Roman Philosophy: Cicero On Duties 3 – Political Significance

Page refs to Cicero, Selected Works (Penguin Classics)

(One) Possible personal/political significance of the work for Cicero; original nature of topic (C. not working from a single source, unlike rest of On Duties, pp. 161-2). Tone intense and engaged, deliberate fusion of Stoic and Roman moral themes (despite C.’s official ‘Academic scepticism’).


(Three) Linkage between philosophy and politics: for C. See p. 80, letter written in 49 BC (after Caesar’s invasion of Italy). Note esp. last point: conflict between opposing tyranny and maintaining one’s life and security. Same issue seems to preoccupy C in On Duties 3 (44-43 BC). Question of moral status of tyrants and how to respond to them a recurrent theme: see e.g. pp. 165, 169-70, 190-1, 195. Caesar’s position, as outlined in pp. 190-1 the opposite of C.’s. Caesar presented as thinking that prospect of sole rule allows one to set other moral considerations aside; C. thinks that tyrants place themselves outside the moral community (the brotherhood of humankind). (See also Long, ‘Cicero’s Politics in the De Officiis’). On Duties 3 in part a way of thinking out the moral issues of responding to tyranny (cf. the letter of 49 BC); should one show virtue (courage) in opposing tyranny or is it morally acceptable to maintain one’s own security? Cf. issues facing French and others in WW2 or many people today living under oppressive regimes.

(Four) Historical context: aftermath of murder of Caesar (March 44) and question of resisting Mark Antony, Caesar’s heir and potential tyrant (in C.’s eyes). C.’s hesitation in summer of 44 evident in his letters: acquiescence in Antony’s rise to power or resistance to the new potential tyrant? (Tyrannicides Brutus and Cassius had fled to Greece to organise resistance.) Sequence of events later in 44 BC. Aug 1, L. Piso (supporter of Caesar) attacked Antony in Senate; Sept 2, C. delivers 1st Philippic, attacking Antony’s acts as unconstitutional; Sept 19, A. attacks C. violently; 2nd Philippic (written but not delivered, pp. 100-53) was C.’s reply; Dec 20, C. uses 3rd Philippic to organise the Senate against A. (A. as outgoing consul had left Rome to go to his province) – decisive breakdown of relations between two men (on reasonable terms in early summer). C. attacks A. as enemy of Roman republic, of ‘freedom’, and thus, as it turned out, ensured his own death in 43, when Antony gained power again as part of 2nd Triumvirate, a risk C. says he knew he was taking (pp. 152-3).

(Five) Key moment of decision late summer; also time when C. was writing On Duties 3. See Letter of Nov 5, 44 (XVI.11), acknowledging Atticus’ comments on 2nd Philippic and discussing On Duties 3 (not in Selected Works).
Focus on issue of distinguishing right from advantage and (apparent) conflict between them, and referring to Regulus as key exemplar of right course of action. Cf. letter of 49 BC. Core significance of work must have lain in exploring the conflict between virtue (as he sees it), i.e. opposing A. as tyrant and advantage (preserving life and security). Hence, he writes a book for his son (and himself) offering practical guidance in philosophical form about how to distinguish right from advantage, and arguing for idea that one should always pursue the right course of action, however (apparently) disadvantageous, thus nerving himself for defiance and possible death.

(Six) Should we see it as a purely moral stance? No- it was partly a political risk, reflecting his personal world-view at this time. When L. Piso (Caesar’s father-in-law) attacked Antony on Aug. 1, C. saw hope of splitting Caesarian group and using Octavian as instrument (cf. his letters at this time). He hoped to be the leading figure in the republic again as restorer of liberty and opponent of Antony. Indeed, C. was temporarily successful in this objective from Dec 44 to early summer of 43, using Senate to organise resistance to Antony, leading up to defeat of Antony at battle of Mutina by consuls of 43, though this was reversed by the formation of the 2nd triumvirate of A., Octavian and Lepidus. But C.’s stance in 44 (both political and philosophical) expressed his world-view (cf. his Republic written in late 50s): Roman republic best possible form of constitution, and freedom (libertas) bound up with the freedom of aristocrats such as C. to exercise talents in gaining power and using it. Tyranny meant the destruction of ‘freedom’ in this sense, and thus also of virtue, as expressed in the political and social functions and roles of the republic.

(Seven) This world-view underlies much of On Duties 1 and 2: the virtues (e.g. justice, courage) defined in terms of active political involvement (with Roman republic in mind), a way of life that also brought advantages (wealth, power, status) in a way that was compatible with ‘virtue’ as thus expressed. On Duties 3, by contrast, take the question of how to react when virtue and advantage conflict (or seem to), i.e. when circumstances no longer allow virtue to go along with advantage. For C. opponents of the republican system, e.g. Catiline in 63 (who led an insurrection C. suppressed as consul), Caesar after 49, or Antony in 44, destroyed the freedom which could unite virtue and advantage (in a properly working republic). Hence, for C. it probably seemed obvious that the right (virtuous) course of action lay in attacking these men or killing them if need be, whereas acquiescing in their power meant pursuing advantage at expense of virtue. Hence, Regulus paradigm of the tough choice C. feels he needs to take; the pro and contra arguments in pp. 198 ff., may represent C. arguing with himself about what he should do in 44. We may not agree with this analysis; for some historians, the republic was a failed system at this point and military/political leaders such as Caesar and finally Octavian/Augustus the only hope of stability. But one can see (bearing in mind C.’s career, rise to power and life) that he must have seen the morality of the situation in this way.

(Seven) A disturbing feature of C’s position: his readiness to contemplate political murder, e.g. execution of Catiline and conspirators without trial in 63 BC, his approval of Caesar’s brutal murder in March 44, his apparent readiness to use (and then ‘remove’) Octavian (letter of May 24, 43 BC). Hence, his own death at the hands of the triumvirate in Dec 43 may seem less unjustified; C. anticipates this death if he opposes A. in 2nd Philippic (p. 152).