainty judged to be evil unless it results in actual harm to the person involved.

I'll leave the rest for the podcast discussion, but I illustrated this by referring to Cicero himself, and to Cassius Longinus.

in certain circles Cicero was held up to "infamy" for his execution of the Cataline conspirators. Likewise, Cassius was held up to "infamy" for the assassination of Julius Caesar.

But at the time they took those actions, there was no necessity that those actions would result in infamy or bad results to them at all. Cicero believed that his actions regarding Cataline were among his most heroic, and would send him down in history as the savior of the Roman Republic. If Cassius and Brutus had won the battle of Philippi, then they too would likely have been judged to have saved Rome from Julius Caesar's dictatorship.

So you can support the idea that even trifling amounts of "pain" are worse than any amount of "infamy" by speaking strictly: "Pain of and for itself" is always undesirable, but no amount of "infamy" can reliably be judged as always undesirable without referring to consequences.

I don't know whether Epicurus said something like this explicitly, or whether Cicero invented the argument like he misrepresented Epicurus as saying that being in the bull of Phalaris is "sweet." But either way, we can read between the lines and unwind the points being made by Epicurus, and see that Epicurus was regularly making philosophical points ("the feelings are two, pleasure and pain, so that absence of pain is the same as pleasure.") that are easy to misrepresent if you take them out of context.