



On Ends (De finibus bonorum et malorum)

Marcus Tullius Cicero , Harris Rackham (translator)

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De finibus bonorum et malorum ("On the ends of good and evil") is a philosophical work by the Roman orator, politician and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero. It consists of five books, in which Cicero explains the philosophical views of Epicureanism, Stoicism, and the Platonism of Antiochus of Ascalon.

The book was developed in the summer of the year 45 BC within about one and a half months. Together with the Tusculanae Quaestiones written shortly afterwards, De finibus is the most extensive philosophical work of Cicero

(source: wiki)

On Ends (De finibus bonorum et malorum) Details

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rogue says

I will have to read this a dozen more times before I can say anything about it.

Andrew Fairweather says

Why does Cicero always ultimately leave me cold? I don't fervently disagree with much I've read by him, yet... I feel like I'm always waiting for the passage which will convince me of his reputed brilliance. As for this particular work, 'On Ends' is a dialogue between the convinced Epicurian, Torquatus, and Cicero, followed by another dialogue with the Stoic Cato. The style of disputation is very different in both debates--much of this has to do with the premise of Epicurianism and Stoicism and its relation to Cicero's own point of view which greatly favors the Stoic's devotion to virtue.

I have a lot of sympathy with Cicero's take-down of Epicurianism. Indeed, I think it can be reasonably figured that we live in a largely Epicurian world at the moment due to our location of the Good Life in largely sensual pleasures. His critique of Epicurus' lack of distinction when using the term "pleasure" (Epicurus says that the absence of pain is a definite, static pleasure as opposed to moving pleasure which is sought) is spot on, and it is fair play to him that he makes a point to reserve his criticism for Epicurus the thinker, not the man. By far the hedonist's worst offense is his locating the center of pleasure and pain in the sensations of the body which Cicero argues dulls the fruits of reason since reason can only be a means to an end of sensual pleasure. Epicurus does not portray a social human being—insofar as Cicero insists on the social character of humanity, I am with him all the way. After all, without this crucial foundation, both Judgement and Justice are impossible—

"The fact is that when [Epicurus] says that the verdict of the senses themselves decides pleasure to be good and pain evil, he assigns more authority to the senses than the law allows to us when we sit as judges in private suits. We cannot decide any issue not within our jurisdiction; and there is not really any point in the proviso which judges are fond of adding to their verdicts: 'if it be a matter within my jurisdiction,' for if it was not within their jurisdiction, the verdict is equally invalid with the proviso omitted. What does come under the verdict of the senses? Sweetness, sourness, smoothness, roughness, proximity, distance; whether an object is stationary or moving, square or round."

The Epicurian stance is essentially anti-public. Plato's Myth of Gyges kept turning in my head. Rather than outright promote the idea that "ethics are what we do when no one is looking" (something which Cicero would undoubtedly concur) Cicero portrays the most malignant personality as one that would practice public virtue for the satisfaction of their own selfish ends.

"Again, if modesty, self-control, chastity, if in a word Temperance is to depend for its sanction on the fear of punishment or of disgrace, and not to maintain itself by its own intrinsic sacredness, what form of adultery, vice or lust will not break loose and run riot when it is assured of concealment, impunity or indulgence."

Here, Epicurianism is kind like the "ethical consumerism" we have today which tells us that the buy

responsibly sourced products is out ticket out of environmental catastrophe, or the proper way to support political causes... no, the outrageous excesses of consumerism *itself* can't possibly be responsible for the destruction of the planet! Of course, the Epicurian would argue that saving the planet is in the subject's own interest... a rather flat statement if you ask me. I think we should all be quite aware of where enlightened selfishness gets us. Being essentially anti-public, I'm not sure you *could* trust an Epicurian to come up with the massive social organization necessary to properly tackle problems that are rightly political. Instead, for the Epicurian, life is that of the gambler's, a game of chance, and fate "will be what it will be"—

"For the things that produce pleasure are not in the Wise Man's control; since happiness does not consist in wisdom itself, but in the means to pleasure which wisdom can procure. But all the apparatus of pleasure is external, and what is external must depend on chance. "

Anyway, what follows is a discussion with Cato in Lucullus' country home about Stoicism. It seems like Cicero agrees with Cato by-and-large, but feels it is not subtle enough to account for the emotional complexity of human beings. Again, no disagreements from me—yet, for this reader, long passages which concerned themselves about the differences between the Peripatetic and the Stoic school of thought left me yawning in a big way (I just don't have the requisite background to appreciate it all, I am fully willing to admit) and I had to close up shop early before Cicero got to talking about the Academy. I don't normally review books I didn't finish, but hey, if there's anything I learned from Cicero here it's that you ought to have your principles, but don't get to worked up over them, eh? Geez, I wish I enjoyed this a little more though. I think the Catiline orations are probably my next move. Oration—that's probably the good stuff.

Justin says

A classic and necessary sourcebook for anyone wanting to understand the debates between the philosophers of the Stoa and the Garden

James Miller says

Reviewing Cicero is difficult (he wrote in genres he partially created and quite unlike modern philosophy), but the translation can be commented on. The footnotes are very good for not just clarifying details of the common biographical references, but drawing attention to the key point of arguments.

The common thread is of course the nature of the good and happy life and arguments are presented in various ways and with varying success. Similarly to Platonic dialogues we are not offered a worked solution, but issues and problems and encouraged to judge ourselves (explaining some very weak argument in places and some questionable bald assertions).

Thomas Rivers says

"Now it was a mistake to make virtue consist in an act of choice, for this implies that the very thing that is the ultimate Good itself seeks to get something else." --Tully

Peerless rhetoric, noble thinking. We expect nothing less from him.

Delphine says

Ce livre serait une bonne introduction à l'éthique des grandes écoles de la période hellénistique, quoi que la lecture est parfois rendue difficile par la structure un peu forcée (je pense principalement au livre IV, qui souffre de nombreuses répétitions. À ce sujet, voyez l'article de Th. Bénatouïl : "Structure, standards and Stoic moral progress in De Finibus 4", 2015).

J'ai travaillé principalement les livres III et V pour étudier la théorie de l'oikeiôsis stoïcien et la version d'Antiochus d'Ascalon. Les arguments de Caton sont parfois un peu faibles, mais ils suffisent à donner une vue d'ensemble. Le livre V est mieux construit, plus convaincant, quoi qu'il laisse le lecteur sur une fin un peu brusque, qui ne règle pas les points de divergence entre les protagonistes du dialogue.

Les livres I et II, bien que je les ai moins approfondis, sont facile à lire et se suffisent ensemble. Ils pourront facilement être lus indépendamment du reste par qui ne s'intéressera qu'à l'épicurisme.

Dans l'ensemble, un texte intéressant, qui convient à un lecteur débutant. Certaines notions de philosophie ancienne seraient peut-être nécessaire pour en comprendre toutes les subtilités, mais l'ouvrage en lui-même pourrait au contraire permettre un premier aperçu qui clarifiera des textes plus difficiles et plus techniques.

William Prueter says

Go to prueter.org. Click on my Latin page. Click on books read. Click on Marcus Tullius Cicero. Scroll down to 545.

Jean says

I recently read the book "Friends Divided" by Gordon S. Wood. In the book Wood made a point that Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BCE-43 BCE) was a favorite of both John Adams (1735-1826) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and they quoted Cicero frequently. I have always enjoyed reading about Cicero, but I suddenly realized I have never read any of his books. Audible had this audiobook by Cicero written toward the end of his life while he was in exile at his countryside estate. Apparently, he did a great deal of writing during this period.

In this book Cicero discusses the philosophical views of Epicureanism and Stoicism. The book was written in 45 BCE. I wish that I had the skill to read this in Latin. This book was translated to English by Harris Rackham. I am always in awe of reading a book written so long ago and yet it is valid today. I found the method Cicero used in writing extremely helpful in understanding his debates. The way he had different friends and himself debate back and forth the various points of each philosophy made me feel I was sitting with him and his friends in a patio drinking tea/wine. It was such a delight to have Cicero at times include me in the conversation. This is how I spent my Christmas Day, sitting in a garden with Cicero discussing philosophy. Oh, it was such a pleasant day.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book is just over nine hours. Derek LePage does a good job narrating the book.

Benjamin Gaiser says

In this book Cicero develops the ideas of the three prevailing philosophical ideas of his time. He gives several accounts for and against them and as such it is a good introductory read into ancient philosophy. Another side topic is the fact that Cicero establishes that one need not to philosophize in a traditional language but that philosophy should be adaptable to everybody's mother tongue.

Suze Fields says

Read it in Hungarian, not in Latin. Though there were several parts where I didn't agree with Cicero, or that I found his arguing a little bit flawed (at least in the Hungarian translation, in some parts he seems to twist the words of Epicurus), all in all I found it quite enjoyable and interesting. Wish it were complete!

Zachary Rudolph says

“For nothing in life is more worth investigating than philosophy in general, and the question raised in this work in particular: what is the end, what is the ultimate and final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed?”

Patrick Hadley says

Spero ut Cicero ab elephanto ad mortem pedicetur.

Moryam says

Although this work will be somewhat interesting to the student of Epicureanism and Stoicism, it has by far the most to offer to anyone interested in Cicero's own thought. His presentation of the philosophical schools he's attempting to refute has sometimes been accused of being slanted, but Cicero (the consummate orator) never forgets that he is addressing an audience, and the key question we should ask is what he means to say to that audience.

De Finibus is an subtle accomplishment, but unfortunately this translation doesn't merit the same recommendation. The translator tries to make Cicero accessible to *us* when the first and crucial question is what Cicero is trying to say to his Roman audience. We can learn something from *that* encounter, but by trying to port Cicero's philosophy directly to contemporary readers the translator only obscures what is being said. There are a number of Ciceronian terms which don't have exact counterparts in English, but because the translator varies his translation so much the reader can never get a real sense for what *Cicero* meant by those terms. Unfortunately to the best of my knowledge there are no truly serviceable translations.

Oriol Ràfols Grifell says

Queda clar que el fort de Ciceró no era la filosofia. Brilla molt més en les Catilinàries o en altres exercicis de política i retòrica. Tot i així, el llibre (una discussió entre epicuris, estoics i peripatètics) és interessant pels diàlegs que tenen personatges que hi apareixen, tan influents en la història com Cató, Brutus o el mateix Ciceró, que si sempre els veiem en discursos polítics, aquí els trobem debatent sobre filosofia. I a fe que amb gran coneixement.

Phillip says

(Latin: De finibus bonorum et malorum), composed by Cicero in 45 BC, presents the ethical teachings of the major philosophical schools of the time in the form of dialogues recounted by Cicero to his friend Brutus. Lucius Torquatus serves as spokesman for epicureanism in the first two books, while Cato represents stoicism in books three and four. Book five presents Cicero's own academic scepticism. Highly Recommended!
