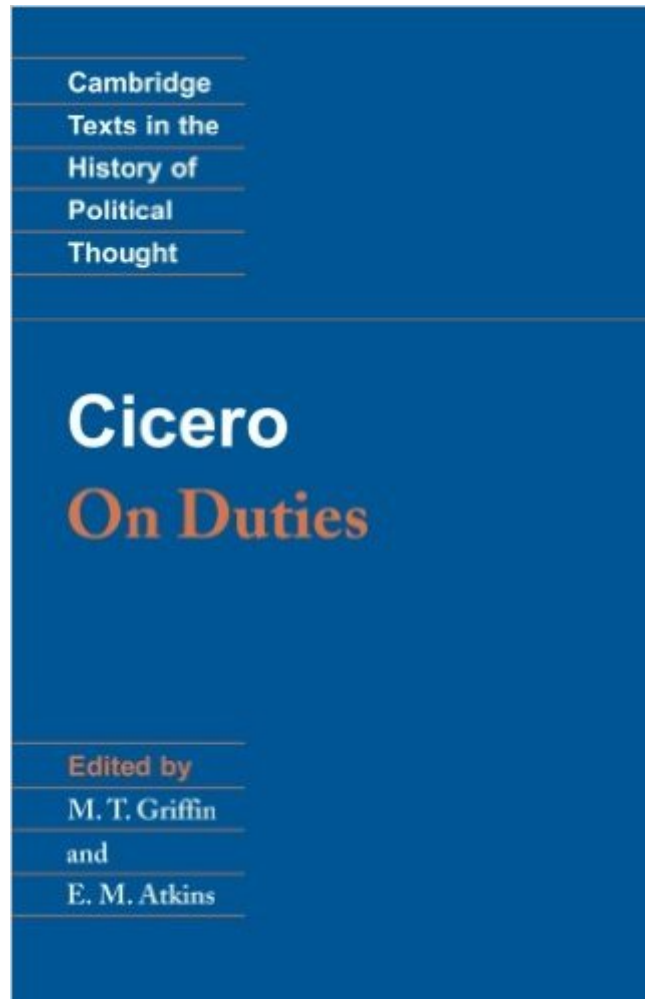


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Cicero: On Duties (Cambridge Texts In The History Of Political Thought)



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

"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 its 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.

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.

I'm not sure why we ignore our ancient wisdom. We seem to be well-fed on eastern paradox and mysticism, but we have lost the tradition of reason and cross-examination that brought stability and technology to the world. We heard the cry, "If we can send a man to the moon, why can't we . . ."

Part of the reason is that the nature of a moon-shot may be different than the nature of curing breast cancer, winning the war on terrorism within the time-frame of WWII, or solving social problems. The other part of the reason is that we have abandoned the fundamental principles of Western Civilization that brought us Galileo, Newton, and Einstein. When we left these core truths, we undid several thousand years of progress, and have returned to a faux primitive and savagery. Emotion has supplanted reason, mercy has robbed justice, and catchphrases have replaced fundamental platitudes. In short, we have abandoned the mind, and are left with the stomach. In "On Duties," Cicero drives a dagger in the heart of today's ills. This book's theme is justice as it related to social duties. It is essentially pedagogical, and like Aristotle's Ethics, is written as advice to his growing son. We speak of Motherlove, but this book embodies Fatherlove, or all the good and ideal aspects of paternalism. As with all good philosophers, he is easy to understand, once you get the feel for philosophical banter. C. S. Lewis observed "The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism."

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