



Introduction to Cicero's *De Finibus (On Final Ends)*

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The *de Finibus Bonorum et Matorum* is a treatise on the theory of ethics. It expounds and criticizes the three ethical systems most prominent in Cicero's day—the Epicurean, the Stoic and that of the Academy under Antiochus. The most elaborate of Cicero's philosophical writings, it has had fewer readers than his less technical essays on moral subjects. But it is of importance to the student of philosophy as the only systematic account surviving from antiquity of those rules of life which divided the allegiance of thoughtful men during the centuries when the old religions had lost their hold and Christianity had not yet emerged. And the topics that it handles can never lose their interest.

The title *About the Ends of Goods and Evils* meaning requires explanation. It was Aristotle who put the ethical problem in the form of the question, What is the Τέλος or End, the supreme aim of man's endeavour, in the attainment of which his Good or Well-being lies? For Aristotle, Telos connoted not only aim, *but completion*; and he found the answer to his question in the complete development and right exercise of the faculties of man's nature, and particularly of the distinctively human faculty of Reason. The life of the Intellect was the Best, the Chief Good; and lesser Goods were Means to the attainment of this End. Thus was introduced the notion of an ascending scale of Goods, and this affected the interpretation of the term Telos. Telos came to be understood as denoting not so much the end or aim of endeavour as the end or extreme point of a series, the topmost good. To this was naturally opposed an extreme of minus value, the topmost, or rather bottommost, evil. Hence arose the expressions τέλος ἀγαθῶν, τέλος κακῶν (*End, of Goods, of Evils*), which occur in Philodemus, *Rhetoric* I, 218. 8 ff., and are translated by Cicero *finis honorum, malorum*. As a title for his book he throws this phrase into the plural, meaning "different views as to the Chief Good and Evil." Hence in title and to some extent in method, the *de Finibus* may be compared with such modern works as Martineau's *Types of Ethical Theory* and Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*.

Cicero belongs to a type not unknown in English life, that of the statesman who is also a student and a writer. From his youth he aspired to play a part in public affairs, and the first step towards this ambition was to learn to speak. He approached Greek philosophy as part of a liberal education for a political career, and he looked on it as supplying themes for practice in oratory. But his real interest in it went deeper; the study of it formed his mind and humanized his character, and he loved it to the end of his life.

In his youth he heard the heads of the three chief Schools of Athens, Phaedrus the Epicurean, Diodotus the Stoic, and Philo the Academic, who had come to Rome to escape the disturbances of the Mithradatic War. When already launched in public life, he withdrew, at the age of 27 (79 BC), to devote two more years to philosophy and rhetoric. Six months were spent at Athens, and the introduction to *de Finibus* Book V gives a brilliant picture of his student life there with his friends. No passage more vividly displays what Athens and her memories meant to the cultivated Roman. At Athens Cicero attended the lectures of the Epicurean Zeno and the Academic Antiochus. Passing on to Rhodes to work under the leading professors of rhetoric, he there met Posidonius, the most renowned Stoic of the day. He returned to Rome

to plunge into his career as advocate and statesman; but his Letters show him continuing his studies in his intervals of leisure. For many years the Stoic Diodotus was an inmate of his house.

Under the Triumvirate, as his influence in politics waned, Cicero turned more and more to literature. His earliest essay in rhetoric, the *de Inventione*, had appeared before he was twenty-five; but his first considerable works on rhetoric and on political science, the *de Oratore*, *de Republica*, and *de Legibus*, were written after his return from exile in 57. The opening pages of *de Finibus* Book III give a glimpse of his studies at this period. In 51 he went as Governor to Cilicia; and he wrote no more until the defeat of Pompey at Pharsalus had destroyed his hopes for the Republic.

After his reconciliation with Caesar and return to Rome in the autumn of 46, Cicero resumed writing on rhetoric. In February 45 came the death of his beloved daughter Tullia, followed soon after by the final downfall of the Pompeians at Munda. Crushed by public and private sorrow, he shut himself up in one of his country houses and sought distraction in unremitting literary work. He conceived the idea, as he implies in the preface to *de Finibus*, of rendering a last service to his country by bringing the treasures of Greek thought within the reach of the Roman public. Both his *Academica* and *de Finibus* were compiled in the following summer; the latter was probably presented to Brutus, to whom it is dedicated, on his visit to Cicero in August 45 (ad Att. XIII, 44). Seven months later Brutus was one of the assassins of Caesar. In the autumn of 44 Cicero flung himself again into the arena with his attack on Antony, which led to his proscription and death in December 43.

Excepting the *de Oratore*, *de Republica* and *de Legibus*, the whole of Cicero's most important writings on philosophy and rhetoric belong to 46-44 B.C. and were achieved within two years. Such a mass of work so rapidly produced could hardly be original, and in fact it made no claim to be so. It was designed as a sort of encyclopaedia of philosophy for Roman readers. Cicero's plan was to take each chief department of thought in turn, and present the theories of the leading schools upon it, appending to each theory the criticisms of its opponents. Nor had his work that degree of independence which consists in assimilating the thought of others and recasting it in the mould of the writer's own mind. He merely chose some recent hand-book on each side of the question under consideration, and reproduced it in Latin, encasing passages of continuous exposition in a frame of dialogue, and adding illustrations from Roman history and poetry. He puts the matter frankly in a letter to Atticus (XII, 52): "You will say, 'What is your method in such compositions?' They are mere transcripts, and cost comparatively little labour; I only supply the words, of which I have a copious flow." In *de Finibus* (I, 6) he rates his work a little higher, not without justice, and claims to be the critic as well as the interpreter of his authorities.

This method of writing was consonant with Cicero's own position in philosophy. Since his early studies under Philo he had been a professed adherent of the New Academy, and as such maintained a sceptical attitude on questions of knowledge. On morals he was more positive; though without a logical basis for his principles, he accepted the verdict of the common moral conscience of his age and country. Epicureanism he abhorred as demoralizing. The Stoics repelled him by their harshness and narrowness, but attracted him by their strict morality and lofty theology. His competence for the task of interpreting Greek thought to Rome was of a qualified order. He had read much, and had heard the chief teachers of the day. But with learning and enthusiasm he combined neither depth of insight nor scientific precision. Yet his services to philosophy must not be underrated. He introduced a novel style of exposition, copious, eloquent, impartial and urbane; and he created a philosophical terminology in Latin which has passed into the languages of modern Europe.

The *de Finibus* consists of three separate dialogues, each dealing with one of the chief ethical systems. The exponents of each system, and the minor interlocutors, are friends of Cicero's younger days, all of whom were dead when he wrote....The role of critic Cicero takes himself throughout.

The first dialogue occupies Books I and II; in the former the Ethics of Epicurus are expounded, and in the latter refuted from the Stoic standpoint. The scene is laid at Cicero's villa in the neighbourhood of Cumae, on the lovely coast a little north of Naples. The spokesman of Epicureanism is L. Manlius Torquatus, a reference to whose praetorship (II, 74.) fixes the date of the conversation at 50 BC, shortly after Cicero's return from his province of Cilicia. A minor part is given to the youthful C. Valerius Triarius.

In the second dialogue the Stoic ethics are expounded (in Book III) by M. Cato, and criticized (in Book IV) from the standpoint of Antiochus by Cicero. Cicero has run down to his place at Tusculum, fifteen miles from town, for a brief September holiday, while the Games are on at Rome; and he meets Cato at the neighbouring villa of Lucullus, whose orphan son is Cato's ward. A law passed by Pompey in 52 BC is spoken of (IV, 1) as new, so the date falls in that year; Cicero went to Cilicia in 51.

The third dialogue (Book V) goes back to a much earlier period in Cicero's life. Its date is 79 and its scene Athens, where Cicero and his friends are eagerly attending lectures on philosophy. The position of the "Old Academy" of Antiochus is maintained by M. Pupius Piso Calpurnianus, and afterwards criticized by Cicero from the Stoic point of view; the last word remains with Piso. The others present are Cicero's brother and cousin, and his friend and correspondent Titus Pomponius Atticus, a convinced Epicurean, who had retired to Athens from the civil disorders at Rome, and did not return for over twenty years. In Book I the exposition of Epicureanism probably comes from some compendium of the school, which seems to have summarized (1) Epicurus's essay *On the Telos*, (2) a resume of the points at issue between Epicurus and the Cyrenaics (reproduced I, 65 ff), and (3) some Epicurean work on Friendship (I. 65-70).

The Stoic arguments against Epicurus in Book II Cicero derived very likely from Antiochus; but in the criticism of Epicurus there is doubtless more of Cicero's own thought than anywhere else in the work.

The authority for Stoicism relied on in Book III was most probably Diogenes of Babylon, who is referred to by name at III, 33 and 49.

In Books IV and V Cicero appears to have followed Antiochus.

Alexander the Great died in 323 and Aristotle in 322 BC. Both Epicurus and Zeno (of Citium), the founder of Stoicism, began to teach at Athens about twenty years later. The date marks a new era in Greek thought as in Greek life. Speculative energy had exhausted itself; the schools of Plato and Aristotle showed little vigour after the death of their founders. Enlightenment had undermined religion, yet the philosophers seemed to agree about nothing except that things are not what they appear; and the plain man's mistrust of their conclusions was raised into a system of Scepticism by Pyrrho. Meanwhile the outer order too had changed. For Plato and Aristotle the good life could only be lived in a free city-state, like the little independent Greek cities which they knew; but these had now fallen under the empire of Macedon, and the barrier between Greek and barbarian was giving way. The wars of Alexander's successors rendered all things insecure; exile, slavery, violent death were possibilities with which every man must lay his account.

Epicureanism and Stoicism, however antagonistic, have certain common features corresponding to the needs of the period. Philosophy was systematized, and fell into three recognized departments. Logic, Physics and Ethics; and for both schools the third department

stood first in importance. Both schools offered dogma, not speculation; a way of life for man as man, not as Greek citizen. Both abandoned idealism, saw no reality save matter, and accepted sense experience as knowledge. Both studied the world of nature only in order to understand the position of man. Both looked for a happiness secure from fortune's changes; and found it in peace of mind, undisturbed by fear and desire. But here the rival teachers diverged: Epicurus sought peace in the liberation of man's will from nature's law, Zeno in submission to it; and in their conceptions of nature they differed profoundly.

Formal Logic Epicurus dismissed as useless, but he raised the problem of knowledge under the heading of Canon. The Canon or measuring-rod, the criterion of truth is furnished by the sensations and by the *pathē* or feelings of pleasure and pain. Epicurus's recognition of the latter as qualities of any state of consciousness and as distinct from the sensations of sight, hearing, etc., marks a notable advance in psychology. The sensations and the feelings determine our judgment and volition respectively, and they are all "true," i.e., real data of experience. So are the *prolepseis*, or preconceptions by which we recognize each fresh sensation, i.e., our general concepts; for these are accumulations of past sensations. It is in *upolepseis*, opinions, i.e., judgments about sensations, that error can occur. Opinions are true only when confirmed, or, in the case of those relating to imperceptible objects (e.g. the Void), when not contradicted, by actual sensations. Thus Epicurus adumbrated, however crudely, a logic of inductive science.

His *Natural Philosophy* is touched on in *de Finibus* I, c, vi. It is fully set out in the great poem of Cicero's contemporary, Lucretius, who preaches his master's doctrine with religious fervour as a gospel of deliverance for the spirit of man. Epicurus adopted the Atomic theory of Democritus, according to which the primary realities are an infinite number of tiny particles of matter, indivisible and indestructible, moving by their own weight through an infinite expanse of empty space or Void. Our perishable world and all that it contains consists of temporary clusters of these atoms interspersed with void. Innumerable other worlds beside are constantly forming and dissolving. This universe goes on of itself: there are gods, but they take no part in its guidance; they live a life of untroubled bliss in the empty spaces between the worlds. The human soul like everything else is material; it consists of atoms of the smallest and most mobile sort, enclosed by the coarser atoms of the body, and dissipated when the body is dissolved by death. Death therefore means extinction.

Thus man was relieved from the superstitions that preyed upon his happiness—fear of the gods and fear of punishment after death. But a worse tyranny remained if all that happens is caused by inexorable fate. Here comes in the doctrine of the Swerve, which Cicero derides, but which is essential to the system. Democritus had taught that the heavier atoms fell faster through the void than the lighter ones, and so overtook them. Aristotle corrected the error; and Epicurus turned the correction to account. He gave his atoms a uniform vertical velocity, but supposed them to collide by casually making a slight sideway movement. This was the minimum hypothesis that he could think of to account for the formation of things; and it served his purpose by destroying the conception of a fixed order in Nature. The capacity to swerve is shared by the atoms that compose the human soul; hence it accounts for the action of the will, which Epicurus regards as entirely undetermined. In this fortuitous universe man is free to make his own happiness.

In ethics, Epicurus based himself on Aristippus, the pupil of Socrates and founder of the School of Cyrene. With Aristippus he held that pleasure is the only good, the sole constituent of man's well-being. Aristippus had drawn the practical inference that the right thing to do is to enjoy each pleasure of the moment as it offers. His rule of conduct is summed up by Horace's *carpe diem*. But this naïve hedonism was so modified by Epicurus as to become in his hands an entirely different theory. Its principal tenets are: that the goodness of pleasure is

a matter of direct intuition, and is attested by natural instinct, as seen in the actions of infants and animals; that all men's conduct does as a matter of fact aim at pleasure; that the proper aim is to secure the greatest balance of pleasure over pain in the aggregate; that absence of pain is the greatest pleasure, which can only be varied, not augmented, by active gratification of the sense; that pleasure of the mind is based on pleasure of the body, yet that mental pleasure may far surpass bodily in magnitude, including as it does with the consciousness of present gratification the memory of past and the hope of future pleasure; that unnatural and unnecessary desires and emotions are a chief source of unhappiness; and that Prudence, Temperance or self-control, and the other recognized virtues are therefore essential to obtain a life of the greatest pleasure, though at the same time the virtues are of no value save as conducive to pleasure.

This original, and in some respects paradoxical, development of hedonism gave no countenance to the voluptuary. On the contrary Epicurus both preached and practised the simple life, and the cultivation of the ordinary virtues, though under utilitarian sanctions which led him to extreme unorthodoxy in some particulars. Especially, he denied any absolute validity to Justice and to Law, and inculcated abstention from the active duties of citizenship. To Friendship he attached the highest value; and the School that he founded in his Garden in a suburb of Athens, and endowed by will, was as much a society of friends as a college of students. It still survived and kept the birthday of its founder in Cicero's time.

Epicurus is the forerunner of the English Utilitarians; but he differs from them in making no attempt to combine hedonism with altruism. "The greatest happiness of the greatest number" is a formula that has no counterpart in antiquity. The problem that occurs when the claims of self conflict with those of others was not explicitly raised by Epicurus. But it is against the egoism of his Ethics at least as much as against its hedonistic basis that Cicero's criticisms are really directed.

The Stoics paid much attention to Logic. In this department they included with Dialectic, which they developed on the lines laid down by Aristotle, Grammar, Rhetoric, and the doctrine of the Criterion. The last was their treatment of the problem of knowledge. Like Epicurus they were purely empirical, but unlike him they conceded to the Sceptics that sensations are sometimes misleading. Yet true sensations, they maintained, are distinguishable from false; they have a clearness which compels the assent of the mind and makes it comprehend or grasp the presentation as a true picture of the external object. Such a "comprehensible presentation, 'καταληπτική φαντασία,' is the criterion of truth; it is 'a presentation that arises from an object actually present, in conformity with that object, stamped on the mind like the impress of a seal, and such as could not arise from an object not actually present.'" So their much-debated formula was elaborated in reply to Sceptical critics. If asked how it happens that false sensations do occur—e.g., that a straight stick half under water looks crooked—the Stoics replied that error only arises from inattention; careful observation will detect the absence of one or other of the notes of clearness. The Wise Man never "assents" to an "incomprehensible presentation."

In contradiction to Epicurus, the Stoics taught that the universe is guided by, and in the last resort Physics, is, God. The sole first cause is a divine Mind, which realizes itself periodically in the world-process. But this belief they expressed in terms uncompromisingly materialistic. Only the corporeal exists, for only the corporeal can act and be acted upon. Mind therefore is matter in its subtlest form; it is Fire or Breath (spirit) or Aether. The primal fiery Spirit creates out of itself the material world that we know, and itself persists within the world as its heat, its tension, its soul; it is the cause of all movement, and the source of life in all animate creatures, whose souls are detached particles of the world-soul.

The notion of Fire as the primary substance the Stoics derived from Heracleitus. Of the process of creation they offered an elaborate account, a sort of imaginary physics or chemistry, operating with the hot and cold, dry and moist, the four elements of fire, air, earth and water, and other conceptions of previous physicists, which came to them chiefly through the Peripatetics.

The world-process they conceived as going on according to a fixed law or formula (λόγος), effect following cause in undeviating sequence. This law they regarded impersonally as Fate, or personally as divine Providence; they even spoke of the Deity as being himself the Logos of creation. Evidences of design they found in the beauty of the ordered world and in its adaptation to the use and comfort of man. Apparent evil is but the necessary imperfection of the parts as parts; the whole is perfectly good.

As this world had a beginning, so it will have an end in time; it is moving on towards a universal conflagration, in which all things will return to the primal Fire from which they sprang. But only for a moment will unity be restored. The causes that operated before must operate again; once more the creative process will begin, and all things will recur exactly as they have occurred already. So existence goes on, repeating itself in an unending series of identical cycles.

Such rigorous determinism would seem to leave no room for human freedom or for moral choice. Yet the Stoics maintained that though man's acts like all other events are fore-ordained, his will is free. Obey the divine ordinance in any case he must, but it rests with him to do so willingly or with reluctance. To understand the world in which he finds himself, and to submit his will thereto—herein man's well-being lies.

On this foundation they reared an elaborate structure of Ethics. Their formula for conduct was 'to live in accordance with nature.' To interpret this, they appealed, like Epicurus, to instinct, but with a different result. According to the Stoics, not pleasure but self-preservation and things conducive to it are the objects at which infants and animals aim. Such objects are primary in the order of nature; and these objects and others springing out of them, viz., all that pertains to the safety and the full development of man's nature, constitute the proper aim of human action. The instinct to seek these objects is replaced in the adult by deliberate intention; as his reason matures, he learns (if unperverted) to understand the plan of nature and to find his happiness in willing conformity with it. This rightness of understanding and of will (the Stoics did not separate the two, since for them the mind is one) is Wisdom or Virtue, which is the only good; their wrongness is Folly or Vice, the only evil. Not that we are to ignore external things: on the contrary, it is in choosing among them as Nature intends that Virtue is exercised. But the attainment of the natural objects is immaterial; it is the effort to attain them alone that counts.

This nice adjustment of the claims of Faith and Works was formulated in a series of technicalities. A scale of values was laid down, and on it a scheme of conduct was built up. Virtue alone is "good and to be sought," Vice alone "evil and to be shunned"; all else is "indifferent." But of things indifferent some, being in accordance with nature, are "promoted" or "preferred" as having "worth," and these are to be chosen; others, being contrary to nature, are "depromoted" as having "unworthy," and these are to be rejected; while other things again are absolutely indifferent, and supply no motive for action. To aim at securing things promoted, or avoiding their opposites is an appropriate act: this is what the young and uncorrupted do by instinct. When the same aim is taken by the rational adult with full knowledge of nature's plan and deliberate intent to conform with it, then the appropriate act "is perfect," and is a right action or "success," Intention, not achievement, constitutes success. The only "failure," "error" or "sin" is the conduct of the rational being who ignores and violates nature.

In identifying the Good with Virtue and in interpreting Virtue by the conception of Nature, the Stoics were following their forerunners the Cynics; but they parted company with the Cynics in finding a place in their scheme for Goods in the ordinary sense. For though they place pleasure among things absolutely indifferent, their examples of things promoted—life, health, wealth, etc.—are pretty much the usual objects of man's endeavour. Hence, whereas the Cynics, construing the natural as the primitive or unsophisticated, had run counter to convention and even to decency, the Stoics in the practical rules deduced from their principles agreed in the main with current morality, and included the recognized duties to the family and the state.

But their first principles themselves they enunciated in a form that was violently paradoxical. Virtue being a state of inward righteousness they regarded as something absolute. Either a man has attained to it, when he is at once completely wise, good and happy, and remains so whatever pain, sorrow, or misfortune may befall him; or he has not attained to it, in which case, whatever progress he has made towards it, he is still foolish, wicked and miserable. So stated, the ideal was felt to be beyond man's reach. Chrysippus, the third head of the school, confessed that he had never known a Wise Man. Criticism forced the later Stoics to compromise. The Wise Man remained as a type and an ensample; but positive value was conceded to moral progress, and appropriate acts "tended to usurp the place that strictly belonged to right acts."

The last system to engage Cicero's attention, that of his contemporary Antiochus, is of much less interest than the two older traditions with which he ranges it.

Within a century of the death of its founder Plato, the Academy underwent a complete transformation. Arcesilas, its head in the middle of the third century B.C., adopted the scepticism that had been established as a philosophical system by Pyrrho two generations before, and denied the possibility of knowledge. He was accordingly spoken of as the founder of a Second or New Academy. His work was carried further a century afterwards by Carneades. Both these acute thinkers devoted themselves to combating the dogmas of the Stoics. Arcesilas assailed their theory of knowledge; and Carneades riddled their natural theology with shafts that have served for most subsequent polemic of the kind. On the basis of philosophic doubt, the New Academy developed in ethics a theory of reasoned probability as a sufficient guide for life.

The extreme scepticism of Carneades led to a reaction. Philo, who was his next successor but one, and who afterwards became Cicero's teacher at Rome, reverted to a more positive standpoint. Doing violence to the facts, he declared that the teaching of the Academy had never changed since Plato, and that Arcesilas and Carneades, though attacking the Criterion of the Stoics, had not meant to deny all possibility of knowledge. The Stoic comprehension was impossible, but yet there was a 'clearness' about some impressions that gives a conviction of their truth.

The next head, Antiochus, went beyond this ambiguous position, and abandoned scepticism altogether. Contradicting Philo, he maintained that the true tradition of Plato had been lost, and professed to recover it, calling his school the Old Academy. But his reading of the history of philosophy was hardly more accurate than Philo's. He asserted that the teachings of the older Academics and Peripatetics and of the Stoics were, in Ethics at all events, substantially the same, and that Zeno had borrowed his tenets from his predecessors, merely concealing the theft by his novel terminology.

The latter thesis is argued in *de Finibus*, Book III while Book V gives Antiochus's version of the Old Academic and Peripatetic Ethics, which he himself professed. His doctrine is that Virtue is sufficient for happiness, but that in the highest degree of happiness bodily and external goods also form a part. The Stoics will not call these latter "goods," but only "things

promoted”; yet really they attach no less importance to them.

Antiochus could only maintain his position by ignoring nice distinctions. The Ethics of Aristotle in particular seem to have fallen into complete oblivion. Aristotle’s cardinal doctrines are, that well-being consists not in the state of virtue but in the active exercise of all human excellences, and particularly of man’s highest gift of rational contemplation; and that though for this a modicum of external goods is needed, these are but indispensable conditions, and in no way constituent parts, of the Chief Good.

The fact is that philosophy in Cicero’s day had lost all precision as well as originality. It must be admitted that *de Finibus* declines in interest when it comes to deal with contemporary thought. Not only does the plan of the work necessitate some repetition in Book V of arguments already rehearsed in Book IV; but Antiochus’s perversion of preceding systems impairs alike the criticism of the Stoics and the presentation of his own ethical doctrine.

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