

Discussion Questions

Cicero, On Duties

1. Justice and Injustice in Cicero

Cicero says that human beings have a natural inclination toward justice due to their nature: “a spirit that is well trained by nature will not be willing to obey for its own benefit someone whose advice, teaching and commands are not just and lawful” (I.13). If we are naturally inclined toward justice, injustice must be contradicting our nature. How does Cicero account for injustice? Do you find him convincing?

2. Contradiction?

Cicero makes the following two claims in Book I:

“We have divided the nature and power of that which is honourable under four headings. The first of these, that consisting of the learning of truth, most closely relates to human nature.” (I.18)

“In my view those duties that have their roots in sociability conform more to nature than those drawn from learning.” (I.153)

Do these statements contradict one another? How can we resolve or explain this apparent contradiction?

3. Fear or Love?

Cicero favors “love” over “fear” as a policy in exercising influence and power over other people in both private and public life:

“But there is nothing at all more suited to protecting and retaining influence than to be loved, and nothing less suited than to be feared. . . . Let us therefore embrace the course that extends the most widely; and that is the strongest to secure not only safety, but also influence and power, so that fear may be absent but love preserved. That is how we will most easily achieve what we want both in private matters and in public affairs. For those who wish to be feared cannot but themselves be afraid of the very men who fear them.” (II.23-24)

Do you agree with Cicero on this matter? Is it better to try to gain the love or fear of people to “achieve what we want both in private matters and in public affairs”?

4. Political leadership

Cicero presents us with certain leadership qualities that he thinks are needed especially by those who are eager to take on administrative responsibilities in public life (see II.72 and II.85-90). Do you think if he comes up with the right ones? Is there any that you can add?

5. The Ring of Gyges

The story about the Ring of Gyges in III.38-39 was first told by Herodotus and later revised by Plato in his well-known work Republic. Cicero is using Plato's version of the story to support his position that "nothing should be done greedily, unjustly, licentiously or without restraint, even if we could conceal it from all gods and men" (III.37). Then he poses the following question:

"If no one were going to know, if no one were going to suspect, when you did something for the sake of riches, power, despotism or lust, if it would be always unknown by gods and men alike—then would you do it?" (III.39)

We are tempted to say "who wouldn't?" but Cicero claims that the sage wouldn't: "If a wise man . . . were to have the same ring, he would think himself no more free to do . . . wrong than if he did not have it. For a good man pursues aims that are not secret, but honourable." (III.38) [Note: Our edition has a problematic "no" in front of the word "wrong" in the first sentence. I suspect this is an error as another translation reads: "He would not believe that he had any more right to do wrong than if he did not possess it."]

But most would: "For so few will be found who can refrain from injustice when granted both impunity and absolute secrecy!" (III.72). In light of these remarks, do you think Cicero's understanding of human nature is flawed or not?

6. Foolish or Honest?

Cicero tells the story of the Roman consul Regulus in III.99-111. Regulus was captured by the Carthaginians, Rome's enemy, in an ambush, and was sent to Rome to persuade the Senate to release the captive Carthaginian nobles after "having sworn that he would return to Carthage" unless the captives were freed. Regulus goes to Rome, but not only does he advise against the release of the Carthaginians but also goes back to Carthage to keep his oath when the Senate, following his advice, decides not to return the captives. Some would say that he "acted foolishly":

"But he acted foolishly! For he not only failed to recommend that the captives be returned, but even spoke against it" (III.101).

What do you think? Was Regulus foolish or honest?