

## Cicero's Redefinition of *Utilitas* in *De Officiis* and *De Amicitia*

In *De Amicitia* 18, Cicero makes the rather startling comment that he will not pursue his argument any further, since to do so would be *ad communem utilitatem parum*. This statement presents an apparent contradiction, for Cicero himself elsewhere condemns those who seek the useful above the good. Scholars have labelled this problem the “two Ciceros”: one, a philosopher, defines man by his search for truth, and the other, a statesman, is willing to pass truth by to assist his country. But this dual image of Cicero is inconsistent with the earnest defender of both philosophy and the state which appears in his works. This paper will seek to demonstrate how Cicero's definition of the word *utilitas* in *De Amicitia* and *De Officiis* solves this problem, and his purpose behind this redefinition.

Cicero explicitly addresses the tension between the useful and the right in the third book of *De Officiis*. In fact, he dismisses it entirely, arguing that whatever is *honestum* is also *utile*, and whatever is *utile*, *honestum* (*Off.* 3.11). This seemingly paradoxical belief constitutes a redefinition of *utilitas*. Since all virtue is one, Cicero must believe it a virtue in its own right (cf. *Off.* 2.35). He puts this belief into practice in *De Amicitia*, when he argues that no great attachment to a friend should hinder someone from doing *utilitates* for his country (75). There is something inherently moral about the performance of *utilitas*.

The answer to this conundrum lies in *Amic.* 18 itself. Cicero leaves his line of argument behind, not for any sort of *utilitas*, but *ad communem utilitatem*. Cicero's interest is in public welfare, the well-being of the community. He has long exalted the benefits of human society; in *De Officiis*, he removes wisdom from its preeminence among moral requirements and replaces it with *communitas* (see Smethurst 1955). Elsewhere he writes that “our country claims a part of

us, and our friends a part” (*Off.* 1.22). In this light, Cicero’s abandonment of the subtleties of philosophy gains a foundation: he cannot sanction pursuits which steal a man from his duty to his society, and society necessitates things done for one another’s benefit. If wisdom is the soul’s highest virtue, *utilitas* is its highest duty, or activity. It is a duty that only exists within the confines of community, however, since *utilitas* sought for personal gain is only greed in disguise.

Cicero’s definition of *utilitas*, then, is a morally good action done for the sake of assisting others in some concrete way, the natural result of a virtuous mind, and this is the *utilitas* which is indistinguishable from *honestas*. This definition finds its most pleasant application in *De Amicitia*, for only the most wicked of individuals would fail to assist a friend in need. The friendship does not arise because of *utilitates*—Cicero makes himself quite clear on this point—but it is sustained by and meaningless without them. A man who loves his friend and, by extension, his society, seeks to offer them services. In fact, the state is, in some ways, a man’s closest and most deserving friend, and the one which most requires *utilitates* for the purpose of its flourishing.

By re-defining *utilitas* and giving it moral weight, Cicero gives one argument for why a statesman such as himself should be absent from the forum in a time of political and social need. He sees in Rome a dearth of moral and philosophical thought, and he offers what it lacks as a way of serving the state and bettering the citizen body (see Nicgorski 1984). He takes off the mantle of the statesman and dons that of the philosopher in an attempt to offer *utilitas* to his friend, Rome.

### Works Cited

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