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Responsibility: Recognition and Limits

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Cicero's Civic Metaphysics As a Basis for Responsibility

By William A. Frank

"It is not in order to make honeycombs that swarms of bees gather, but it is because they are gregarious by nature that they make honeycombs."

De Officiis 1.157

"It is more repugnant to Nature for man to rob a fellow-man of his own advantage than to endure all possible loss, whether to his own property or person ... or even to his own soul ..."

De Officiis 3.28

Our seminar takes as its theme the recognition and limits of responsibility. I am more interested in its recognition than its limits. In effect, I shall be asking the question: What does it mean to be responsible? How does "being responsible" fit in with the more general concern of "being human" or with "living a good life"? My response will take the form of a commentary and interpretation of themes in Marcus Tullius Cicero's *De Officiis*.

If you allow me to equate Cicero's Latin "*officium*" with our English "responsibility,"¹ *De Officiis* readily lends itself to our purposes. It directly examines the basis of our responsibility. Were we to ask Cicero to explain to us what our duties are in this life, he might well direct us to this discourse, which he originally addressed to his son who was at the time in Athens studying oratory and philosophy.² In *De Officiis* he details a broad range of duties divided into

¹ E. Margaret Atkins, for instance, allows for the equivalence in her "Notes to the Translation," in: Cicero, *On Duties*, ed. by Miriam T. Griffin and E. Margaret Atkins (Cambridge, New York, Port Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. XLV.

² Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.4: "Now when I had decided to write something for you ... I very much wanted to begin with something which was preeminently suitable to your age and my authority. Many weighty and beneficial matters in philosophy have been discussed accurately and expansively by philosophers. However, it is their teachings and their advice on the question of duties that seem to have the widest application. For no part of life, neither public affairs nor private, neither in the forum nor at home, neither when acting on your own nor in dealing with another, can be free from duty. Everything that is honorable [*honestas*] in life depends on its cultivation and everything dishonor-

two sorts, one of which includes duties that are universal and incumbent on any man in virtue of his common humanity and a second that vary and are pegged to the particular endowments of a given person and the distinct roles in society that he assumes.³

More interesting than his itemization of the many responsibilities is the rationale he gives for them. As a work of theoretical philosophy, *De Officiis* offers an insightful account of responsibility itself. The main lines of his theory lead back to fundamental notions of anthropology and to what might be termed a “civic metaphysics.”⁴ Cicero is most philosophically interesting in the way he understands human society. It is as commonplace to observe that man is by nature a social animal as that he is a rational animal. What Cicero sees in an unprecedented fashion is the essential identity between human sociability and rationality.⁵ I shall develop these two notions in the first two parts of the follow-

able [*turpitude*] on its neglect.” See also E. Margaret Atkins, “Introduction,” to the Cambridge, 1991 translation cited above. All English translations of *De Officiis* are taken either from the Cambridge 1991 translation by Griffin or from Cicero, *De Officiis*, with an English translation by Walter Miller (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1913). In some instances I have made minor adjustments to their translations.

³ *De Officiis* 1.107: By nature each one is endowed with two roles: (1) the common role of being rational and thereby superior to the brute animals: all *honestia* and *decorum* derive from this role; (2) the one that corresponds to one’s individual personality and status which is due to particular differences in birth, wit, health, inheritance, aptitudes, and so forth.

⁴ I have adapted to my own purposes an expression I have found in Luca Del Pozzo’s “La ‘metafisica civile’ di Augusto Del Noce: ontologismo e liberalismo,” <http://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/ldp01.htm>; accessed January 22, 2007.

⁵ Cicero grasps the essential social or political nature of man with a rare degree of resolute precision. In order to accept this claim one must put at bay the received opinion that Cicero’s philosophy reduces without remainder to a derivative syncretism of classical Greek genius. Michael P. Foley documents the entrenched prejudice in his “Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 45 (1999), pp. 51–52. I do not want to deny that Cicero’s philosophical works are replete with straightforward retailing of the opinions of the Greek tradition of philosophy. Nevertheless, so far as I can see, what I am calling his “civic metaphysics” is an original contribution. Cicero understands the especial reality of the web of human relationships. That reality remains for him a sure, steady focus as he details the rich historical particularity of human action and behavior that fills his philosophical discourses. In the broad sweep of the history of philosophy, the genius of Cicero’s civic metaphysics is easy to overlook. Premodern philosophers were more readily drawn to the splendor of the great speculative philosophies of Greek antiquity. Insofar as the ancients pursued philosophy as a way of life, the grand speculative systems offered a surer measure of personal beatitude in activity that was more geared toward withdrawal from than engagement with the indeterminate regions of matter and choice. In later modern times, less congenial to metaphysical speculations, Cicero’s elevated social-political morality gains little traction against the passion for libertarian individualism and social contract theory that characterizes most modern anthropology and political

ing essay. These more speculative notions of Cicero provide the foundation for his subsequent insistence that human excellence can only be achieved insofar as a man or woman acquires the stable and ready capacity for performing actions governed by an attraction to the *bonum honestum*, a kind of goodness whose attraction passes beyond the promises of personal self-interest. Parts three and four are devoted to the notion of *honestas* and the role of the virtues. In the end it becomes evident that human excellence is achieved in building up the human community and that the human community is built up only by actions responding to the beauty of the *bonum honestum*.

It is worth mentioning in passing that Cicero the rhetorician does not altogether mute his powers for persuasion in the interest of a disinterested philosophical dialectic. As keen as he may be to assist his son in his philosophic studies, he is just as concerned to inspire him to live out his responsibilities. The argument of *De Officiis* appeals to his son’s capacity for human excellence and his desire for distinction. By virtue of the explanations and the concrete examples drawn from the lives and times of Greek and Roman history he encourages the young man to envision himself standing among others: either honorably, distinguished as one who by his words and deeds has strengthened the bonds and enriched the common life of society; or disreputably, as an object of shame whose words and deeds, or lack thereof, have diminished or cheapened the common life-of-men-with-one-another. In *De Officiis* Cicero sets before his son the vision of a beautiful and noble life along side the image a vulgar and shameful alternative. I have called these alternative lives the “beautiful and noble” and the “vulgar and shameful,” but as becomes evident in the unfolding of the argument, they correspond directly to “responsible” and “irresponsible” lives.

I. Societas

A bee that lives by itself would be a natural curiosity, a kind of anomaly or freak. Bees swarm, they congregate. The fact that they live-with-one-another explains the further fact that they make honeycombs.⁶ The material, communal structure of a beehive follows consequent to the formal actuality of apian social nature. Nature has outfitted bees with the instincts for producing the structures that sustain their collective life. The end is a flourishing hive expressed in and sustained by the construction of a honeycomb. Cicero applies the principle *a fortiori* to human conditions: “to a much greater extent, men, living naturally in

philosophy. For the ancients, life in society is not the final *telos* for man. For the moderns, it is not a *telos* at all; it is a means or, at the best, a purpose chosen by man himself.

⁶ *De Officiis* 1.157: “Atque ut apium examina non fingendorum favorum causa congregantur, sed, cum congregabilia natura sint, fingunt favos ...”

groups, exercise their ingenuity in action and in reflection.”⁷ The fruits of prudent action and reflective learning are actualizations of man’s inherently social nature. The common end of intellectual creativity and reason’s wit is an ever more fruitful and stable life-of-one-with-another in society. The well-being of one’s community, taken as the end of purposive activity, is prior to the autonomy of the individual.⁸ With this argument Cicero aims to overturn the common misperception that social life is somehow derivative of ends and purposes more fundamentally individual. He goes on to observe that “it is not true, as some claim, that men embarked upon communal life and fellowship in order to provide for life’s necessities just because we could not manage, without others, to provide ourselves with our natural requirements.”⁹ In his *Republic* (2.369b), for instance, Plato proposes that men first enter into the bonds of human society, living together in villages and cities, in order to meet the individual’s desire for basic necessities. If that were the case, then Cicero wonders what would happen “if everything needed for sustenance and comfort were provided by a magic wand, so to speak.” Wouldn’t any reasonable, talented individual drop his business affairs? Wouldn’t he abandon his efforts aimed at maintaining society and its network of relationships? If it is true that society and its structures are means to an end and the end is amply and securely achieved by other means, then society and its structures lose their purpose and become useless bothers. Cicero finds the thought experiment persuasive; he takes it that a man living by himself, a human isolate, would be as much a freak of nature as, or even more than, the autonomous bee. E. M. Atkins recognizes the claim we are making when she notes that for Cicero “*societas* is not simply another *utile* that contributes to the maintenance or comfort of life. It is the goal that defines the virtue that limits other goals ...”¹⁰ The bond of personal human excellence with a flourishing society constitutes an interesting conceptual unity for Cicero. The two elements – individual perfection and flourishing community – are not pieces that have their independent logics and can be entertained separately of one another. The tight connection becomes evident as we examine Cicero’s understanding of human reason and moral virtue.

⁷ *De Officiis* 1.157.

⁸ This is not to say that Cicero does not prize a certain transcendent excellence of the individual. See below in Section IV on the moral virtues.

⁹ *De Officiis* 1.158.

¹⁰ E. Margaret Atkins, “‘Domina et Regina Virtutum’: Justice and Societas in *De Officiis*,” *Phronesis* 35,3 (1990), p. 271. On the natural finality of human sociability see: 1.11–12, 1.22, 1.50, 1.154; 1.157–158, 3.21–28.

II. Reason

In the order of nature, man’s reason sets him apart from the beasts.¹¹ Cicero describes reason as man’s ability to grasp consequences, causes, and similarities; it signifies his ability to anticipate or project into the future. In addition to the obvious attention to nature’s order of cause and effect, it is easy to see in these attributes of reason the tools for man’s own provident behavior. Reason’s powers befit man for envisioning the whole of a life and fashioning within its terms the conditions for well-being. His formulation of the same concept in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* puts the key points nicely: “Nature has bestowed on man the gift of Reason, of an active, vigorous intelligence, able to carry on several operations at the same time with extreme speed, and having, so to speak, a keen scent to discern the causes and effects of things, to draw analogies, combine things separate, connect the future with the present, and survey the entire field of the subsequent course of life.”¹² This sort of reason clearly belongs to man engaged in the *vita activa*. If there were any doubt, the next lines of *De Finibus* emphasize the social scope of human reason: “It is Reason moreover that has inspired man with a relish for his kind; she has produced a natural conformity both of language and of habit; she has prompted the individual, starting from friendship and from family affection, to expand his interests, forming social ties first with his fellow-citizens and later with all mankind.”¹³ Reason, man’s specific difference, is the social faculty.

Just how is it that reason leads one into binding ties with all mankind, with fellow citizens, family members, and friends? Can we see more clearly the inner logic connecting reason and society? An obvious reply should be dismissed at the start. It will not do to instrumentalize reason, to treat it like a tool or medium of exchange. Let me illustrate the point with a comparison. The mutual exchange of satisfaction between a milk laden mother and a hungry nursling requires no words; it is as common to the beasts as to men. Suppose, however, one man has the skills of goat herder and cheese maker but desires a secure dwelling which he does not know how to make. And further suppose that his neighbor is expert at building but incompetent with livestock. Among such individuals we could imagine a society built up of the mutual exchange of goods and services. Reason would be instrumental: it is necessary in both producing the goods and arranging the exchange. We therefore might see the difference between the bond of mother to child and the ties of farmer to carpenter as a function of nature in the first case and reason in the second. To understand the

¹¹ *De Officiis* 1.11, 1.50; and Cicero *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 2nd ed., tr. by H. Rackman (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1931), 2.45.

¹² *De Finibus* 2.45.

¹³ *De Finibus* 2.45.

connection between reason and society in this way misrepresents Cicero's intention. The scenario represents reason as subordinated to the purposes of the crafts and the exchange of their products. Cicero, however, understands a more essential relationship between a human person's rational and social being. Being rational and being social are equally ends of being human. As we saw above, man would live in society even if material needs were not at issue, the further point is that man's sociability is constituted in his being rational. The more perfectly men live the life of reason, the more their common life-with-one-another flourishes.

Cicero writes that reason "reminds him that ... man was not born for self alone, but for country and for kindred, claims that leave but a part of him for himself."¹⁴ In other words, he asserts a predominant social or interpersonal intentionality of human reason. The meaning of this passage is not that by some reasoned argument men and women conclude that they ought to live communally. Rather Cicero means that, in the very act of living rationally, men and women find themselves bound to one another in communal life. By its very nature reason's inner structures are largely ordered to the practical and interpersonal categorialities of social existence.¹⁵ Just as the seedling matures into a fruit-bearing vine, so the child grows into a spouse, parent, friend, and citizen. But whereas the vine matures through nature's work in the sun and earth and in the vine's own vegetative powers, the child grows into society, if I may put it so simply, by virtue of education: the extending, strengthening, and subtilizing of reason, a continuum of cultural and societal processes that are the fruit of individual and collective acts of deliberation, judgment, and volition.

The linkage between reason and society is brought out more fully when one sees the cardinal virtue of justice as the middle term, as it were. After asserting that man is not born for himself alone, Cicero then writes that although "Nature has ... engendered in mankind the desire for contemplating the truth ... which is

¹⁴ *De Finibus* 2.45. *De Officiis* 1.22 makes the same point: "We are not born for ourselves alone, to use Plato's splendid words [*Letter IX* 358a], but our country (*patria*) claims for itself one part of our birth, and our friends another." He continues: "men are born for the sake of men ... we ought in this to follow nature as our leader, to contribute to the common needs (*communes utilitates*), by giving and receiving expertise and effort and means, to bind fast the society of man with one another (*devincire hominum inter homines societatem*)." Society attends to common needs; of greater significance is its binding of men to one another.

¹⁵ It is important to note how Cicero safeguards a dimension of reason for interests that are not caught within the practical categories of human social and communal life (*De Finibus* 2.46). Reason does have its natural tendency to speculative, theoretical inquiry that seeks truth simply for its own sake. It does not, however, predominate, and ought always to cede precedence to serious moral and political interests: "the bonds between and the sociability of men take precedence over any devotion to learning [for its own sake]." *De Officiis* 1.157.

most evident in our hours of leisure," when we often find ourselves thinking about the most speculative matters,¹⁶ that same love of truth spills over into non-theoretical, practical concerns. The instinct for reason's truth impels us "to love all truth as such, that is, all that is trustworthy, simple, and consistent, and to hate things insincere, false and deceptive, such as cheating, perjury, malice and injustice ..."¹⁷ Reason's ordination to truth moves man to both wisdom and justice. Truth's movement toward justice is what interests us here. Love of truth manifests itself in the words and actions in the midst of one's life-of-one-with-another just insofar as these words and deeds express justice. It is the work of the cardinal virtues, and especially justice, to transform reason's truth into the presence of intrinsic goodness (*honestas*) in the midst of society. The bonds of human fellowship are built up and sustained when men's words and deeds are formed in the light of intrinsic goodness (*honestas*).

Of the natural principles that bond men in fellowship (*societas*) and community the first is reason and speech (*ratio et oratio*) which, in the activities of "teaching, learning, communicating, debating, and making judgments, conciliates men with one another and joins them into a sort of natural society (*conciat inter se homines coniungitque naturali quadam societate*)."¹⁸ The verb "to conciliate" deserves special mention. Reason and speech unite men in the bonds of fellowship and community because it makes possible "justice, fairness, and goodness (*justitiam, aequitatem, bonitatem*),"¹⁹ which "conciliate" men; the separate interests of each man in a group are reconciled into a functioning network of activity marked by a harmony of mind and purpose and desire. Truth, in the form of justice and trust (*fides*), conciliates. Society therefore subsists as an active network of many minds with their various interests and desires acting together in a harmony or mutual accord that is fashioned in speech and reason by its members. Cicero does not believe in any hidden hand that mysteriously harmonizes the independent, autonomous action lines of self-interest. The community or society of men is not the work of natural instincts; it is not the effect of chance; nor is it the work of divine intervention. It is the work of individual men and women who exercise the virtues of practical wisdom, justice and generosity, greatness of spirit or courage, and temperance.²⁰ Virtuous action needs also to be complemented by effective rhetoric.²¹

¹⁶ *De Finibus* 2.46.

¹⁷ *De Finibus* 2.46. In Cicero's vigorous, detailed hatred of falsity in its many social forms, it is easy to see a mentality akin to that of Dante Alighieri who devoted so many cantos of his *Inferno* to the varieties of liars and frauds.

¹⁸ *De Officiis* 1.50.

¹⁹ *De Officiis* 1.50.

²⁰ Important society-building actions stand out. They acquire a kind of primal authority. It is part of the Roman cast of mind to revere the founding acts in the history of its republic. In fact, any significant subsequent proposal acquires legitimacy insofar as it

III. *Honestas*

Cicero recalls the story that Plato tells about a lowly shepherd who finds a magic ring that allows him to become invisible at will and thereby to do whatever he wants with complete impunity.²² And how does the shepherd use this new found freedom? He goes to the city, seduces the king's wife, murders the king, and rules his realm with unchecked self-interest. Within the logic of the story, the magic ring liberates personal choice from any external constraint. In effect, it asks us to imagine what happens when the ring is conferred on a person who is motivated only by personal self-interest and then set loose in society. We see a man, garbed with the appearances of social prominence and dignity, interiorly reduced to nothing more than a feral, calculating beast, ready for the most heinous exploitations of his fellow man. The point of the story is to ask

can be justified as a development or enrichment implicit in the original founding. See Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in her *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 91–141. "Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals – the most unstable and futile beings we know of. Its loss is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world ... [T]he loss of worldly permanence and reliability – which politically is identical with the loss of authority – does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and care for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us" (p. 95). Authority derives from the Latin '*augere*,' which means "to augment," and those in authority (elders, the Senate, *patres*) augment the foundation. The ancestors are the *maiores* from whom derive the authority of the living. "Authority, in contradistinction to power (*potestas*), has its roots in the past, but this past was no less present in the actual life of the city than the power and strength of the living" (p. 122). Authority itself derives from the foundation of the city; men's action rests on it and develops it: hence the need to be faithful to the original divine *auspices*. A Roman grew old by growing closer to the past and the ancestors. The past is sanctified by tradition, which is preserved by handing down to the next generation the testimony of the ancestors, who had first witnessed the founding. If the tradition is continued uninterrupted, the authority is inviolate. Action is sanctioned by the measures or standards preserved in tradition. Romans needed time-honored standards for thought as well as for action, which is why, as Remi Brague has persuasively argued, they so readily adopted Greek philosophy and likewise provided a cultural framework so fruitful for the development of Christian religion with its commitment to an authoritative tradition. See his *Eccentric Culture. A Theory of Western Civilization*, tr. by Samuel Lester (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2002), a translation of *Europe, la voie romaine*, rev. ed (Paris: Éditions Critérion, 1992).

²¹ Walter Nicgorski has convincingly argued that Cicero redirects the central focus of political philosophy away from the Greek concern with the theoretical question of the best regime to the practical consideration of the highest standards of able statesmanship, its realistic responsibilities and limits. See "Cicero and the Rebirth of Political Philosophy," *Political Science Reviewer* 8 (1978), pp. 63–101; Cicero's Paradoxes and His Idea of Utility," *Political Theory* 12:4 (November 1984), pp. 557–578; "Cicero's Focus: From the Best Regime to the Model Statesman," *Political Theory* 19:2 (May 1991), pp. 230–251.

²² *De Officiis* 3.38–39. Plato, *Republic* 2.357–361.

whether or not this shepherd stands for Everyman. Isn't its logic of unchecked self-interest inexorable? Who would not act as did the shepherd? Given its starting points, one can conclude that man is only raised above the beast by his superior rational powers for manipulating his environment. In reality, where men do not have the shepherd's magic ring, the only thing that restrains a person is his wariness of his inadequacies. They compel him to accommodate his interests with those of his fellow men. Society accordingly develops as a network of limited powers checking one another's "true nature." Communal life represents a compromise: as a condition of membership, each citizen forsakes the pursuit of maximal self-interest, which is the equivalent of individual beatitude, and simultaneously gains the surety of not having to suffer maximal exploitation. In this scheme, the one who gets ahead is the one who excels at *really* pursuing self-interest, even outside the law if need be, while always *seeming* to care for the interests of others. Success in life involves masking vice as virtue. If we have presented accurately the view of man in society behind Plato's myth, then the question becomes whether it is true: Does it adequately depict the essential nature of human society and how man befits himself for success in it? Cicero, of course, thinks it is not true. If not, then it is instructive to ask what is left out in the myth's account of the human condition?

Fundamental to Cicero's moral anthropology is the distinction between *honestas* and *utile*.²³ The latter term refers to the goods of self-interest or personal advantage, which include wealth, health, physical pleasures and comforts, power, and social status. *Utile* can be translated literally as "useful" or more flexibly as what is "beneficial," "advantageous," or "expedient." The core concept of the term signifies that some action, thing, or state-of-affairs is said to be good or desirable just because it pleases or advances someone's personal interests. It can include, for instance, "security, food, and arms," things that answer to "the natural needs of man" and "require a concern for resources and power."²⁴ Human goods of benefit and expediency find their analogues in the natural, non-rational realms of beasts, insects, and even plants. The concept of

²³ Sometimes instead of *utile* Cicero will use the word *commoda*, as at *De Officiis* 1.5: "The man who defines the highest good in such a way that it has no connection with virtue, measuring it by his own advantages [*suis commodis*] rather than by honorableness [*honestate*] cannot (if he is in agreement with himself and is not occasionally overcome by the goodness of his own nature) cultivate either friendship, justice, or liberality."

²⁴ Walter Nicgorski's "Cicero's Paradoxes and His Idea of Utility," *Political Theory* 12:4 (November 1994), p. 563. Peter Phillips Simpson, in his "Justice, Consequences, and Cicero," in *Vices, Virtues, and Consequences. Essays in Moral and Political Philosophy*, Studies in the Philosophy and History of Philosophy, vol. 35 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), pp. 75–89, makes effective use of Cicero's *honestum/utile* distinction in controverting contemporary consequentialist moral theory.

utile acquires a more ample, appropriate meaning when it is set alongside its contrastive opposite: *honestas*. *Honestas* – “it alone is what is to be sought for its own sake.”²⁵ English has no word that does the Latin word justice; expressions such as “moral goodness,” “honorableness,” “the noble,” “intrinsic goodness” capture aspects of its meaning. Although it signifies a positive value, it is perhaps best conceived by negation; *honestas* is the kind of good or worth that is cancelled or annulled if instrumentalized or sought for its consequences. For instance, if the motivation for telling the truth is financial gain, then truth-telling has its price and can be out-bid. In Cicero’s moral vocabulary, *honestas* is the sort of thing that is essentially an end. Part of the experience of being human is the recognition and achievement of one’s own excellence in knowing and telling the truth for its own sake, as part of the meaning of human dignity. In truth-telling for its own sake the truth-teller is not conditioned or determined in his action by forces or interests beyond his own knowledge and character. Commitment to the *bonum honestum* means that man’s rational nature is not especially perfected in the technological exploits that gain for him a secure and comfortable life. Rather human reason shines forth in exercising the power man has to transcend these interests or even to forsake them in order to do that which is simply just, noble, honorable, or beautiful. Justice, Nobility, Honorableness, Beauty – facets of *bonum honestum* – are categories of desirability that correspond to man’s rational spirit. They materialize in human affairs when men and women act beyond self-interest. And for Cicero it is in the sphere of human fellowship, in the securing and enriching the bonds of the human community, whether narrowly circumscribed to regions of friendship and family or more widely extended to one’s nation or republic or to humanity at large, that man primarily experiences the *bonum honestum*.

With the idea of *honestas* in mind, we can recall the shepherd’s world envisioned in Plato’s myth of the magic ring. It is not a fully human world; rationality is truncated. Among men, as represented by the shepherd, there is no category for the *honestum*; all goods are expedient. Imagining men who would pursue the beneficial apart from the honorable, Cicero remarks: “one cannot conceive of anything more foul and disgusting than such greed. In their mistaken judgments they see the profits in things, but they do not see the penalty; I do not mean the penalty of the laws – for they often ride roughshod over that – but that of dishonorableness itself, which is bitter indeed.”²⁶ The refusal of *honestas* is its own punishment: one is, in the spurning act itself, shameful and diminished as a man.

Dishonorableness (*turpitude*) is the contrary opposite of *honestas*. An important part of the argument of Part 3 of *De Officiis* involves showing the grave

²⁵ *De Officiis* 1.6.

²⁶ *De Officiis* 3.36.

theoretical error and disastrous moral and political consequence of separating *utile* from *honestum*: “To this error the assassin’s dagger, the poisoned cup, the forged wills owe their origin; this gives rise to theft, embezzlement of public funds, exploitation and plundering of provincials and citizens; this engenders also the lust for excessive wealth, for despotic power, and finally for making oneself king even in the midst of a free people; anything more atrocious or repulsive than such a passion cannot be conceived.” With the initial error of dissociating *utile* from *honestum* one enters into a downward spiral of social dissolution. In writing this Cicero was acutely aware of the immanent collapse of his beloved republic through the actual misdeeds of his contemporaries. In *De Officiis* he represents this collapse as the direct effect of the pursuit of *utile* – personal and public advantages taken at the expense of the *honestum* and the consequent collapse of the Roman Republic. Cicero’s disgust at those who would break trust with *res publica* finds its apt expression more than a millennium later in Dante’s *Inferno*, where he situates so many political characters in the infernal regions set apart for those who broke trust with their fellow men and thereby savaged the bonding ties of human community.

The virtues of friendship, justice, liberality, for example, are only possible insofar as the claims of *honestas* (honorableness, the noble good) take precedence over those of *commoda* (advantage). Inverting the precedence is the essence of hedonism. The dignity or nobility of moral action lies in the exercise of one’s own powers on behalf of the good of others, taking precisely the good of another as one’s own good. The specifically human capacity for morality lies in the capacity for identifying one’s own good with the independent good of the other person. It is important not to misunderstand this identification of goods, one’s own and the other’s, with instrumentalization, in which one might, in a kind of exchange, advance one’s own good by helping or trading with someone else who is at the same time advancing his own good. In the “commercial” exchange there are two separate goods: the other person’s and one’s own. In the moral exchange there is only one good – that of the other person, and the acting person identifies that good as his own.²⁷

Observing the centrality of the distinction between *honestum* and *utile* in Cicero’s philosophy of man and society helps make sense of the larger contours of his dialectic in both *De Officiis* and *De Finibus*. On the one hand, he targets Epicureans for their undervaluing, if not outright dismissal, of the *bonum honestum*. Without it they cannot give an adequate account of man’s spiritual rationality or the true dignity of the political dimension of human existence. “There can certainly be no brave man who judges that pain [*dolorum*] is the greatest evil, nor a man of restraint who defines pleasure [*voluptatem*] as the

²⁷ Robert Sokolowski, *Moral Action: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 41–76.

highest good."²⁸ On the other hand, he faults the Stoics for failing in the opposite way: they undervalue the relevance of *bonum utile*. In their pursuit of detachment from mere worldly affairs they tend to neglect the real needs and legitimate desires of the human animal and the kinds of exchange that form part of dynamic of social intercourse. The subtlest part of Cicero's *De Officiis* is his argument for the inseparability of *honestum* and *utile*.²⁹

IV. Cardinal Virtues

There are four ways that the *honestum* primarily becomes manifest in human affairs.³⁰ In one way, it becomes evident in those intellectual acts of wisdom and prudence by which one acutely and swiftly sees the truth and explains the reasons in particular things. Wise and prudent men stand out for their capacity to see and say what is or should be the case and to explain why it is so and could or should not be otherwise.³¹ Specific achievements in the life of reason lift men above opinions grounded in perception and passion, instinct and custom. They show that man in his beliefs and judgments need not be, as it were, be a mere recipient or victim of external agents or forces. He need not judge only what he feels, nor need he believe what others tell him. Because he can stand in the truth, he can take responsibility for what he believes and says. Moreover, this knowing and saying what is the case is communicable. One man's wisdom and prudence become resources for many. *Honestas* is manifest insofar as "because it is true" is a necessary and driving reason for belief and judgment. On occasion it may be sufficient; more often the human situation calls for appeal as well to the interests of *utile* or *commoda*. The scope of wisdom and prudence is wide enough to accommodate the interests of what is beneficial and expedient, although within the limits of justice, fortitude, and temperance.³²

²⁸ *De Officiis* 1.5.

²⁹ Nicgorski, "Cicero's Paradoxes," has an excellent discussion of the issue.

³⁰ *De Officiis* 1.15: "Everything that is honorable arises from one of four sources: it is involved either with the perception of truth and with ingenuity; or with preserving fellowship among men, with assigning to each his own, and with faithfulness to agreements one has made; or with the greatness and strength of a lofty and unconquered spirit; or with order and limit in everything that is said and done, which here includes modesty and restraint. (Sed omne, quod est honestum, id quattuor partium oritur ex aliis: aut enim in perspicacia veri sollertiaque versatur aut in hominum societate tuenda tribuendoque suum cuique et rerum contractarum fide aut in animi excelsi atque invicti magnitudine ac robore aut in omnium, quae fiunt quaeque dicuntur, ordine et modo, in quo inest modestia et temperantia.)"

³¹ *De Officiis* 1.15–16.

³² *De Officiis* 3.96.

In a second way, *honestas* makes its presence felt in the work of justice, in those moral acts that preserve fellowship (*societas*) among men by both giving to each man that which is his own and keeping faith with the agreements he has made.³³ Justice "is the reasoning by which the fellowship of men with one another, and the communal life are held together."³⁴ It has two parts, the first of which is justice in the proper sense, what Cicero calls "the most illustrious of the virtues, on account of which men are called 'good.'"³⁵

Cicero closely associates with justice in the strict sense the virtue of beneficence (*beneficentia*), which he sometimes also calls either kindness (*benignitas*) or generosity (*liberalitas*).³⁶ It is interesting to wonder why Cicero considers generosity to be, as it were, a division of justice. This is not the case in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* where the generous giver gives out of his liberality, out of a motivation unconstrained by any obligation to what is owed or due the recipient. Aristotle's beneficence transcends justice. Its nobility lies precisely in the fact that it is the sort of giving that springs wholly from an abundance of one's resources and extends to others beyond any consideration of need on the part of the giver or justice due the beneficiary. Cicero gives three reasons for closely associating beneficence and justice.³⁷ Acts of kindness can harm the intended beneficiary; examples are commonplace in friendship, family, and society where kindness in fact leads to a spirit of self-indulgence, immaturity, or irresponsibility.³⁸ A benefit conferred does harm insofar as it does not correspond to justice and fails to increase the beneficiary's growth toward a responsible life. Secondly, in the answering the impulse to beneficence the donor can exceed his own capabilities or deplete his own resources beyond what is just or worthy of his condition; he becomes less able to answer to his genuine responsibilities. In such a context, the virtuous thing is to resist the temptation to do good. Thirdly, acting out of kindheartedness can become the justification for taking unjustly what belongs to one person in order to give to others whom the donor considers more needy or worthy; Robin Hood's violation of the social order is passed off as a virtue of charity.³⁹ Beneficence remains virtuous only so

³³ *De Officiis*, 1.15: "... in hominum societate tuenda tribuendoque suum cuique et rerum contractarum fide ..."

³⁴ *De Officiis* 1.20: "... ea ratio, qua societas hominum inter ipsos et vitae quasi communitas continetur."

³⁵ *De Officiis* 1.20. Cicero's develops the idea of justice and its duties in 1.20–42.

³⁶ He develops this virtue and its corresponding duties in *De Officiis* 1.42–59.

³⁷ *De Officiis* 1.42.

³⁸ The "tyranny of nice" and the frequent belated calls for "tough love" in contemporary society signify contemporary social forces that have separated beneficence from justice.

³⁹ The proverb "Charity begins at home" aims at correcting the temptation to acts of kindness that benefit strangers at the unjust expense of those to whom one has closer duties of responsibility.

far as it is conditioned by two fundamental duties of justice, namely: (1) harm no one unless provoked by injustice, and (2) treat common goods as common and private goods as private. Beneficence that is not compromised by injustice extends and enriches the web-of-personal-relationships. In acts of beneficence benefactors and beneficiaries are bound to one another in mutual duties of caring for and being grateful for one another. The sort of human good experienced in caring and being grateful are facets of *honestas*, whose value is of a higher order than the *utile* or benefit given or received. In other words, just like justice, true beneficence builds up society and expresses man's social nature.

With respect to the duties of justice, whether taken in the strict sense or more widely so as to include beneficence, one can ask about its range. To whom is one obliged to act in justice? Are there sorts of individuals or groups to whom one is related by no bond other than self-interest? Are there some individuals or groups with whom we interact but with respect to which the claims of *honestas* are irrelevant? Cicero observes that some maintain that one's pursuit of self-interest needs to be restrained only within the ties of fellowship among family members and that there are no restraints of justice or fellowship that obtain among citizens or strangers. He, however, thinks that this refusal to extend the duties of justice beyond the family destroys the structure of civil society. Others, he notes, will extend the ties that limit the pursuit self-interest to fellow citizens, but deny that they pertain to people of foreign countries. Cicero thinks this denial is an impiety: it overturns the society of mankind established by the gods. He insists on a general principle of the universality of justice in man's relationship to man: the natural, god-given bond of human beings is such that "it is more repugnant to Nature for man to rob a fellow-man of his own advantage than to endure all possible loss, whether to his property or his person ... or even to his own soul – so far as these losses are not concerned with justice; for this virtue is the sovereign mistress and queen of all the virtues."⁴⁰

In sum, the virtue of justice protects, sustains, nourishes civil society. It does this in part by limiting or restraining the pursuit of self-interest. There is a range or hierarchy of fellowship or society among men: ties of family (father and brother); citizenship; humanity, all of which are part of a providential order. Within each social level members have what is their own, and others cannot advance themselves by taking, outside the limits of justice, what belongs to them. Acts of injustice destroy society; they are acts of men who absent themselves from the life-together which is the end of human existence.⁴¹ Man is precisely that sort of being that can lift himself above his own self-interest. The specifically human world is the web-of-human-relationships, *societas humanum*, of

each-with-all, bound together in ties of mutual giving and receiving that build up the society. *Honestas* names the good achieved in actions that intentionally build up society and consequently manifest the supreme dignity of the agent. *Honestas* and *societas* are correlative terms; both represent perfection of human reason; they are the fruit of responsible, dutiful action, most especially of justice.

The third way that nobility or honorableness enters into human affairs is through fortitude, which Cicero understands as the greatness and strength of a lofty and unconquered spirit.⁴² There are two ways that greatness of spirit manifests itself. The brave and great spirit shows a disdain for external things as a consequence of its conviction that one should admire, choose, pursue only what is intrinsically worthy and seemly (*honestum decorumque*). Such disdain involves knowing that *honestas* is the real good and being free of agitation for gain in money or glory and emptying one's self of fear and desire. The second sign of the courageous spirit is its undertaking difficult tasks that are beneficial and that endanger his life and treasure. Such a spirit pursues its ends undeterred by either fear of harm or the seductions of ease and pleasure.⁴³ Reason and *honestas* lie at the heart of courage. "It is the mark of a truly brave and constant spirit that one remain unperturbed in difficult times, and when agitated not be thrown, as the saying goes, off one's feet, but rather hold fast to reason, with one's spirit and counsel ready to hand."⁴⁴ Courage enables a man to preserve his reason's attention to and attraction for intrinsically worthy goods (the *honestas*) otherwise easily forsaken in the interests of what is expedient and simply advantageous (the *utile*). It is noteworthy that fortitude is inseparable from reason's capacity for *honestas*.

Finally, we see the fourth manifestation of *honestas* in what Cicero calls *decorum*, which can be translated as seemliness, fittingness, or propriety. The term has both a broad and a strict sense. In the broad sense, propriety is an aspect of all of the virtues insofar as they condition actions that are proper to man's specific nature and excellence.⁴⁵ In the strict sense, seemliness signifies a measure or balance that specifically tempers words and actions giving them a beauty or luster. The measured appropriateness of a person's speech and deed reflects a reason borne of self-control and moderation. Modesty and self-restraint testify to the judgment, "Enough: neither too little, nor too much," when it comes to the enjoyment of the beautiful and pleasant things of life. With respect to these

⁴² *De Officiis* 1.15–16; 1.61–92.

⁴³ *De Officiis* 1.66.

⁴⁴ *De Officiis* 1.80.

⁴⁵ In the first sense, *decorum* "is customarily defined thus: what is seemly is that which agrees with the excellence of man just where his nature differs from that of other creatures." *De Officiis* 1.96.

⁴⁰ *De Officiis* 3.28; trans. by Walter Miller, Loeb Edition, p. 295.

⁴¹ Griffin, p. XXIII, comments on how for Cicero so little is personally required in order to observe the bonds of fellowship beyond family and republic.

sorts of goods, the unlimitedness of "more" need not be better, nor need the "less" be worse. What rises above the simple pleasure in the experience, or at least maintaining a competing interest alongside it, is an enjoyment in the limit and order that temperate agency infuses into the words and deeds. Temperance and modesty manifest facets of *honestas*.⁴⁶

V. Responsibility

What then is responsibility? Responsibility signifies a man's capacity for his own judgment. More particularly it points out his capacity for "owning" the words he speaks and the deeds he does. A man stands by these words and deeds not simply because they are his own, but because they enable him to partake of the *bonum honestum*. He can say and do what he says and does *just because* it is true, or right, or beautiful. The *bonum honestum* appears and appeals to him precisely in his rational nature which enables him to envision and serve what is intrinsically good and worthy. When he stands in the light of the *bonum honestum* a man is beholden in his speech and deeds wholly, or at least finally, to his own judgment. Alien claims of the *bonum utile* are necessarily registered, but in the end they are adjudicated according to their compatibility with the highest interests of human life.

And what comes of the words and deeds begotten from the love of what is intrinsically worthy? Cicero has two answers to the question. First of all, I think he would say it is a just man; and secondly, I think he would say it is Rome's *res publica*. The two responses are moments of one another. The republic subsists in the justice of just men. Society is man's trust. The good man is the one who is faithful to that trust. The good society is the one uniting men with one another in the bonds of that trust, lived out in all the rich actual detail of the interplay of *bona honesta et utile*, in words and deeds, among men and women living together at the various levels of social life, be it friendship, family, nation, or humanity at large.

The patterns of conciliation do not just happen; they are the fruit of thoughtful engagement, of judgment and action. When achieved, this conciliation of one's own self and other persons amounts to a kind of togetherness that emerges among the members of the community. The togetherness is the identity of a society. Our commentary on Cicero's account of duties shows us that a stable and worthy identity is fashioned insofar as men and women adhere to *honestas* in their words and deeds. Individual men and women stand out as noble or ignoble, honorable or shameful the extent to which their presence augments or diminishes the common life of one-with-another.

Being responsible, at its most fundamental level, is recognizing and answering to the demands of man's *telos* as a rational, social being. The *telos* is given. The answering response is never a foregone conclusion. History tells the story of the rise and fall of societies. Cicero helps us understand man's responsibility in the life of society.

Summary

As a work of theoretical philosophy, *De Officiis* offers an insightful account of responsibility. The main lines of his theory lead back to fundamental notions of anthropology and to what might be termed a "civic metaphysics." Cicero is most philosophically interesting in the way he understands human society. It is as commonplace to observe that man is by nature a social animal as that he is a rational animal. What Cicero sees in an unprecedented fashion is the essential identity between human sociability and rationality. These two notions are developed in the first two parts of the essay. These more speculative notions provide the foundation for Cicero's subsequent insistence that human excellence can only be achieved insofar as a man or woman acquires the stable and ready capacity for performing actions governed by an attraction to the *bonum honestum*, a kind of goodness whose attraction passes beyond the promises of personal self-interest. Parts three and four are devoted to the notion of *honestas* and the role of the virtues. In the end it becomes evident that human excellence is achieved in building up the human community and that the human community is built up only by actions responding to the beauty of the *bonum honestum*.

Zusammenfassung

Als ein Werk der theoretischen Philosophie bietet *De officiis* eine aufschlussreiche Interpretation von Verantwortung. Die Hauptlinien der dort dargelegten Theorie verweisen auf grundlegende Begriffe der Anthropologie und darauf, was man als „civic metaphysics“ bezeichnen könnte. Cicero ist aus philosophischer Sicht daran interessiert, die menschliche Gesellschaft zu verstehen. Es ist fast trivial, darauf hinzuweisen, dass der Mensch von Natur aus ein soziales Wesen ist, so wie er auch ein vernunftbegabtes Wesen ist. Was Cicero in einer zuvor noch nie dagewesenen Weise sieht, ist die Wesensidentität zwischen menschlicher Soziabilität und der Vernunft. Diese zwei Aspekte werden in den ersten beiden Teilen des Beitrags entfaltet. Diese mehr spekulativen Elemente bilden die Grundlage für Ciceros Annahme, dass menschliche Vortrefflichkeit nur erreicht werden kann, wenn sich ein Mann oder eine Frau unablässig darum bemüht, ihr Handeln auf das *bonum honestum* auszurichten, einer Tugend, die von den eigenen Interessen absieht. Der dritte und vierte Teil ist der Idee der *honestas* und der Rolle der Tugenden gewidmet. Es wird deutlich, dass die Vervollkommnung des Menschen durch den Aufbau der menschlichen Gemeinschaft erreicht wird und dass die menschliche Gemeinschaft auf Handlungen gründet, die für die Schönheit des *bonum honestum* empfänglich sind.

⁴⁶ *De Officiis* 1.15–16; 1.93–151.