DE OFFICIIS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649140558

De officiis by Cicero & George B. Gardiner

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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CICERO & GEORGE B. GARDINER

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METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET, W.C.
LONDON
1899

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PREFACE

In preparing this translation of the *De Officiis* I have consulted the best literature on the subject, but I am under special obligation to the editions of Müller (1882), Heine (1885), Stickney (1885), Dettweiler (1890), and Holden (1891). The metrical versions are taken from L'Estrange.

My best thanks are due to my old pupil, Mr. Hugh Gordon, for much valuable help.

INTRODUCTION

The *De Officiis* is a practical code of morals, a compendium of the duties of everyday life, intended for the instruction, and accommodated to the special circumstances, of young Romans of the governing class who were destined for a public career. As a summary of the duties of a gentleman addressed by a father to his son, it may be compared with Lord Chesterfield's Letters, but it is written in a very different tone. Born in 65 B.C., Marcus served with some distinction under the successive republican commanders, and attained the dignity of consul. He inherited neither the ambition nor the energy of Cicero, and is best known as his father's son. At the age of twenty he was sent to the "university" of Athens to complete his education under Cratippus, the head of the Peripatetic School. The irregularity of his life, which we may infer from the scant expressions of commendation contained in the work itself, and of which we have positive evidence in Cicero's Letters, was a cause of anxiety to his father, and may have suggested the dedication if not the composition of this treatise on duty.

INTRODUCTION

The *De Officiis* is the last of the long series of philosophical works which Cicero gave to the world during the closing years of his life, when condemned to political inaction. After the final overthrow of the senatorial party, when the constitution of the republic was supplanted by the will of the "Democratic King" and little scope was left for individual effort, Cicero had voluntarily retired from the political arena, and lived for the most part in the country. With the assassination of Caesar in March 44 B.C. the hopes of his party rose for a moment only to be dashed to the ground by the intrigues of Antony. Cicero driven from Rome "by force and godless arms" was compelled to seek safety in flight, and wandered aimlessly for a great part of the year from one of his country seats to another. He was distracted. Death had robbed him of Tullia, the joy of his life, and he was now an exile from his beloved city. Once more he turns for consolation to active literary work, and in the composition of this hortatory treatise completes his patriotic design of transplanting philosophy from Athens to Rome and popularising its study among his countrymen. The events of the stormy year 44 are reflected in the acrimonious allusions to contemporary politics and the many imperfections of the work in thought and language.

Cicero had too much of the practical Roman

instinct to regard philosophy as an end in itself. To him it was a preparation for the active life of the orator and statesman, an occupation in his hours of leisure, a consolation in misfortune. Like many cultured Romans he was an Eclectic and sought for wisdom wherever it was to be found. In his scientific method he professed himself an adherent of the New Academy which denied the possibility of attaining absolute certainty in questions of speculative philosophy. His "scepticism," however, far from being destructive, took a positive direction and sought to discover the greatest probability where certainty was impossible. He was less an agnostic than a seeker after truth. But his profession of the doctrines of the New Academy did not prevent him from embracing the ethical system of the Stoics to which he was strongly attracted by its practical tendency and its sublime principle of the sovereignty of virtue. Yet at times he rebels against some of their extreme doctrines. For example, the theory that the wise man is happy even when suffering pain and is quite independent of fortune appeared to him so contrary to all experience that here he rather leaned to the view of the Peripatetics who admitted that within certain limits external circumstances were necessary to happiness. In one thing he is consistent, his determined hostility to the egoistic and unsocial doctrines of the Epicureans which could hardly

commend themselves to a genuine Roman who looked on devotion to the state as the first duty of man.

When first presented to the Romans in the second century B.C. Stoicism was stripped of many of its pedantic and impossible dogmas. "There is no happiness except virtue and no unhappiness except vice; virtue is a permanent condition which admits of no increase or decrease; the non-virtuous man is absolutely vicious; all sins are equally heinous"—principles such as these were found to be worthless when tested by the facts of everyday life. Take again the picture of the Stoic sage or saint: "He is a perfect man, absolutely virtuous, happy, self-sufficient and free. He is indifferent to fortune and misfortune, superior to fear and remorse, free from sorrow and excessive joy, and he maintains that immovable tranquillity of soul in which conformity with reason consists." The Stoics, if challenged, could not point to historical examples of their sage, and even Zeno himself was not so presumptuous as to claim the title. If the founder of the school despaired of attaining this lofty ideal, what hope was there for the ordinary man? One by one these purely academic and fantastic principles were abandoned, ignored, or modified, and the Stoic system became less of a science and more of a moral evangel accommodated to the facts of life and the frailties of erring mortals.