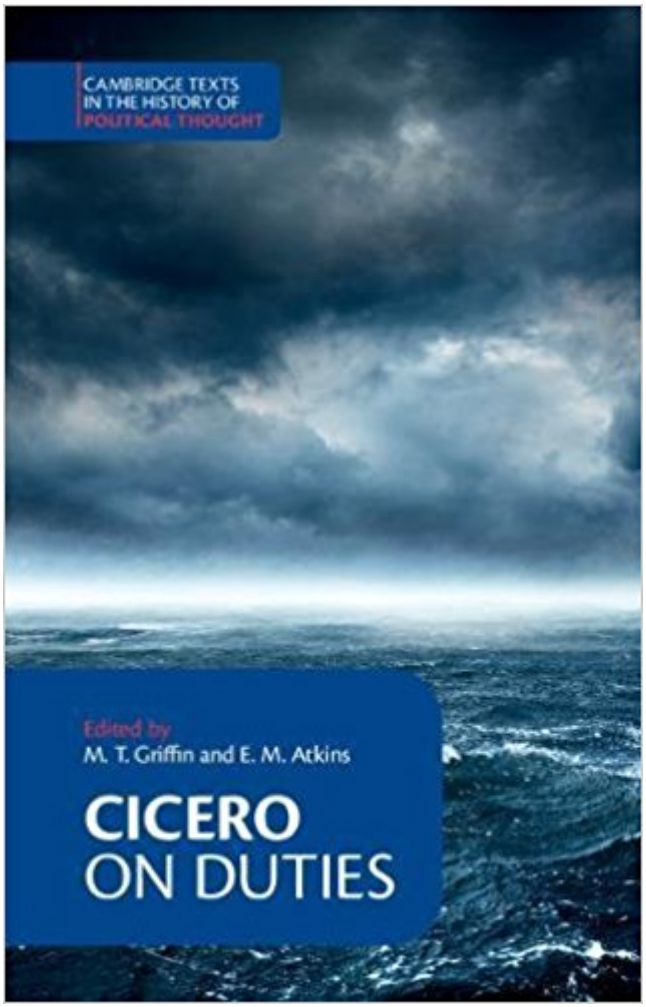
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Cicero: On Duties (Cambridge Texts In The History Of Political Thought)



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Synopsis

De Officiis (On Duties) is Cicero’s last theoretical work and contains his analysis, in a Greek theoretical framework, of the political and ethical values of the Roman governing class in the late Republic. It has often been treated merely as a key to the Greek philosophical works that Cicero used, but this volume aims to render De Officiis, which had a profound impact upon subsequent political thinkers, more intelligible by explaining its relation to its own time and place. All the standard series features are present, including a wholly new translation, a concise introduction by a leading scholar, select bibliography, chronology, notes on vocabulary and brief biographies of the most prominent individuals mentioned in the text.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: Latin --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

De Officiis, Cicero’s last theoretical work on the political and ethical values of the Roman governing class in the late Republic, is made more meaningful through an explanation of its relationship to its own time and place.

"Office, fame, virtue, glory and natural talent" This epitaph for a young Roman from one of the

patrician families summarizes in brief the ideal life of the patricians. It also serves in some ways as a crib on Cicero's book under review.The plan of my review is fairly straight forward. I will talk briefly about the qualities of this edition of On Duties, the historical situation of its creation, give a summary of its contents and influence and then make one or two remarks as to it utility for these times. For this is a book that is meant to serve as a guide to practical ethics. It should be read on those grounds- what does it teach us about how to live?But first a note about my inadequacies. I have no Latin and have only begun recently anything like a study of Roman history and philosophy. I may very well not know what I am talking about. But then that is true of all of us. If I make any obvious errors, please let me know in the comments.First, I love this edition of the work. The scholarly apparatus is superbly done and very helpful. These include a good introduction, principal dates of Cicero's life, a plan of the various contemporary schools of philosophy and a summary of their doctrines, a bibliography, a synopsis of the work, biographical notes on the individuals named by Cicero and two indexes. The synopsis and the biographical notes I found to be very useful. I found the structure of Cicero's argument to be somewhat odd and the synopsis several times served to orient my understanding.This book was written during a period of crisis for Cicero. In the same year that Cicero wrote this book Caesar was named dictator and assassinated and the wars that would lead to Octavian becoming emperor had begun. Cicero had been somewhat retired for the previous few years and was finishing up an extraordinary burst of writing. On Duties would be the last of his writings. He was also involved in delivering The Philippic against Anthony. He would be killed the following year.The previous reviewer makes much of the fact that On Duty is written to his son. The younger Cicero is spoken to several times in the work. The elder Cicero is offering him a Practical Ethic that will come from a different direction and tradition than that of Crattipus with whom Marcus is studying.But the book is more than that. In many ways it is an early example of the "mirror for princes" genre. Yes, it is directed toward the younger Cicero but it is also directed toward any and all of the patricians who would listen.It is also an apologia pro vita sui; in this book Cicero holds his own career up as a paragon and uses every opportunity to attack Caesar and Anthony. This is one of the ways that Cicero is closer to the heroes of Homer than to the modern reader. No becoming modesty for Cicero. What we have here is a practical ethic for an elite, a military and political elite that competed with each other for office, fame, the reputation of virtue and glory.There is no metaphysical grounding of ethics here. Cicero's work is based on several assumptions. The most important is the identity of the honorable and the beneficial. (By the way, I will avoid all debate on the translation of terms. Suffice to say that the Latin words so translated are polysemous and that any choice of English equivalent has consequences. It is ironic that Cicero had the same problem

when he translated Greek philosophical terms into Latin.)Cicero (hereafter C because I am lazy) believes that our ends will determine what are out duties. Our ends are the result of our virtues. Cicero discusses four. The first is the characteristic virtue of the rational animal that we are. We search for truth. The other three virtues are called by C the necessities of sociality, i.e., without them there would not be the social life which serves so many human purposes. These are sociality (subdivided into justice and liberality), greatness of spirit (the desire to excel, to do great and useful things, to live gloriously) and seemliness (moderation, a sense of limits, order).Much of the book focuses on justice. This is one of those areas which might give the modern reader pause. Time and again, C refers to schemes to redistribute wealth (mostly through land reform) that had been suggested in Rome's history or was being discussed during C's lifetime. It one point, C suggests that it is better to die than to relieve someone of their property because to do so would be to destroy that most human thing, "the common fellowship of the human race" (Book III,28). This very discussion leads to one of the most obvious contradictions in the whole book. C denies that we are even justified in taking the property of foreigners for that too destroys our most natural sociality. Yet earlier in his discussion (II,74), C implies that it is better to conquer other countries than to impose a property tax! (The Great State of Oregon, where I abide, is one of the very few states that does not have a sales tax. Perhaps we should attack Seattle in order to avoid imposing a sales tax should it come to that?).C has much to say on both greatness of spirit and on seemliness (or moderation). This is one of the areas where his book spoke to me the most forcefully. I find it endlessly fascinating the idea that one of the ends of humanity is to excel but that it has to be done in an orderly and moderate way. I suppose you could make the argument that The Iliad is about what happens to a society when that pursuit of glory loses all moderation as in Achilles.C ends his book with a series of case studies. The climax is the story of Marcus Atilius Regulus. C then examines the actions of Regulus using the criteria he has outlined. According to C, the story is almost unparalleled. I will not repeat it here (just copy the name and do a internet search) but the way that Regulus met his end was remarkable by anyone's standards.So much for C in this brief review. On Duty and the other writings of C's that he wrote during this time had a lasting impact on Western history and culture. St. Augustine was inspired to study philosophy by one of C's books that is lost to us. On Duty itself inspired a book by St. Jerome. Machiavelli's The Prince should be read, in part, as a answer to On Duty. C's writings on duty had an effect on Locke and on the Founding Fathers.So there are lots of historical reasons for reading this book. But any really great book should be approached as perhaps giving us insight into how to live our lives. One of things that I most admire about C is that he regarded all schools of philosophy as resources. He was most influenced by the

Stoics but he also was influenced by scepticism, the Peripetetics and by the Academy. Didn't have much good to say about the Epicureans though. (This is one criticism I have of him- C is ashamed of the animal side of the human being. He regards the naked body and the pleasures of the body as dishonorable. I am rather fond of many of those pleasures.) I suggest that you approach C the same way. This was a man living under tremendous pressures and who was able to think, read and write carefully and in a way that has been found insightful for millenia. We can all learn something from this book.

For good reason, Of Duties was the most popular of the Latin classics during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. If it were as popular as it used to be modern society would have higher values to aspire to: it praises the common good above the private good; it emphasizes a healthy patriotism that incentivizes putting the common good above one's private good; above all, it honours civic virtue and honourableness.In these three books addressed to his son, Cicero discusses all the things a person should know--from such small matters as how to tell jokes with decorum to such great matters as the standards of a just war. The book is based on the stoic ethics of Panaetius, which rests on the idea that happiness comes from virtue alone.On Duties is divided into three books. The first explains duties based on what is honourable (honestum) and in relation to the virtues; the second discusses the duties in relation to what is beneficial (utile); the third argues that everything honourable is beneficial and that nothing dishonourable is beneficial. Again and again he repeats it: "If something is dishonourable, it is never beneficial" (III.49). Cicero, thus, defends the Stoic doctrine of the identity of the honourable and the beneficial, arguing they can never be in conflict. He examines many cases where there appears to be a conflict, only to argue that the apparent benefit cannot really be beneficial if it involves dishonourableness. However, he also argues that what is usually dishonourable is not always so; for example, killing is dishonourable, but the killing of a tyrant is honourable.This type of Socratic thought soars to great moral heights, but it also suffers from its own idealism. For who really believes it is better to die of hunger than to become "disposed in spirit" by stealing from another for one's own advantage (III.29 p. 110). According to the Stoic argument the doing of injustice to another is more to be avoided than death, poverty, pain, or the loss of children, relations, or friends. This is because a failing of the spirit is worse than any of the latter. Such acts, he argues, take "all the 'human' out of a human" (p. 109). However, by setting such an uncompromising ideal it could be argued that the Stoic ethics that Cicero adopts does the same, that is, does not take enough account of the 'human' in humans. On the other hand, it could be recognized as simply that: an ideal.Cicero's personal boasts are a little

"indecorous," although he justifies them as a way of burdening his son with a high model to live up to. One may have misgivings about his rigid defence of private property, his one-sided apologia for the Roman empire, and even his criteria for just war, but even if one is critical of those aspects there is still much that is priceless.The Cambridge addition comes with an excellent introduction and critical apparatus, and, compared to the Loeb, usually seems closer to the original, though the Loeb chooses the cognate more often. For the key term honestum Loeb uses "morally right" and for utile "expedient," compared to Cambridge's "honourable" and "beneficial." On another note, Cambridge translates decorum as "seemliness" and Loeb as "propriety." Since "seemliness" is rarely used in English, I prefer "propriety," but why not "decorum"?

Great book! Written to Cicero's son before Cicero was murdered by orders of Augustus caesar. My college age daughter just read it and was moved on how to live life. My father had me read it when I was 13.

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