

Reconciling Cosma Raimondi and Diogenes Laertius On the Bull of Phalaris Question

Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2025 at 8:20 AM

I think we've probably mentioned this in the past but not devoted a thread to it, and this apparent conflict in the sources deserves scrutiny to see how it might be reconciled.

In his letter, Cosma Raimondi takes the Stoic to task for saying that one can be happy even while being roasted in the bull of Phalaris. Here is the section. I have included both the direct statement and his justification, where he explains his reasoning, which seems to me to be sound as far as it goes.

Quote

Though this was Epicurus's judgment, the Stoics took a different view, arguing that happiness was to be found in virtue alone. For them the wise man would still be happy even if he were being tortured by the cruelest butchers. This is a position I most emphatically reject. What could be more absurd than to call a man 'happy' when he is in fact utterly miserable? What could be sillier than to say that the man being roasted in the bull of Phalaris,¹ and subject to the most extreme torment, was not wretched? How again could you be further from any sort of happiness than to lack all or most of the things that themselves make up happiness? The Stoics think that someone who is starving and lame and afflicted with all the other disadvantages of health or external circumstances is nonetheless in a state of perfect felicity as long as he can display his virtue. All their books praise and celebrate the famous Marcus Regulus for his courage under torture.² For my part I think that Regulus or anyone else, even someone utterly virtuous and constant, of the utmost innocence and integrity, who is being roasted in the bull of Phalaris or who is exiled from his country or afflicted quite undeservedly with misfortunes even more bitter, can be accounted not simply not happy but truly unhappy, and all the more so because the great and prominent virtue that should have led to a happier outcome has instead proved so disastrous for them.

If we were indeed composed solely of a mind, I should be inclined to call Regulus 'happy' and entertain the Stoic view that we should find happiness in virtue alone. But since we are composed of a mind *and* a body, why do they leave out of this account of human happiness something that is part of mankind and properly pertains to it? Why do they consider only the mind and neglect the body, when the body houses the mind and is the other half of what man is? If you are seeking the totality of something made up of various parts, and yet some part is missing, I cannot think it perfect and complete.

Nevertheless, the position CR is attacking (a man can be happy even under torture) seems to be endorsed by Epicurus as well, if both Diogenes Laertius and Cicero are correct:

Quote

Diogenes Laertius 118

And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy. Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament.

Quote

Cicero Tusculan Disputations II-VII.¶

But Epicurus, indeed, says such things that it should seem that his design was only to make people laugh; for he affirms somewhere, that if a wise man were to be burned, or put to the torture,—you expect, perhaps, that he is going to say he would bear it, he would support himself under it with resolution! he would not yield to it, and that, by Hercules! would he very commendable, and worthy of that very Hercules whom I have just invoked: but even this will not satisfy Epicurus, that robust and hardy man! No; his wise man, even if he were in Phalaris's bull, would say, How sweet it is! how little do I regard it! What sweet? is it not sufficient, if it is not disagreeable? But those very men who deny pain to be an evil, are not in the habit of saying that it is agreeable to any one to be tormented; they rather say, that it is cruel, or hard to bear, afflicting, unnatural, but still not an evil: while this man who says that it is the only evil, and the very worst of all evils, yet thinks that a wise man would pronounce it sweet. I do not require of you to speak of pain in the same words which Epicurus uses—a man, as you know, devoted to pleasure: he may make no difference, if he pleases, between Phalaris's bull, and his own bed: but I cannot allow the wise man to be so indifferent about pain. If he bears it with courage, it is sufficient; that he should rejoice in it, I do not expect; for pain is, beyond all question, sharp, bitter, against nature, hard to submit to, and to bear. Observe Philoctetes: We may allow him to lament, for he saw Hercules himself groaning loudly through extremity of pain on mount Æta: the arrows with which Hercules presented him, were then no consolation to him, when.....

What are the possibilities?

1. Did Cosma Raimondi not have Diogenes Laertius?

2. Did Cosma Raimondi not have Tusculan Disputations?
3. Did Cosma Raimondi not understand Epicurus on this point? (If so, how could CR not relate this to Epicurus own final experiences when he said he was happy even under excruciating pain of kidney disease?)

Are there other possibilities?