The Stoic Straw Man: How Cicero tries to Defeat Notions of the Good in *De Finibus* 4

In *Fin*. 4, Cicero tries to refute Cato’s Stoic discourse from book 3. Along the way he rehearses some of the same criticisms offered at the beginning of 3 and explores the differences between the three Hellenistic schools. These concern definitions of the good and the proper *modus vivendi* for attaining it. In 4.3 Cicero spells out the three major doctrines he believes all the schools have inherited from Socratic and Aristotelian efforts: humans are (1) naturally suited (*natos*) to the cardinal virtues; (2) possess an innate thirst (*innatam* *cupiditatem*) for knowledge; (3) are naturally suited (*natos*) to the society of others. Having summarized the common doctrines, Cicero then focuses on the differences.

He first criticizes equating *vivere secundum naturam* as the chief good with *vivere honeste*. This constitutes, he claims, an abandonment of important aspects of human nature. Cicero also opposes positing virtue as the chief good as concerns the body, for he believes the Stoics construe the concerns of the body as a-virtuous. In order to demonstrate the strength of his criticism, Cicero uses the thought experiment of a disembodied mind. He believes this proves that the Stoic account of the highest good is bankrupt, for such a creature would still desire health, freedom from pain, etc.

Second, Cicero believes that positioning virtue as our chief end excludes activities that are according to nature yet outside our power. It is difficult at first to understand the force of this second criticism. As the question concerns one’s highest good, how can any account of that take into consideration what is beyond our control? There seems to be a basic misunderstanding on this very point, an equivocation on *bonum*. Stoic *bonum* was always deontological, it could not be separated from its moral foundation. Thus to designate something good means that it is *per se* within one’s control. That it imparts some benefit to the individual is secondary to the understanding that it was *bonum* for the agent to perform. Thus the good accruing to the individual is more the result of the proper performance of the act than the acquisition of whatever good end that same performance occasioned. It was intimately connected to the agent’s moral makeup.

The sense, however, in which Cicero seems to want to employ *bonum* here is mainly that the ‘good’ in question provides some benefit to the person who receives it. It is not of course immoral in its choice or execution, for that would clearly place it outside *bona*. But it is *bonum* primarily for the agent as subject rather than in the objective, secondary or complementary (to Cicero), sense in which the Stoics employed the term. Despite the fact that Cicero claims elsewhere (*Off*.) to be following the Stoics, one wonders whether the distinction he makes between the good and the useful is even a coherent one in their system. For Stoics, only *virtus* can be *bonum* *per se*, but it is so only insofar as it is performed by a rational agent, who is aiming primarily not at the performance of the act in question but instead at virtue (cf. the spear-thrower analogy of 3.22). Only then is the action ‘*bonum*.’

For these reasons Cicero’s objections miss the point. He wants to count beauty and health (as they are *secundum naturam*) as ‘*bonum*’, though neither can be gained via exercise or cosmetics. But as they ultimately lie outside our control they lack any moral component. By emphasizing their character as in accordance with nature and neglecting the fact that only virtue is completely within our control, Cicero creates a straw man of the Stoic position. Cicero’s third allegation, that the Stoics finally abandon moral obligation (*ipsum denique officium*), is also somewhat fatuous. For it is evident from the analysis of book 3 that duty plays a large role in the Stoic system. But again their focus on the intentions of the agent performing these *officia*, such that like health, wealth, beauty etc. they could not be counted *bona propter se*, has led Cicero to caricature their position, as this lecture will demonstrate.

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