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CICERO, RETRIEVING THE HONORABLE

Pleasure is the beginning and
the end of the blessed life.

– Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 129a

To recognize a person means preeminently
to restrain my own potentially unlimited urge
for self-expansion . . . to resist the inclination to
see the other only as a factor in my own life-
project.

– Spaemann, *Persons*, 186

Modernity, as a philosophical and ethical project, stretching from at least the 16th into the 21st century, has been self-conscious of superseding its spiritual and intellectual past. Among its predominant ideological characteristics, intellectual historians, from Max Weber to Brad S. Gregory, identify forms such as secularism, enlightenment rationalism, political liberalism, and scientific naturalism. If there is a unifying thread, perhaps it is expressed in the phrase: “the disenchantment of the world.” A godless and indifferent cosmos forces man upon himself alone in dealing with the large questions about life’s meaning. The idea of man’s fragility and isolation in a purposeless universe is often accompanied by an anthropology committed to the primacy of self-interest in human interactions. The modern period, however, has always included its critics. Chief among them are those committed to projects of retrieving and renewing strains of wisdom to be found in the premodern philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus and Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. Among contemporary philosophers who work within this enduring intellectual tradition, we can count Jude P. Dougherty, whom we celebrate in this festschrift. The extensive body of his philosophical writings are

invariably grounded in the full range of the Western philosophical tradition, a tradition capable of absorbing within it the genuine achievements of the contemporary natural and social science. In what follows I shall join this project of retrieval and renewal in order to shed some critical light on modernity's near axiomatic commitment to individualism.

The primary intention of the essay is to draw out from Marcus Tullius Cicero's philosophical writings a modest network of ideas that informs his understanding of what it means to be a good man. The Latin term he uses is "*vir bonus*," which had for him the specific meaning of one who lives properly as both man and citizen according to intelligible principles grounded in nature.¹ His idea of the good man has an attractiveness that I think can have its appeal even today. Taken together, his notions of *ratio*, the *honestum*, *officium*, and *societas* constitute what I have elsewhere referred to as his civic metaphysics.² We find in Cicero the idea of a befitting mutuality among four distinctively human capacities: a faculty for inquiry into and love for truth manifest in words and actions (reason); a disposition for the recognition of and attraction to things of worth beyond self-interest (the honorable); an acute sense of one own spheres of responsibility along with facility for speaking and acting appropriately within them (appropriate action), and fostering and extending the bonds of mutual personal relations grounded in justice and benevolence (society). I wish to carry forward these ideas and pose them for consideration anew. To a remarkable extent Cicero's analysis of and hope for Rome's moral-political culture in 1st century BC can shed light on the current situation of Western European moral-political culture.³ Even more, I think it can provide a basis for an attractive alternative to a social philosophy grounded in autonomous individualism.

¹ On the concept of the "good man," see Roberto Fiori, "The *Vir Bonus* in Cicero's *De Officiis*: Greek Philosophy and Roman Legal Science," in *Aequum Ius*, ed. A. M. Shirvindt (Moskva: Statut, 2014), 200; on natural law, see esp. Cicero, *De Legibus* 1.16–17.

² "Cicero's Civic Metaphysics As a Basis for Responsibility," in *Verantwortung in einer komplexen Gesellschaft / Responsibility: Recognition and Limits*, ed. Anton Rauscher (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010), 175–191.

³ My approach to Cicero's teachings is somewhat like what Robert Sokolowski has called recapitulation. "To recapitulate is to repeat, but also to select, to summarize and to put into hierarchic order, with the more important distinguished from the less." As I bring forward Cicero's ideas, they are "abridged, rearranged, and . . . slanted." However, despite the shuffling and resituating of the original texts, they have not been lost, but neither are they simply repeated. *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge et al: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78–79 fn 10.

I

One might ask what there is in Cicero's Rome that bears comparison to the undergirding civic culture of modern nation states in Western Europe and North America. I propose that they have in common an attraction to Epicureanism. It is well known that much of Cicero's philosophy is developed in dialectical encounters with Epicurean teachings. He thought that Epicurus's hedonism was grounded in a false view of cosmic necessities and was corruptive of the sort of personal commitments required for engagement in political life and its service to the common good. For the past century or more scholars have cast doubt on Cicero's interpretation of Epicureanism. In a recent study, however, Walter Nicgorski has defended Cicero's criticism as insightful and fair minded. In the process of his study, he offered an explanation for a longstanding scholarly rejection of Cicero's criticism. "The Epicureanism within us [citizens of modern liberal democracies] . . . make it difficult to hear the voice of Cicero."⁴ This is to say that behind a prevailing scholarly posture lies our modern "sober and seemingly virtuous, calculated pursuit of self-interest, that which is often considered self-interest rightly understood, and that which is particularly and intentionally turned loose in modern societies."⁵ It is the principled elevation of self-interest in both ancient Epicureanism and the political liberalism of modern democracies that makes Cicero's view of especial interest in the 21st century when the critics of democracy and self-interested individualism are legion but with no attractive alternative to offer.⁶

Epicurean dispositions, however, are not newly arrived with the civic culture of late modernity. In fact, the broader philosophical commitments that support Epicurean hedonism are remarkably similar to those at the origin of modern political liberalism. In what follows I shall set beside

⁴ Walter Nicgorski, "Cicero, Citizenship, and the Epicurean Temptation," in *Cultivating Citizens: Soulcraft and Citizenship in Contemporary America*, ed. Dwight D. Allman and Michael D. Beaty (Lanham et al: Lexington, 2002), 19.

⁵ Nicgorski, "Cicero, Citizenship," 4.

⁶ In his *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), Pierre Manent considers individualism one of the principal ideas of liberalism. What he means by "individuals" here are inhabitants of a state "that have become ever more autonomous, ever more equal [to each other] and have felt themselves progressively less defined by the family or social class to which they belong" (id., xvi). It is an idea that starts out as a work of the imagination, whether as single human beings conceived in Hobbes's state of nature or Rawls's original position. But this "imaginary" individual "has tended to become more and more reality" (id., xvi).

one another sketches of ancient Epicureanism and that of Thomas Hobbes's modern liberalism as they appear profiled against the rejection of key elements in the anthropology of classical political philosophy.⁷ Their commonality will be readily evident. What is especially important for the purposes of this essay is to note the common denial of political space for the expression of human dignity and the pursuit of what is noble. This denial is of a piece with their insistence on pleasure and self-interest as the *summum bonum*. It stands in stark contrast with Cicero's idea of the *vir bonus* who distinguishes himself in the public pursuit of what is noble. Acting on behalf of the noble or the *honestum* is only possible inasmuch as persons are not defined by the imperatives of self-interest and species preservation. Deeds done in such moments of self-transcendence show forth the dignity of human persons.⁸ Moreover, an approach to social-political life with an understanding of the human persons ordered to the splendor of the *honestum* and fidelity to *officium* provides an attractive alternative to the sort of individualistic anthropology sanctioned by the liberalism passed on to us by Hobbes. All of this, however, remains to be seen.

II

Before advancing to the central argument of the essay, I wish to recount four practical scenarios from *De Officiis* that Cicero had put before his readers in 44 BC, only months before he was assassinated. The point here—if I am right—is that each of these narratives puts before the reader judgments regarding the moral integrity or the immoral turpitude of actions. There is an interesting rationale to Cicero's use of the real exemplary actions. They are illustrative and perhaps inspiring, but I think they also serve a rhetorical purpose more essentially tied to his insistence on recog-

⁷ The comparison is commonly noted. For one prominent instance, see Leo Strauss's treatment of Thomas Hobbes in *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 165–202. Also, Walter Nicgorski in "Cicero, Citizenship" calls attention to Thomas Jefferson's preference for Epicurus's philosophy and to the influence Jefferson had on the development of an American public philosophy with a prominent place in it for the idea of "the virtuous, calculated pursuit of self-interest" (id., 4). Permit me also to recall that over forty years ago Professor Thomas Prifer would teach a graduate course on Epicurus and Hobbes in the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America. A decoction of his course appears as an essay, "On Nature" in his *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1993), 22–26.

⁸ See Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115, 186, and *Love & the Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 32.

nizing the primacy of what is honorable in all instances of appropriate behavior (*officium*).

The reader might be expected to encounter in them the truth of a noble action with a kind of immediacy somewhat like the way our reason encounters the impossibility of a contradiction between two beliefs or the necessity of a *modus ponens* inference or the way we verify a predication such as *The tablecloth is stained* in the presence of a stained tablecloth. In each of the three cases, the truth claim faces the immediacy of the truth claimed. I do not mean to say the statements of what is impossible, necessary, or being a fact need to be secured as true on their being asserted. They can be called into question. But if they are called into question and subsequently confirmed, then the confirmation simply restores the immediacy of the unmediated awareness of the contradiction's impossibility, inference's necessity, or fact's truth. Put otherwise, the truth of these claims cannot be reduced to logically prior truths. But even if, *per impossibile*, they could, the reductions would eventually have to rest on some other immediate claims of truth. There is a comparable immediacy to recognizing an action as noble or honorable, as possessed of a worthiness that transcends any measure of self-interest. In addition to making the nobility of the action evident, Cicero's scenarios cause one to marvel at a man's capacity to marginalize what is beneficial to his own self-interested purposes. They force, as it were, our recognition of "the honorable" (*honestum*) in contradistinction to "the beneficial" (*utile*). Let us consider four of Cicero's many exempla.⁹

Themistocles's dishonorable plan (3.49). After the victory of the combined forces of the Athenians and Spartans in the Persian war, Themistocles announced he had a plan that would preserve Athenian greatness. He needed the Athenians consent, but it was necessary that the plan not become common knowledge. The people put forward Aristides as their representative who would entertain Themistocles's plan but keep it to himself.

⁹ Through Cicero's exempla, drawn from mythology and Greek and Roman history and sketched with a few swift strokes, shine the forms of the honorable and the shameful. The stories are recorded in *De Officiis* book 3. In addition to the ones cited, others include: the house vendor (3.54), Pythius sells Canius a vacation resort (3.58–9), Quintus Scaevola buys a farm and then pays extra (3.62), Gaius Marius becomes consul by slandering Quintus Metellus (3.79), Marius Gratidianus claims honor due the six praetors for himself alone (3.80), Gaius Fabricius returns a deserter assassin to King Pyrrhus (3.86), Ulysses feigns madness (3.97), Hercules's extreme service (3.25), Brutus deposes Tarquinius Collatinus (3.40), and Romulus kills Remus (3.41).

Themistocles told him that the plan involved secretly setting afire the entire Spartan fleet drawn ashore nearby. With Spartan power crushed, Athens would thrive. When Aristides heard this he went into the assembly who gathered around him amid great expectation. He said that the counsel offered by Themistocles was extremely beneficial, but not at all honorable. The Athenians considered that something that was not honorable was not even beneficial, and on Aristides's authority they rejected the plan completely, although they had not even heard it.

The corn merchant (3.50). A good man brought a ship load of corn from Alexandria to Rhodes at a time when corn was extremely expensive among Rhodians due to shortage and famine. If he were to know that several more merchants would soon likewise set sail for Rhodes with boats laden with corn, would he tell the Rhodians? Or, would he keep silent so as to produce as high a price as possible for his corn? Cicero's evaluation (3.57): The corn dealer ought not to have concealed anything from the Rhodians. It cannot be said that the seller is just silent and does not actively deceive his buyer. The actual situation is that the buyer wants those in whose interest it would be to know something that he himself knows to remain ignorant of it, so that he may profit. What sort of man acts this way? Certainly not one who is open, straightforward, upright, just or good, rather one who is a twister, mysterious, cunning, tricky, ill-intentioned, crafty, roguish, and sly. It is not beneficial to subject oneself to such allegations of viciousness.

Dance in the forum (3.93). Suppose someone makes a wise man heir to 100,000,000 sesterces on the condition that he promise that on receipt of the inheritance he will dance in the forum in open daylight, an insult to the republic and a grave violation of public decorum. Should he do what he promised? Cicero's response: It would be best if he did not make the promise. But if he promises, and because he knows it dishonorable to dance in the forum, he would act more honorably by breaking his promise and taking nothing of the inheritance. Alternatively, he could keep the promise, accept the money, and give it to the republic to meet some important contingency, for then the dancing would be in the interest of the country which would not be dishonorable.

Regulus returns to Carthage (3.99–100). Marcus Atilius Regulus, as consul for the second time, was captured in an ambush by Hannibal's Carthaginian forces. He was sent to the Roman Senate, having sworn to return to Carthage in the event that certain Carthaginian nobles held captive in Rome are not returned. Regulus arrives and sees the benefit to himself and

his family: to remain in his own country, to be at home with his wife and children, to maintain his rank as ex-consul, counting the disaster that had befallen him as common to the fortunes of warfare. So reads the case for "the beneficial." Who can deny it? Cicero's evaluation: Greatness of spirit and courage deny it! Entering the Senate, Regulus revealed his instructions; then he refused to vote himself, saying that so long as he was held under oath by the enemy, he was not a senator. He even argued that it was not to Rome's benefit to restore the captives to the enemy: for they were young men and good leaders. The authority of Regulus prevailed, and the captives were not restored to Carthage. Regulus returned to Cathage, held back by love neither for his country nor his family and friends. He knew well that he was going to a very cruel enemy, one most sophisticated in torture. And so, even while he was dying through enforced wakefulness he was better off than if he had remained at home, a consular but elderly, captive, and foresworn.

In each of these exemplary stories Cicero appeals to his readers good sense—a good sense that readily distinguishes the good that is intrinsically worthy from the good that is beneficial or expedient. One is meant readily to recognize what is honorable and what is shameful. Were the reader not to see the difference between the honorable and the shameful or to be doubtful of the preference of the honorable over the expedient, it is not clear that there are arguments which would prevail without eventually appealing to the immediacy of distinguishing the honorable/shameful and preferring what is honorable to what is expedient. Cicero means for us to see the honorable in human actions, and he wonders what kind of man it is who would prefer either the shameful or the beneficial to the honorable.

Unravel and sift your understanding in order to see the form and concept of a good man (*vir bonus*) that is there [in an exemplum just recounted]. Does it become the good man to lie or slander for his own profit, or to usurp or deceive? Is there any matter so valuable or any advantage so desirable that you would abandon the name and splendor of a good man for it?¹⁰

III

In what follows I return to the consideration of the Epicurean disposition. It has its ancient form with which Cicero was familiar. It also has its

¹⁰ *De Officiis*, 3.81.

modern form with which we are more familiar, aptly characterized earlier as that “sober and seemingly virtuous, calculated pursuit of self-interest, that which is often considered self-interest rightly understood.” The previous section brought forward the notion of the good man as one who recognizes the *bonum honestum* and has the ready disposition to prize it above the goods of his private, personal self-interest. In order to draw out this Ciceronian notion of man, I shall first develop as a foil brief sketches of the ancient Epicurean and modern Hobbesian views of self-interested man. Against this backdrop, I shall then introduce a fuller view of key elements of Cicero’s civic philosophy.

In Epicurean thought man finds himself part of a purposeless universe. The system of nature amounts to a vast set of complex combinations of matter in motion. At the foundation lie indivisible atoms and the void.¹¹ The many worlds of the universe come into and fall out of existence in an unending sequence with no overarching pattern or reason.¹² Indifferent to human life, the cosmos provides no support for human ends and aspirations. Death, however, is inevitable. Fear of death, founded on childish beliefs in an afterlife and vengeful gods, is the chief hindrance to happiness.¹³ The gods, like anything else, are contingent composites of mindless matter and motion. Oddly though, they are immortal, and a condition of their blessedness is that they take no interest in the fate of worldly or human affairs.¹⁴ Human civilization is best conceived as a wall erected against the depredations of restless, mindless nature. Those things that are specifically human, especially friendship and systems of justice or social order, give some measure of stability in the here and now. Social and political structures, however, are matters of pure artifice,¹⁵ and the prudent way to happiness is to avoid the attachments of politics and civil society with all the anxieties that come with them. The wise alternative is to withdraw from the city and live the private life of friendship in the pursuit of

¹¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 33c–45b (Eng. 10–13), from *Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Bk 10, 128–129a; English translation from *Letters, Principle Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*, trans. Russel M. Geer (NP: Library of Liberal Arts Press, 1964), 55–56.

¹² *Letter to Herodotus*, 45b, 73b–74a (Eng. 13, 28–29).

¹³ *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124b–127a (Eng. 54–55).

¹⁴ *Letter to Phythocles*, 97 (Eng. 41–42); *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123–124a (Eng. 53–54); *Letter to Herodotus*, 76b–77 (Eng. 30–31).

¹⁵ *Principal Doctrines*, XXXI–XXXVIII, 150–153 (Eng. 63–64).

the refined pleasures of life.¹⁶ Though knowledge of nature has its own pleasures, it is especially useful in allowing us to make terms with our finitude so that we might confidently give ourselves over to a lifetime of contentment: “Do not think that knowledge about things above the earth, whether as treated as part of a philosophical system or by itself, has any other purpose than peace of mind and confidence. And this is true of the other studies.”¹⁷ In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus writes that “gaining health of body and peace of mind . . . is the final end of the blessed life. To gain this end, namely, freedom from pain and fear, we do everything . . . We say that pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life.”¹⁸ John Rist offers an apt summary of Epicurus’s variety of hedonism:

It is a form of the theory that the end is pleasure; but the distinguishing feature is that pleasure equals freedom from pain combined with safety, whether from fear of the gods or of death or of any other mortal affliction, or from the purely ‘fleshly’ inconveniences of life . . . [T]he unimpeded activity of the organism is pleasant in so far as it is unimpeded.¹⁹

Anticipating the subsequent contrast with Cicero, several features of Epicurus’s hedonism stand out. The first is the instrumental character of the political order which provides safety and convenience, but only at the cost of drawing people into the anxieties, passions, and conflicts of the active life. Secondly, in the quiet of the private life the good life is taken up very much with care for the condition one’s own self. Finally, there is no moral place in the Epicurean world for finding ultimate meaning in the truth of speech and action which would allow us to rest in a good outside of our own private interests.

IV

Modernity has its own form of hedonism.²⁰ Ingredient to Thomas Hobbes’s self-consciously new political philosophy is the rejection of

¹⁶ *Letter to Menoeceus*, 131b–132a (Eng. 57); *Principle Sayings*, XIV, XXVII–XXVIII, 142, 148 (Eng. 6, 631); *Vatican Sayings*, LVIII (Eng. 70). See John Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 122–126.

¹⁷ *Letter to Pythocles*, 85b–86 (Eng. 36); *Principle Doctrines*, XII, 143 (Eng. 61).

¹⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128–129a (Eng. 55–56).

¹⁹ Rist, *Epicurus*, 125–126.

²⁰ Leo Strauss argues that Hobbes was the “creator of political hedonism” and “the founder of liberalism.” *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 169,

premises fundamental to the then received view of political thought as we find them, for instance, in Aristotle or Cicero. The new understanding that Hobbes installed has become for us the received view. To appreciate its novelty it's enough to identify in Hobbes five ideas that directly conflict with the doctrine common to the tradition of classical political philosophy that historians call civic republicanism.²¹

First, Aristotle holds that political communities are creations of nature (1253a2, 26–27) and that men are by nature political beings. In other words, we do not choose life in community, for outside of it we would not be men. “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god . . . A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature.”²² By contrast, Hobbes's man, as man, is innately a-social and a-political.²³ The fact that he lives in a society overarched by a political order is a function of a unique kind of choice, namely, man's acquiescence to the social contract.

Second, for Aristotle, life in political communities draws out from its citizens the best that men are capable of. To be a good citizen in a good state is the ideal situation. It is what a man would be were he to be an instance of human nature at its best (1293b5). Political life elevates and ennobles citizens. By contrast, the move into political society provides the Hobbesian man protection and security against the threat of violent death, chiefly at the hands of other men. It does not open up avenues for pursuing goods greater in kind than what he could have attained in the a-political state of nature, with the exception the great good of peace. Fear of violent death is “the most fundamental of natural desires” and “the desire for self-preservation is the sole root of all justice and morality.”²⁴ Hobbes's first law of nature: “Peace is to be sought after, where there it may be found; and where not, there to provide for ourselves help for war.”²⁵ Peace is here

181. He devoted the first half of his account of modern natural right to Thomas Hobbes. Throughout this section I will adopt a number of his ideas.

²¹ Peter Riesenberg, *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); J. G. A. Pocock, “The Ideal of Citizenship Since Classical Times” in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29–52; Derek Heater, *A Brief History of Citizenship* (New York: New University Press, 2004).

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2 (1253a28–31), trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1130.

²³ Strauss, *Natural Right*, 169, 183; Hobbes, *De cive*, 1.2.

²⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right*, 181.

²⁵ Hobbes, *De Cive*, 2.2, in *Man and Citizen* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 123.

understood as the negative condition of avoiding the worst, rather than a positive achievement of the best.

Third, Aristotle holds that the community exists for the sake of noble actions and not merely for the safety and convenience of living in common (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281a2). Noble actions require a measure of self-forgetfulness on the part of the agent. For Aristotle, man's dignity lies in the freedom he has to marginalize his own private self-interests so as to serve for their own sake the good of others and the common good of a community. The Hobbesian civil state, however, exists in order to cut out a sphere of operation where each member of the community can pursue his individual interests without undue interference from others. This is not to reduce morality to a kind of crude egoism; it does, however, reject a hierarchy of goods in which some goods are of greater intrinsic worth than others. Hobbes denies that "the noble and the just are fundamentally distinguished from the pleasant and are by nature preferable to it."²⁶

Fourth, for Aristotle, citizens in a good political community participate in the activities of ruling and being ruled (1262a16, 1277a25–28, 1277b14–20); they serve in the state's legislative and judicial offices (1275a22–23, 1276a4–5). It is no accident of nature, therefore, that man is endowed with the gift of speech, which Aristotle understands as the power "to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and unjust . . . [For] it is characteristic of man alone that he has any sense of good and evil, just and unjust and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes the family and the state" (1253a9–17). The innumerable acts of free men deliberating, judging, and acting on behalf of the people's common interests establish and sustain the state. Yet for Hobbes, the central political act is the primordial ceding of authority for judgment and the power for administration to an absolute sovereign. The social contract establishes conditions of security against the prospects of suffering a violent death at the hands of one's neighbors. Men are thus free to pursue their private interests, within the limits laid down for society by the sovereign will. The rights men enjoy in the Hobbesian civil order "hallow everyone's self-interest as everyone sees it."²⁷

Fifth, the ordered cosmos of Aristotelian natural philosophy has in it a distinctive place for mankind in its hierarchy of beings. Endowed with reason, men are capable of informing their choices and governing their

²⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right*, 167.

²⁷ *Id.*, 182–183.

passions so that they might bring to perfection their innate potentialities for truth and moral virtue. The dynamics of nature include formal and final causality alongside efficient and material causality. This means that it is no matter of chance or external intentionality, whether of choice or artifice, that certain goods we seek are perfective of the kind of being we are. Written into nature is the standard for what it is for a man to look back and judge whether he has led a good life. Public speech debates the objective good of situations calling for action. By contrast, Hobbes situates human beings within a natural order of things that is of itself unintelligible and indifferent to human interests which must be secured against nature's forces.²⁸ We may call our scientific theories true only to the extent that they are beneficial, permitting us to channel nature's power to our own purposes and projects. Beyond the good of self-preservation there is no common measure for the goods men seek. Public law is the work of sovereign will, not the function of common or prevailing opinions fashioned in public discourse.

As a practical matter Hobbes's views can seem more the extreme effect of a radical thought experiment than the prudent assessment of man's historical experience in political life. Nevertheless, they do provide an articulation of the theory of liberalism in which the political order is not the sphere in which men seek the greater human good. Rather the state is an overarching order that sets the limits within which individuals are at liberty to autonomously pursue each his own private interests.²⁹ In liberalism, man's pursuit of the good life is very much an individual thing.

Common to the Epicurean moral-political philosophy, whether of the ancient or the modern sort, is the primacy of the pursuit of self-interests, the good of which is measured by pleasure and the absence of pain. Any public action or law has its worth to the degree to which it serves the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. The fact that the experience of pleasure and pain are preeminently individual and incommunicable is emblematic of a self-contained individualism which is consistent with the essentially extrinsic character of interpersonal ties. Hedonism flattens values; it denies that there is any especial dignity to be found in the care for others and for the common good. Men may have shared interests, but their

²⁸ *Id.*, 175.

²⁹ "We may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with protection or safeguarding of those rights . . ." *Id.*, 181-182.

“common” good is nothing more than the sum of individual hedonistic goods.

V

Cicero was not unaware of ideas such as Hobbes’s.³⁰ He encountered their analogues in Epicureanism, which has its attractions. Among many of his well-to-do contemporaries it provided a rationale for their political apathy and withdrawal from political affairs. Cicero’s understanding of civic life and the role it plays in the life of a good man differs from both Epicurus and Hobbes, though in different ways. Epicureans retreat from the city in order to flee trouble and anxiety, and Hobbesian man turns to the city seeking refuge from a brutal state of nature. Both Epicurus and Hobbes, however, agree that the good life takes the form of untroubled self-interest enjoyed in private, non-political activities. In contradistinction to both, it is in the active life of the republic that Ciceronian man, through speech and action, can pursue the *bonum honestum* from which proceed acts of virtue, and especially acts of justice and benevolence. He comes to the *summum bonum* by de-centering self-interest in preference to the honorable good, which we can see in the scenarios recounted above. Such deeds manifest the dignity of man, that quality that calls forth in us reverence, awe, honor in the face of a person responsible for good that exceeds any measure of self-interest. We also recognize that such actions protect and strength the bonds of civil society. Trust, the moral bond of a good society, is established on our capacity to act for the sake of the honorable.

Four concepts play a large role in Cicero’s understanding of the social, political nature of man: *honestum*, *officium*, *ratio*, and *societas*. Together they generate a picture of the human person whose life as a citizen is integral to his perfection as a man. In one of his last works, *De Officiis*,³¹ he advises his reader that

³⁰ Portions of this section revisit topics I have treated earlier in “Cicero’s Civic Metaphysics As a Basis for Responsibility,” 175–191.

³¹ *De Officiis*, 1.4. In this book, Cicero directly addressed his son Marcus. But the work also targets a wider readership, a point noted by Andrew R. Dyck, who observes that since the year 58, Cicero had been “shut out of any meaningful role in politics. As the confrontation with Marc Antony took shape in the fall [of 43] . . . he was counting on the willingness of young nobles to defend the Republic . . . This was evidently the intended audience for the political message of *De Officiis* . . . Cicero aimed at reforming the political culture of Rome, which he saw veering dangerously from the traditional patriotism toward the kind of egotis-

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 appropriate action (*vacare officium potest*). Everything that is honorable in a life depends upon its cultivation, and everything dishonorable upon its neglect (*in eoque et colendo sita vitae est honestas omnis et neglegendo turpitude*).³²

In this passage Cicero focuses upon the good man's responsibility to notice the many circumstances of life that call for appropriate action (*officium*). He also insists that what is honorable in life depends on the cultivation of appropriate action. Moreover, the interpersonal bonds that constitute society are established in actions on behalf of the honorable good, and it is nature's gift of reason that capacitates men for the recognition and judgment necessary for actions that befit a good man. To elaborate this picture I shall comment on each of the four key terms.

Honestum. In a primary sense, the *honestum* is an objective quality or attribute that belongs to a certain category of human action. Were one to say, for instance, that a person has performed a noble or honorable action, this would mean that the person, the agent, has displayed a capacity to act on behalf of a kind of good that cannot be reduced to the attractions of pleasure or the value of utility.³³ The proper response to its recognition is admiration and praise. *Honestum* is Cicero's rendering of the Greek *kalón* (the noble, beautiful, splendid) and as such it connotes an inherent attractiveness. Cicero's Latin word is derivative of the Latin *honus* which is

tical quest for glory and self-aggrandizement . . ." *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 31.

³² I have taken all English translations of *De Officiis* either from Cicero, *On Duties*, ed. Miriam T. Griffin and E. Margaret Atkins (Cambridge et al: Cambridge University Press, 1991), or from Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1913). In some instances I have made minor adjustments to their translations.

³³ *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 2.45. By *honestum* Cicero means "that which is of such a nature that, though devoid of all utility, it can justly be commended in and for itself apart from any profit or reward." Cicero considers this a good definition, but because of its formal character, it is little indicative of its lived reality. He therefore thinks it useful to look to the experience of men of high character who do good deeds just "because of their propriety, justness, rightness (*quia decet, quia rectum, quia honestum est*)." Man "was not born for self alone, but for country and for kindred, claims that leave but a small part of him for himself." I have used, with modest changes on my part, H. Rackman's English translation in Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1931).

drawn from the social sphere and signifies “public standing.”³⁴ English translators render it as “the honorable,” “the morally good,” and “intrinsic worth.” I think it is fair to say that there is something transcendent and other-regarding to the experience of *honestas*. It is counterpoised to a secondary species of the good called *utile*, which names the sort of goods that are beneficial or expedient or useful. Examples of beneficial goods are health, wealth, and fame. Cicero says that “things that are *utile* . . . help man to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune.”³⁵ It is interesting to note that the goods of *utile* are not wholly or securely in our control; the forces of fortune and evil can both give them and take them away, our best efforts notwithstanding. But the achievement and maintenance of *honestum* in one’s person cannot be given by any other, nor can it be taken away, save by one’s personal surrender. In his emphasis upon the desirability, even the beauty, of honorable and noble actions, Cicero also puts before us what I think is a quite contemporary idea of human dignity.

Appropriate action (*officium*), achieved in the innumerable circumstances of life calling for some personal decision, judgment, or interchange, whether high or low, domestic or civic, simple or complex, provides the opportunity for manifesting what is honorable. And it is precisely in this pursuit of the honorable that virtues come into play. For, as he writes, “The honorableness (*honestum*) that we seek is created from and accomplished by” the search for truth and the pursuit of what is just and lawful, of greatness of spirit, and of seemliness. “Even if it is not accorded acclaim, it is still honorable, . . . and even if no one praises it, it is by nature worthy of praise” (1.14). The virtues, in other words, each in its own sphere of human involvement, confer the integrity, the luster of *honestum* upon a man or woman’s words and deeds. They are “the very face and form, so to speak, of the honorable (*formam quidem ipsam . . . et tamquam faciem honesti*)” (1.15). The polar opposite of *honestas* is *turpitude*, that which is ugly and shameful.³⁶

Attraction to beneficial, expedient goods that can only be attained at the expense of the honorable good tempts one to shameful deeds. The gravity of the moral error is measured by Cicero’s claim that “when men separate benefit from honorableness they subvert the foundations of nature”

³⁴ Dyck, *Commentary*, 69.

³⁵ *De Officiis*, 2.19–20.

³⁶ Moral sensibility plays a foundational role in Cicero’s moral psychology; see Walter Nicgorski, “Cicero’s Paradoxes and His Idea of Utility,” *Political Theory* 12:4 (November 1984): 561–563.

(3.101).³⁷ To be shameful is the worst harm (that is to say, maximal *inutile*) that can befall a man. It de-humanizes him. It violates his reason, which is to say, his capacity by word and deed to build up and sustain the web-of-human-relationships. No man, he seems to think, can be incognizant of his inhumanity when he does shameful things. He cannot equitably endure not being trusted or honored by others. Such inhuman solitariness is an unsustainable experience.

Officium. The second word, *officium*, is often translated as “duty,” which for many is misleading to the extent that the translation bears a Kantian connotation of an imperative necessity. Other translations include “proper function,” “befitting action,” and “appropriate behavior.” *Officium* is Cicero’s rendering of the Greek Stoic term *kathékon*.³⁸ He defines *officium* as an “action for which a persuasive rationale can be given.”³⁹ It signifies the sort of behavior or action that is appropriate to, or befits, or is due from, a particular person in the given circumstances of life that call for action. We would not go far wrong to imagine an actor playing the role of a character in a play: he would be expected to speak and act as

³⁷ If the attainment of a beneficial good involves the violation of a *bonum honestum*, then Cicero will say that that *bonum utile* is mirage or even deceit: “Nothing is so contrary to nature as dishonorableness” and “nothing is so much according to nature as the beneficial” (3.35). “Separation of the beneficial from the honorable is the origin of daggers, poisons, and forged wills, of thefts and embezzlements of public funds and the pillaging and plundering of allies and citizens. It is the origin of excessive wealth, unacceptable power, and monarchy in free cities” (3.36). “Each should attend to what benefits himself, so far as it may be done without injustice to another” (3.42). “A good man will never, for the sake of a friend, act contrary to the republic, to a sworn oath, or to good faith (*fides*)” (3.42). “In friendships, when that which is beneficial is compared to that which is honorable, let the appearance of benefit lie low, and let honorableness prevail” (3.45). “The force of the honorable is so great that it eclipses the appearance of benefit (*speciem utilitatis*)” (3.47). “The rule of what is beneficial and of what is honorable is one and the same” (3.74). “Nothing is either expedient (*expedire*) or beneficial (*utile esse*) that is unjust” (3.76). “For one man to take something from another and to increase his own advantage at the cost of another’s disadvantage is more contrary to nature than death, than poverty, than pain and anything else that may happen to his body or external possessions . . . It would shatter that which is most in accord with nature, that is, the fellowship of the human race . . . Nature does not allow us to increase our means, our resources and our wealth by despoiling others” (3.21).

³⁸ Norbert Wazek, “Two Concepts of Morality,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45:4 (1984): 591, notes that Seneca translated *kathékon* as *convenientia* in which the note of befittingness stands out more prominently than it does in Cicero’s *officium*.

³⁹ *De Finibus*, 3.18.58; *De Officiis*, 1.3.8. See Dyck, *Commentary*, 3, 74–81. On the scholarly controversy concerning *kathékon* in Stoic thought, see for instance John Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

appropriate to the character he assumes. Take the notion a step further by imagining someone dignified with a political or religious office: he would be expected to speak and act in ways appropriate to that office. I think it is too much to say that Nature or Life is a theater or a nation or a church in which men and women play their different roles. There is something to the notion, however, that as Cicero would have it, the concrete the concrete circumstances of life—the grand and the common—present every human person opportunities for acting appropriately. Human dignity rests in this capacity for appropriate action. The idea here is that we express or actualize our human nature by not permitting ourselves to be lost in impulse or sensibility, but instead by bringing to direction to sensibility through reasoned judgment in the pursuit of honorable and beneficial goods.

[T]he power of the spirit, that is its nature (*vis animorum atque natura*), is twofold: one part of it consists of impulse (*in appetitu*), called in Greek *horme*, which snatches a man this way and that; the other of reason, which teaches and explains what should be done and what avoided. Reason therefore commands, and impulse obeys. All action should be free from rashness and carelessness; nor should anyone do anything for which he cannot give a persuasive justification: that is practically a definition of appropriate action (*De Officiis*, 1.101).⁴⁰

The sort of self-command manifest in one's capacity for appropriate action is a mark of Cicero's good man. In his involvements in the world, he is capable of discerning what befits the various goods, characters, and circumstances relevant to the occasion. And, such judgments make a claim on him: they are the measure of a good man's behavior.

Societas. Cicero's *vir bonus*, the honorable man, is preeminently rational and social. The common end of intellectual creativity and reason's wit is the ever more fruitful and stable life-of-one-with-another in society. The well-being of one's community enjoys priority over the autonomy of the individual. Cicero has no sympathy for the common misperception that social life is somehow derivative of ends and purposes more fundamentally individual. He observes that "it is not true, as some claim, that men embarked upon communal life and fellowship in order to provide for life's

⁴⁰ See *De Finibus*, 3.58. Nicgorski's commentary on this notion is helpful; "Cicero's Paradoxes," 262–263.

necessities just because we could not manage, without others, to provide ourselves with our natural requirements" (*De Officiis*, 1.157).

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 individual drop his business affairs? Wouldn't he abandon his efforts aimed at maintaining society and its network of relationships? If the social fabric of human existence is a means to an end and the end is amply and securely achieved by other means, then society and its structures would be useless.⁴¹ A man detached from the web-of-human-relationships, a human isolate, would be an unnatural aberration. For Cicero, individual perfection and a flourishing community are not *pieces* that have their independent logics and can be entertained separately of one another. The excellences of citizenship and of humanity are moments to one another, and what unites them is the pursuit of the honorable.

Ratio. Moreover, natural priority of the "social" is closely tied to Cicero's understanding of human rationality. He thinks of reason, man's specific difference, as the social faculty.⁴² Being rational and being social are equally ends of being human; man's sociability is constituted in his being rational. The more perfectly men and women live the life of reason, the more their common life-with-one-another flourishes. He writes that reason "reminds man that . . . he was not born for self alone, but for country and for kindred, claims that leave but a part of him for himself" (*De Finibus*, 2.45).⁴³ In the very act of living rationally, men and women find themselves bound to one another. By its very nature, reason's inner structures are largely ordered to the practical and interpersonal categorialities of

⁴¹ E. M. Atkins 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." "*Domina et Regina Virtutum: Justice and Societas in De Officiis*," *Phronesis* 35:3 (1990): 271. On the natural finality of human sociability, see: *De Officiis*, 1.11–12, 1.22, 1.50, 1.154, 1.157–8, 3.21–8. I have discussed these ideas more fully in "Cicero's Civic Metaphysics As a Basis for Responsibility," 175–191.

⁴² *De Officiis*, 1.11, 1.50; *De Finibus*, 2.45; 2.133.

⁴³ Also *De Officiis*, 1.22: "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.

social existence.⁴⁴ 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 most evident in our hours of leisure," when we often find ourselves thinking about the most speculative matters (*De Finibus*, 2.46), 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" (*De Finibus*, 2.46). 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 and community foremost is reason and speech (*ratio et oratio*) which, in the activities of "teaching, learning, communicating, debating, and making judgments, conciliate men with one another and join them into a sort of natural society (*conciliat inter se homines coniungitque naturali quadam societate*)" (*De Officiis*, 1.50). Reason and speech unite men in society because it makes possible "justice, fairness, and goodness (*justitiam, aequitatem, bonitatem*),"⁴⁵ which "conciliate" men. Society, therefore, subsists as an active

⁴⁴ 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 (*De Officiis*, 1.157).

⁴⁵ *De Officiis*, 1.50.

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.⁴⁶ Virtuous action needs also to be complemented by effective rhetoric, which is the great mover in political life.⁴⁷

Conclusion

What emerges in Cicero's system of thought is an "active humanism," in which human excellence and moral action are essentially tied to the sort of behavior that enriches and sustains the web-of-human-relationships. One fashions these relationships in appropriate actions, in the midst of the multitude of life's circumstances calling for action. Such circumstances provide occasions to stand forth as honorable, whether in the attainment or in the privation of many beneficial things of life. I believe a recapitulation of these ideas to be timely and appropriate to contemporary moral and social conditions of Europe and the United States of America. If it is the case that autonomous individualism is the prevailing anthropology in our moral and political self-understanding, then a retrieval of the splen-

⁴⁶ Cicero's four cardinal virtues: (1) *Wisdom* and *prudence*, capacities for searching after and discovering truth, belong to one who swiftly and accurately sees things and explains their reasons (developed 1.18–19; also 1.153). The remaining virtues, *justice* and *beneficence*, *greatness of spirit* and *courage*, *seemliness* (*decorum*) and *temperance*, deal with the procuring and conserving the necessities of life. These necessities divide into three broad fields; (2) preserving fellowship and bonding between men, governed by *justice* (developed 1.20–41) and *beneficence* (1.42–60); (3) allowing excellence, *greatness of spirit* and *courage* to shine out, not only in advancing resources and advantages for self and one's own, but also in one's disdain of them (developed: 1.61–92); and (4) securing measure, order, constancy, and moderation in mental activity but especially in action: *seemliness*, *temperance* and *modesty* (developed 1.93–151).

⁴⁷ Walter Nicgorski has shown how 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): 63–101, and "Cicero's Focus: From the Best Regime to the Model Statesman," *Political Theory* 19:2 (May 1991): 230–251.

dor of honorableness and the beauty of nobility might loosen the axiomatic commitment to the primacy of self-interest in our way of thinking and speaking of ourselves.

CICERO, RETRIEVING THE HONORABLE

SUMMARY

From Marcus Tullius Cicero's philosophical writings, the author first draws out a modest network of ideas that informs his understanding of what it means to be a good man (*vir bonus*). Then, he finds in Cicero the idea of a befitting mutuality among four distinctively human capacities: a faculty for inquiry into and love for truth manifest in words and actions (reason); a disposition for the recognition of and attraction to things of worth beyond self-interest (the honorable); an acute sense of one own spheres of responsibility along with facility for speaking and acting appropriately within them (appropriate action), and fostering and extending the bonds of mutual personal relations grounded in justice and benevolence (society). Against the background of deep commitments in modernity to hedonism and autonomous individualism, the author proposes a retrieval of the virtue of the honorable as an attractive alternative.

KEYWORDS: Cicero, honorableness, *vir bonus*, society, virtue, politics, autonomous individualism, hedonism, modernity, officium.