

Cicero's Comparison of the Life of Lucius Balbus (Pleasure) Against That Of Marcus Regulus (Virtue)

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In this week's podcast Joshua discusses this following section from On Ends, in which Cicero claims that Marcus Regulus (who died under torture) was happier than that of Lucius Balbus (who as far as we know died continuing to experience pleasures).

This is worth examination further so we can focus in on the relative meaning of the word "happy" as Cicero is using it to describe the two people - specifically as to the nature of the "pleasure" involved. In this Yonge translation, Cicero is recorded to have said that *"Regulus had had the conduct of great wars; he had been twice consul; he had had a triumph; and yet he did not think those previous exploits of his so great or so glorious as that last misfortune which he incurred, because of his own good faith and constancy; a misfortune which appears pitiable to us who hear of it, but was actually pleasant to him who endured it."*

At time of writing I have not checked the Latin to see what word is used here in "actually pleasant to him" but it's clear that Cicero and Torquatus have a very different view of the meaning of "pleasure."

This contrast is a good example we can use in future conversations so I will set this up as a separate thread.

[Quote from On Ends 2:XX](#)

XX. There was a man of Lanuvium, called Lucius Thorius Balbus, whom you cannot remember; he lived in such a way that no pleasure could be imagined so exquisite, that he had not a superfluity of it. He was greedy of pleasure, a critical judge of every species of it, and very rich. So far removed [pg 154] from all superstition, as to despise the numerous sacrifices which take place, and temples which exist in his country; so far from fearing death, that he was slain in battle fighting for the republic. He bounded his appetites, not according to the division of Epicurus, but by his own feelings of satiety. He took sufficient exercise always to come to supper both thirsty and hungry. He ate such food as was at the same time nicest in taste and most easy of digestion; and selected such wine as gave him pleasure, and was, at the same time, free from hurtful qualities. He had all those other means and appliances which Epicurus thinks so necessary, that he says that if they are denied, he cannot understand what is good. He

was free from every sort of pain; and if he had felt any, he would not have borne it impatiently, though he would have been more inclined to consult a physician than a philosopher. He was a man of a beautiful complexion, of perfect health, of the greatest influence, in short, his whole life was one uninterrupted scene of every possible variety of pleasures. Now, you call this man happy. Your principles compel you to do so. But as for me, I will not, indeed, venture to name the man whom I prefer to him—Virtue herself shall speak for me, and she will not hesitate to rank Marcus Regulus before this happy man of yours. For Virtue asserts loudly that this man, when, of his own accord, under no compulsion, except that of the pledge which he had given to the enemy, he had returned to Carthage, was, at the very moment when he was being tortured with sleeplessness and hunger, more happy than Thorius while drinking on a bed of roses.

Quote

Regulus had had the conduct of great wars; he had been twice consul; he had had a triumph; and yet he did not think those previous exploits of his so great or so glorious as that last misfortune which he incurred, because of his own good faith and constancy; a misfortune which appears pitiable to us who hear of it, but was actually pleasant to him who endured it. For men are happy, not because of hilarity, or lasciviousness, or laughter, or jesting, the companion of levity, but often even through sorrow endured with firmness and constancy. Lucretia, having been ravished by force by the king's son, called her fellow-citizens to witness, and slew herself. This grief of hers, Brutus being the leader and mover of the Roman people, was the cause of liberty to the [pg 155] whole state. And out of regard for the memory of that woman, her husband and her father were made consuls³⁵ the first year of the republic. Lucius Virginius, a man of small property and one of the people, sixty years after the reestablishment of liberty, slew his virgin daughter with his own hand, rather than allow her to be surrendered to the lust of Appius Claudius, who was at that time invested with the supreme power.

XXI. Now you, O Torquatus, must either blame all these actions, or else you must abandon the defence of pleasure. And what a cause is that, and what a task does the man undertake who comes forward as the advocate of pleasure, who is unable to call any one illustrious man as evidence in her favour or as a witness to her character? For as we have awakened those men from the records of our annals as witnesses, whose whole life has been consumed in glorious labours; men who cannot bear to hear the very name of pleasure: so on your side of the argument history is dumb. I have never heard of Lycurgus, or Solon, Miltiades, or Themistocles, or Epaminondas being mentioned in the school of Epicurus; men whose names are constantly in the mouth of all the other philosophers. But now, since we have begun to deal with this part of the question, our friend Atticus, out of his treasures, will supply us with the names of as many great men as may be sufficient for us to bring forward as witnesses.