

A Short Sunday Cicero Meditation

From the Stoic Paradoxes



I fear that for some of you, this work may be seen as arising from the disputations of the Stoic school, rather than from my own sense. Yet I will say what I believe, and will state it more concisely than the situation calls for. I have never held that the money of these people, or their fine houses, or their official stations, or the other delights that shackle them, have been things worth seeking. For they seem most lacking in the very things that abound in their lives. The thirst of desire in anyone is neither filled nor satiated; and those who have such things are tortured by ever-increasing desire, as well as by a fear of losing those things.

Thus I often take notice of the prudence of our unbroken line of ancestors, who thought such transitory and impermanent things worthy of being called “goods” in name only, since they had judged them in reality to be much different. Is it possible for a good thing to be an evil for anyone? Or is it possible for someone to be “not good” when he is swimming in good things? And of all such things (whether good or bad) we observe this: that bad men possess them, and that they obstruct good men. For this reason, whoever wants to may laugh at me. For me, true reason will be more valid than the opinion of the mob. I will never say that a man who has lost cattle or good furniture has not lost something valuable.

I will also often praise the wisdom of Bias, who I believe is counted as one of the Seven; when his city Priene was taken by the enemy, and many were fleeing with their belongings, he was advised by someone to do the same thing. "But I truly am doing this," he replied, "For I already am carrying them with me." He did not think of these playthings of fortune as goods, in the same way that we call them goods.

So someone may ask, "What, then, is a good?" I believe the only true good--that which is truly said to be a good thing--is that which is done rightly, honestly, and with virtue. But these things can be seen to be more off-putting when they are discussed too methodically: they must be illustrated by life, and by the deeds of great men, rather than discussed with overwrought literary phrases. I ask you this: did those who so brilliantly founded our republic, and left it for our safekeeping, have any thought of silver, or greed, or lavish places for their enjoyment, or sumptuous furniture for their delight, or exquisite dinners for their pleasure?

...Is there any good object that is able to make its possessor better? Just as he who shares fully in a good is most praiseworthy, so there is no good thing that is not able to bring some amount of glory to its possessor. But what of these things is to be found in sensual pleasure? Might it make a man better, or more laudable? Or what about he who makes a public show of glorying in his ability to score sensual pleasures? And if sensual pleasure, which is heartily endorsed by the allegiance of the majority, is not considered a good, and if the greater it is, the more it shifts the mind from its proper seat and foundation, then without doubt the good and beautiful life consists only in living honestly and cleanly.