

Cicero

De Officiis

BOOK I

MORAL GOODNESS

Excerpt

1 I. My dear son Marcus, you have now been studying a full year under Cratippus, and that too in Athens, and you should be fully equipped with the practical precepts and the principles of philosophy; so much at least one might expect from the pre-eminence not only of your teacher but also of the city; the former is able to enrich you with learning, the latter to supply you with models. Nevertheless, just as I for my own improvement have always combined Greek and Latin studies - and I have done this not only in the study of philosophy but also in the practice of oratory - so I recommend that you should do the same, so that you may have equal command of both languages. And it is in this

very direction that I have, if I mistake not, rendered a great service to our countrymen, so that not only those who are unacquainted with Greek literature but even the cultured consider that they have gained much both in oratorical power and in mental training.

2 You will, therefore, learn from the foremost of present-day philosophers, and you will go on learning as long as you wish; and your wish ought to continue as long as you are not dissatisfied with the progress you are making. For all that, if you will read my philosophical books, you will be helped; my philosophy is not very different from that of the Peripatetics (for both they and I claim to be followers of Socrates+ and Plato+). As to the conclusions you may reach, I leave that to your own judgment (for I would put no hindrance in your way), but by reading my philosophical writings you will be sure to render your mastery of the Latin language more complete. But I would by no means have you think that this is said boastfully. For there are many to whom I yield precedence in the knowledge of philosophy; but if I lay claim to the orator's peculiar ability to speak with propriety, clearness, elegance, I think my claim is in a measure justified, for I have spent my life in that profession.

3 And therefore, my dear Cicero, I cordially recommend you to read carefully not only my orations but also these books of mine on philosophy, which are now about as extensive. For while the orations exhibit a more vigorous style, yet the unimpassioned, restrained style of my philosophical productions is also worth cultivating. Moreover, for the same man to succeed in both departments, both in the forensic style and in that of calm philosophic discussion has not, I observe, been the good fortune of any one of the Greeks so far, unless, perhaps, Demetrius of Phalerum can be reckoned in that number - a clever

reasoner, indeed, and, though rather a spiritless orator, he is yet charming, so that you can recognize in him the disciple of Theophrastus. But let others judge how much I have accomplished in each pursuit; I have at least attempted both.

4 I believe, of course, that if Plato had been willing to devote himself to forensic oratory, he could have spoken with the greatest eloquence and power; and that if Demosthenes had continued the studies he pursued with Plato and had wished to expound his views, he could have done so with elegance and brilliancy. I feel the same way about Aristotle and Isocrates, each of whom, engrossed in his own profession, undervalued that of the other.

BOOK I. ii.

II. But since I have decided to write you a little now (and a great deal by and by), I wish, if possible, to begin with a matter most suited at once to your years and to my position. Although philosophy offers many problems, both important and useful, that have been fully and carefully discussed by philosophers, those teachings which have been handed down on the subject of moral duties seem to have the widest practical application. For no phase of life, whether public or private, whether in business or in the home, whether one is working on what concerns oneself alone or dealing with another, can be without its moral duty; on the discharge of such duties depends all that is morally right, and on their neglect all that is morally wrong in life.

5 Moreover, the subject of this inquiry is the common property of all philosophers; for who would presume to call himself a philosopher, if he did not inculcate any lessons of duty? But there are some schools that distort all notions of duty by the theories they propose touching the supreme good and the supreme evil. For he who posits the supreme good as having no connection with virtue and measures it not by a moral standard but by his own interests - if he should be consistent and not rather at times over-ruled by his better nature, he could value neither friendship nor justice nor generosity; and brave he surely cannot possibly be that counts pain the supreme evil, nor temperate he that holds pleasure to be the supreme good.

6 Although these truths are so self-evident that the subject does not call for discussion, still I have discussed it in another connection. If, therefore these schools should claim to be consistent, they could not say anything about duty; and no fixed, invariable, natural rules of duty can be posited except by those who say that moral goodness is worth seeking solely or chiefly for its own sake.

Accordingly, the teaching of ethics is the peculiar right of the Stoics, the Academicians, and the Peripatetics; for the theories of Aristo, Pyrrho, and Erillus have been long since rejected; and yet they would have the right to discuss duty if they had left us any power of choosing between things, so that there might be a way of finding out what duty is. I shall, therefore, at this time and in this investigation follow

chiefly the Stoics, not as a translator, but, as is my custom, I shall at my own option and discretion draw from those sources in such measure and in such manner as shall suit my purpose.

7 Since, therefore, the whole discussion is to be on the subject of duty, I should like at the outset to define what duty⁺ is, as, to my surprise, Panaetius has failed to do. For every systematic development of any subject ought to begin with a definition, so that everyone may understand what the discussion is about.

[...]

BOOK I. iii.

III. Every treatise on duty has two parts: one, dealing with the doctrine of the supreme good; the other with the practical rules by which daily life in all its bearings may be regulated. The following questions are illustrative of the first part: whether all duties are absolute; whether one duty is more important than another; and so on. But as regards special duties for which positive rules are laid down, though they are affected by the doctrine of the supreme good, still the fact is not so obvious, because they seem rather to look to the regulation of every-day life; and it is these special duties that I propose to treat at length in the following books.

[...]

11 IV. First of all, Nature has endowed every species of living creature with the instinct of self-preservation, of avoiding what seems likely to cause injury to life or limb, and of procuring and providing everything needful for life - food, shelter, and the like. A common property of all creatures is also the reproductive instinct (the purpose of which is the propagation of the species) and also a certain amount of concern for their offspring. But the most marked difference between man and beast is this: the beast, just as far as it is moved by the senses and with very little perception of past or future, adapts itself to that alone which is present at the moment; while man - because he is endowed with reason, by which he comprehends the chain of consequences, perceives the causes of things, understands the relation of cause to effect and of effect to cause, draws analogies, and connects and associates the present and the future - easily surveys the course of his whole life and makes the necessary preparations for its conduct - shows a strangely tender love for his offspring. She also prompts men to meet in companies, to form public assemblies and to take part in them themselves; and she further dictates, as a consequence of this, the effort on man's part to provide a store of things that minister to his comforts and wants - and not for himself alone, but for his wife and children and the others whom he holds dear and for whom he ought to provide; and this responsibility also stimulates his courage and makes it stronger for the active duties of life.

[...]

13 Above all, the search after truth and its eager pursuit are peculiar to man. And so, when we have leisure from the demands of business cares, we are eager to see, to hear, to learn something new, and we esteem a desire to know the secrets or wonders of creation as indispensable to a happy life. Thus we come to understand that what is true, simple, and genuine appeals most strongly to a man's nature. To this passion for discovering truth there is added a hungering, as it were, for independence, so that a mind well-moulded by Nature is unwilling to be subject to anybody save one who gives rules of conduct or is a teacher of truth or who, for the general good, rules according to justice and law. From this attitude come greatness_of_soul+ and a sense of superiority to worldly conditions.

14 And it is no mean manifestation of Nature and Reason that man is the only animal that has a feeling for order, for propriety, for moderation in word and deed. And so no other animal has a sense of beauty, loveliness, harmony in the visible world; and Nature and Reason, extending the analogy of this from the world of sense to the world of spirit, find that beauty, consistency, order are far more to be maintained in thought and deed, and the same Nature and Reason are careful to do nothing in an improper or unmanly fashion, and in every thought and deed to do or think nothing capriciously. It is from these elements that is forged and fashioned that moral goodness which is the subject of this inquiry - something that, even though it be not generally ennobled, is still worthy of all honour;/a and by its own nature, we correctly maintain, it merits praise even though it be praised by none.

15 V. You see here, Marcus, my son, the very form and as it were the face of Moral Goodness; "and if," as Plato says, "it could be seen with the physical eye, it would awaken a marvellous love of wisdom." But all that is morally right rises from some one of four sources: it is concerned either (1) with the full perception and intelligent development of the true; or (2) with the conservation of organized society, with rendering to every man his due, and with the faithful discharge of obligations assumed; or (3) with the greatness and strength of a noble and invincible spirit; or (4) with the orderliness and moderation of everything that is said and done, wherein consist temperance and self-control. (15) Although these four are connected and interwoven, still it is in each one considered singly that certain definite kinds of moral duties have their origin: in that category, for instance, which was designated first in our division and in which we place wisdom and prudence, belong the search after truth and its discovery; and this is the peculiar

16 province of that virtue. For the more clearly anyone observes the most essential truth in any given case and the more quickly and accurately he can see and explain the reasons for it, the more understanding and wise he is generally esteemed, and justly so. So, then, it is truth that is, as it were, the stuff with which this virtue has to deal and on which it employs itself.

17 Before the three remaining virtues, on the other hand, is set the task of providing and maintaining those things on which the practical business of life depends so that the relations of man to man in human society may be conserved, and that largeness and nobility of soul may

be revealed not only in increasing one's resources and acquiring advantages for one's self and one's family but far more in rising superior to these very things. But orderly behaviour and consistency of demeanor and self-control and the like have their sphere in that department of things in which a certain amount of physical exertion, and not mental activity merely, is required. For if we bring a certain amount of propriety and order into the transactions of daily life, we shall be conserving moral rectitude and moral dignity.

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