

On Roman Liberty, Virtue, and Eudaimonia

This paper is intended as a follow-up on my previous one, in which I argued that the fall of Rome (and classical civilization with it) was the result of a confluence of interdependent factors including Roman imperialism, Roman virtue and culture, the Roman political system, and Roman economic policy. Indeed, in order to fully understand any social phenomenon one must analyze it on three distinct levels of generality, each of which is a precondition and effect of the others: 1) the personal (psycho-epistemological, ethical), 2) the cultural (linguistic, ideological), and 3) the structural (economic, political).¹ In this paper, my primary focus will continue to be on Roman virtue and culture, particularly through the eyes of the statesman-philosopher Cicero. There are aspects of Cicero's thoughts on ethics that are very individualized, particularly insofar as he was influenced by the Aristotelians, but Cicero was also very much a Roman as well as strongly influenced by the Stoics. Liberty for the Romans was a concept not of individual liberty but of the political liberty of certain social groups: family, tribe, class, nation. As we have seen and continue to see in the readings, virtue for the Romans was heavily focused on martial courage, reputation and influence, and service to the collective (the greatest of which was the Republic itself). The rigid ethical doctrines of the Stoics were in many ways supportive of the idealized and traditional views of Roman virtue held by men like Cicero. Both were inherently dangerous, however, in that they fostered blind self-sacrifice for the Greater Good (i.e., of the Republic) and could be easily exploited by unscrupulous statesmen for personal gain. The Common Good of the collective trumps the good of the individual; or, more precisely, the good of the individual is interpreted in large part as service to the Common Good.²

Among the advantages of Aristotle's ethical theory is that it is at once objective and agent-relative, meaning that its fundamental principles (including the virtues) are universally applicable to all men but that the

¹ Chris Matthew Sciabarra, *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 379-383.

² See, for example, page 85 of Cicero's in *On Moral Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

good must be understood in terms of the natures and particular contexts of individual moral agents.³ When we speak of the good, we must ask: good for whom, and for what? General ethical principles, like the virtues, must be applied in practice by the individual moral agent in the appropriate manner given his particular context. Aristotle recognized that each of us has a nature composed of both universal and particular aspects, and that we all operate within particular environmental and social contexts. Moreover, Aristotle and many other Greek philosophers, and Cicero as well it seems,⁴ upheld the unity of virtue principle according to which one cannot specify the content of any one virtue independently of the contents of all the other virtues, the corollaries of which are that one cannot (fully) possess any one virtue without possessing them all and that the requirements of the various virtues cannot conflict.⁵ For both Aristotle and the Stoics, the virtues are a constitutive part of man's ultimate end, *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as happiness but due to the psychological connotations of happiness as an emotion it might be better translated as well-being or flourishing. Aristotle's ethics, then, is not a list of rigid rules but rather a flexible system of general principles that need to be applied in practice with prudence or practical wisdom.

Cicero, on my interpretation, builds on and elaborates the objective and agent-relative aspects of Aristotle's thought in Book I of *De Officiis* when he discusses the four *personae*, or roles, the requirements of which all men must fulfill in order to live the good life: universal human nature (i.e., reason) and the individual's inborn talents, social context, and personal choice.

Furthermore, one must understand that we have been dressed, as it were, by nature for two roles: one is common, arising from the fact that we all have a share in reason and in the superiority by which we surpass the brute creatures. Everything honourable and seemly is derived from this, and from it we discover a method of finding out our duty. The other, however, is that assigned specifically to individuals. For just as there are enormous bodily differences (for some, as we see, their strength is the speed that they can run, for others the might with which they wrestle; again, some have figures that are dignified, others that are graceful), similarly there are still greater differences in men's spirits. (I.108)

Each person should hold on to what is his as far as it is not vicious, but is peculiar to him, so that

³ See, for example, Aristotle's discussion of the doctrine of the median and mean in Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially Chapter 6 (1106a26-1107a08). See also the Antiochan view that Cicero seems to accept in *On Moral Ends*, p. 126.

⁴ *On Moral Ends*, pp. 140.

⁵ This can be seen in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, his description of the moral virtues and practical wisdom, and especially in the Book VI.13 (1144b12-1145a12).

the seemliness that we are seeking might more easily be maintained. For we must act in such a way that we attempt nothing contrary to universal nature; but while conserving that, let us follow our own nature, so that even if other pursuits may be weightier and better, we should measure our own by the rule of our own nature. For it is appropriate neither to fight against nature nor to pursue anything that you cannot attain. Consequently, it becomes clearer what that seemliness is like, precisely because nothing is seemly 'against Minerva's will', as they say, that is, when your nature opposes and fights against it. (I.110)

If anything at all is seemly, nothing, surely is more so than an evenness both of one's whole life and of one's individual actions. You cannot preserve that if you copy someone else's nature and ignore your own. [...] (I.111)

To the two roles of which I spoke above, a third is added: this is imposed by some chance or circumstance. There is also a fourth, which we assume for ourselves by our own decision. Kingdoms, military powers, nobility, political honours, wealth and influence, as well as the opposites of these, are in the gift of chance and governed by circumstances. In addition, assuming a role that we want ourselves is something that proceeds from our own will; as a consequence, some people apply themselves to philosophy, others to civil law, and others again to oratory, while even in the case of the virtues, different men prefer to excel in different of them. (I.115)⁶

Cicero unfortunately means one's social context as imposing a wide range of obligations outside of the realm of personal choice, as long as they are not contrary to nature or beyond one's ability. Thus, the mere accident of birth into a noble family with a long lineage of public service imposes the obligation of maintaining and furthering the family's heritage and position in society with one's own deeds. Thus, also, is a Roman obligated to serve the Roman Republic to the best of his ability so long as nothing he does or is called upon to do is contrary to nature.⁷ The difficulty, of course, lies in how one defines the relationship between particular social contexts and nature.

The scope of personal choice seems rather limited in the Roman context. We have as an example of the dominant role of social context Cicero's admonition to his son in *De Officiis*:

Anyone who is thinking about embarking upon an honourable life ought to do so [learn about duties from the Stoics], but perhaps no one more than you. For you carry this burden: many expect you to emulate my diligence, most my honours, and some, perhaps, even my renown. Besides, you have incurred a weighty responsibility from Athens and from Cratippus; since you went to them as if going to purchase arts of good quality, it would be most dishonourable to return empty-handed, thus disgracing the authority of both city and master. Therefore, strive with as much spirit and struggle with as much effort as you can (if learning is an effort, and not a pleasure) in order that you may succeed, and not, instead, allow yourself to seem to have let

⁶ The foregoing quotations are from pages 42-45 of *On Duties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [2002]).

⁷ This is not to say that Aristotle would necessarily disagree with Cicero, but merely to point out that Cicero's views are problematic.

yourself down, even though we have provided everything for you. (III.6)⁸

In this one passage we see the unchosen obligations of Cicero's son as well as additional obligations that these engender, i.e., an obligation to educate himself so that he can follow in his father's footsteps and therefore an obligation to his teachers and even the city of Athens itself. The word 'seem' in the last sentence is also telling as it illustrates the importance for the Romans of social standing, the *appearance* of virtue, and the opinions of others regarding one's character. As noted by the translator of *De Officiis*:

Honestas [honourableness] is analysed as consisting of the four primary virtues. By the nature of *honestas*, connected with *honor* (an honor or office) and reputation, is public. Our culture tends to internalize virtue and divorce it from social standing. The ethics of Cicero's class were, by contrast, avowedly public and competitive: the good man was the man who was well regarded. Cicero himself sought to reconcile the demands of public service with those of honour; the good man was for him in principle *honorable* and would actually be honoured by other good men.⁹

A further difficulty is presented by the place of virtue in Stoic ethical theory. For Aristotelians, virtue is one of the goods of the soul, the highest of Aristotle's three classes of goods, the other two being goods of the body and external goods. This three-fold classification of goods allows for health, wealth, friendship, and the like to be classed as goods. This, however, commits Aristotelians to the (to my mind commonsensical) position that such goods are necessary for *eudaimonia*. The Stoics, on the other hand, hold virtue or morality to be the only good. Man's end is to live morally or virtuously. And since virtue does not admit of degrees for the Stoic it follows that no virtuous person is more virtuous than another, that one is either virtuous or one is not, that though other ends can be of non-moral value they cannot add anything to virtue and man's ultimate end. We are thus presented with the paradoxical, extreme example of the allegedly wise man still being happy while on the rack though his family, fortune, reputation, and country all lie in ruins.¹⁰ If anything, this single-minded focus on virtue as the only good could only serve to enhance the self-sacrificial and tribalist¹¹ character of Roman virtue.

Cicero thus attempted to ground Roman virtue objectively in nature. In practice, however, Roman virtue given its interweaving with social standing seemed to have been grounded not so much in nature but in cultural

⁸ *On Duties*, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xliv-xlv.

¹⁰ The Stoics and Cicero fail to distinguish between being a good man and living a life of well-being; the former is fully under one's control and is a fundamental part of the latter, but well-being or flourishing is not entirely under one's own control. One can very well be a good man without being happy or as happy as one could be due to undesirable events

tradition. The Common Good takes precedence over individual goods; indeed, individual good is defined in terms of service to the Common Good. The passage¹² in *De Officiis* that argues for the harmony of individual goods and the Common Good, and against the despoiling of others and their property for one's own advantage, is entirely compatible with the passage¹³ in *On Moral Ends* which advances the Stoic (and very Roman) position that the Common Good is of higher value than individual goods. Despoiling others *for your own advantage* is harmful to the Common Good, but there is nothing in Stoic doctrine or Roman virtue and culture that precludes the despoiling of others *for the Common Good*. Indeed, Roman history is full of examples of individual good (both Roman and non-Roman) being sacrificed in the name of the Common Good. When liberty, virtue, and the good are thus collectivized and institutionalized in a political system they cannot help but undermine each other and true liberty and virtue in the long run.

beyond one's control.

¹¹ Tribalist here is meant in a broad sense as the subordination of the individual will to that of the group.

¹² *On Duties*, p. 109.

¹³ *On Moral Ends*, p. 85.