



Study Guide on Cicero's *On Duties*

QUESTIONS ON THE WHOLE WORK

1. What seems to be Cicero's overall rhetorical strategy? What appealed to you the most and why?
2. How could it possibly be true that the useful is never in conflict with the morally good?
3. How do you "forge and fashion" (1.14) your character into something splendid and excellent?
4. What does Cicero think of Caesar? Consider the following passages: 1.26, 2.1, 3.83-85.
5. What examples and metaphors does Cicero repeatedly use? Why use those?
6. Would Cicero say that the active life or the contemplative life, or some mix of both, is the best way of life?
7. What is Cicero's attitude, and what should a leader's attitude be, toward passing pleasures, outward circumstances, and worldly conditions?
8. How does Cicero's philosophy compare and contrast with the Stoic, Epicurean, Christian, Machiavellian, and Marxist understanding of the best way of life? What would he agree with and disagree with in each philosophy?
9. After reading *The Declaration of Independence*, trace Cicero's influence on America's Founding Fathers.

QUESTIONS ON THE OUTLINED PARTS

Book 1: The Honorable: *What is the honorable life?* [See Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* II-II.145.3.reply.]

1. Introduction (1-6)
 - a. **Opening address** (1): *What ensures that Cicero's son is grounded in philosophy?*
 - b. **Philosophy and oratory** (2-3): *How does philosophy relate to oratory?*
 - c. **Relevance of 'duty'** (4): to his son's age and education: *Why would this subject of duty be "most apt"?*
 - d. **Importance of 'duty'** (5): *Why is it that if you error on the "supreme good" your error on honorable action?*
2. Division (7-17)
 - a. **Kinds of obligations** (7-8): "Absolute obligations" vs. "ordinary obligations" (7-9): *What kind of obligation is Cicero concerned with? How is it more fitting than, say, Aristotle's concern in his Ethics?*
 - b. **Outline of the work** (9-10): *What does Cicero add to what has already been said about duty?*
 - c. **Fonts of honor** (11-15): Four "fonts that forge and fashion an honorable character": *What is Cicero's fourfold "starting point" and why is it important to begin there? Why would these virtues "arouse astonishing feelings of love"?* [See Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* I-II.94.2.reply.]



3. "Knowledge of the truth" (18-19): *Why does this font "touch human nature most closely" (18)?*
 - a. **Fault #1** (18): regarding unknown things as known.
 - b. **Fault #2** (19): devote too much study "to matters that that are obscure and difficult and useless."

4. "Social Virtue" (20-60): *Why is justice the "crowning glory of the virtues"?*
 - a. **Justice's 2 kinds** (20-23): allow no harm done to neighbor; protect common and private interests: *What is the "foundation of justice" (23)?*
 - b. **Injustice's 2 kinds** (23-41): actively do harm to neighbor (because of greed, pleasure, ambition, Caesar); passively neglect to protect common and private interests (because of reluctant, indifferent, preoccupied, "zeal in attending their own business"); two ways of inflicting injustice: by fraud like "the cunning fox" and force like "the lion" (41).
 - c. **Generosity's 3 rules** (42-50): hurt no one; do not give beyond your means; and give according to merit.
 - d. **Friendship's order** (50-59): people are bound by "reason and speech" (50); "life and living, counsel, conversation, encouragement, comfort, and sometimes even reproof flourish best in friendship" (58): *What is friendship's civic role?*

5. "Magnanimity" (61-92)
 - a. **Definition** (61-65): "the virtue which champions the cause of right" (62); a leading citizen prefers deeds to fame and "to be first in reality rather than in name" (65): *Why is both being and appearing virtuous necessary?*
 - b. **Characteristic #1** (66-71): "indifference to outward circumstances."
 - i. **Criteria #1** (67-68): regard as good only what is honorable: *How can ambition rob "us of liberty"?*
 - ii. **Criteria #2** (69-71): be free from all mental disturbance: *Why emphasize the need for despising pleasures?*
 - c. **Characteristic #2** (72-92): do activities that are important, useful, taxing, dangerous.
 - i. **In public life** (71-91): civic duty to lead if capable; "achievement in peace more important...than in war"; endurance more of the mind than body; foresight by study and "reflection" (81); seek peace; "two of Plato's rules" (85); courtesy and forbearance; "humility" (90); "counsel of friends" (91). *Why does Cicero urgently warn against the "lust for power"?*
 - ii. **In private life** (92): possessions should be acquired honestly, be made available to deserving people, and be increased by thrift and philanthropy. *How does a private magnanimous citizen regard the common good?*



6. "Decorum" (93-152)

- a. **Definition** (93-99): "that which harmonizes with man's superiority in those respects in which his nature differs from the rest of animal creation" (96); decorum "shines out in our conduct, engages the approbation of our fellow-men by the order, consistency, and self-control it imposes upon every word and deed" (98). *What is the relationship between decorum and speech and action in accord with nature?*
- b. **Nature of man in general** (100-106): *What is the natural law, according to Cicero?*
 - i. The soul (appetites obey and reason rules is "Nature's law" [103]).
 - ii. The body (self-control, wit in games, learning led by delight, "physical comforts...ordered according to the demands of health and strength, not... the calls of pleasure" (106).
- c. **Nature of particular men** (107-114): *How does one discover their natural gifts and temperament?*
 - i. "Everyone...should make a proper estimate of his own natural ability and himself a critical judge of his own merits and defects" (114).
- d. **Chance** (115-116): *How does chance relate to the discovery of what is honorable and why is it important?*
- e. **Choice** (117-152): *How does considering what is natural and reasonable relate to a decorous action?*
 - i. **In lifestyle** (117-121): "we must establish who and what manner of men we wish to be and what calling in life we wish to adopt" (117: *What is the role of history in a moral education?*)
 - ii. **In age** (122-123): youth (respect elders, rely on sound advisor, be "protected against sensuality and trained to toil and endurance of both mind and body"; elderly (give counsel "as much as possible to their friends and to the young, and above all to the state"; avoid "feebleness and idleness" and "luxury" and "sensual indulgence"): *What should a youth do to ensure that they live a morally excellent life?*
 - iii. **In social status** (124-125): magistrates (enforce law uphold "constitutional rights", be faithful, private citizens, aliens: *Why is living under law a path to excellence?*)
 - iv. **In modesty** (126-132): "in every deed, in every word, even in every movement and attitude of the body"; "three elements—beauty, tact, and taste"; modesty and purity; should not be "effeminate...nor boorish"; loveliness for women and dignity for men; "we must be careful... to employ our thoughts on themes as elevating as possible and to keep our impulses under the control of reason": *Is Cicero's vision of modesty possible?*
 - v. **In speech** (132-137): two kinds: argumentation and conversation; speech is improved by practice conversation; speech should be clear and musical; conversation should be mild, undogmatic, and witty; reprove "for the good of the person"; repress anger in disputes; do not boast.
 - vi. **In property** (138-141): impulse obeys reason; neither more or less attention and labor is given to a project than justified; safeguard image and standing of a gentleman.
 - vii. **In timing** (142-149): in a place or with certain people; "As...a musical ear detects even the slightest falsity of tone in the harp, so we, if we wish to be keen and careful observers of moral faults, shall often draw important conclusions from trifles" (146).
 - viii. **In career** (150-151): choose professions that require sagacity.



7. Conclusion (1.153-161): *What is the first of the four fonts? Which one is most important?*
 - a. **Apparent conflicts** (153-160): *What is the chief of the virtues? What is wisdom?*
 - b. **Summary** (160-161): order of duties: gods, country, partens: *Do you agree with this order?*

Book 2: The Useful: *What is truly useful?*

1. Introduction (1-8)
 - a. **Address** (1): *What is the tone that Cicero has in relation to his son? Is he a teacher, a father, a leader, a philosopher?*
 - b. **Defense of Roman Republic** (2.3): *What led to the fall of the Roman Republic?*
 - c. **Defense of Philosophy** (4-8): wisdom is “the knowledge of things human and divine and of the causes by which those things are controlled”; source of “mental enjoyment and relaxation” and path to “strength of character and virtue”: *What effects and what goals does a philosophical education have?*
2. Division (9-23)
 - a. **The useful** (8-9): there is not more “pernicious doctrine” than to think “a thing may be morally right without being expedient, and expedient without being morally right”: *Why is this the most “pernicious doctrine”?*
 - b. **2 Kinds of useful things** (10-12): *Why can men be the most helpful and the most hurtful?*
 - i. **Inanimate things** (10-14): materials, tools, artifacts: *How do inanimate things become useful?*
 - ii. **Animate things** (14-17): animals, people, gods: *What is the most useful thing and how are they won over?*
 - c. **The means of winning cooperation** (18-21)
 - i. **Virtue** (18): the fonts of the honorable life: *Why is the “co-operation of men...secured by wisdom and virtue”?*
 - ii. **Chance** (19-21): *How does Cicero's understanding of Fortune compare to Machiavelli's?*
 - d. **The motives of giving cooperation** (21-22): goodwill, gratitude, confidence, fear, hope for gifts, bribes.
3. **“Motivating by Fear”** (23-29): *How does a tyranny rule and what are the consequences of tyranny? Is fear a good motivation?*
 - a. **Fear & Goodwill** (23): *Is fear “a poor safeguard of lasting power; while affection...may be trusted to keep safe forever”?*
 - b. **Fear & Freedom** (24): *Why are leaders who lead with fear “the maddest of the mad”?*
 - c. **Fear in Greece & Rome** (25-29): *Compare the causes and effects of Rome as “protectorate of the world” and as “empire.”*



4. "Motivating by Goodwill" (30-85): *What is the best way to lead others?*
- a. **Friends** (30-31): *Why is having "affectionate and loving" friends the "first and absolute essential" means of motivating?*
 - b. **Reputation** (31-51): three ways of establishing a good reputation: *Is having a good reputation actually useful?*
 - i. **Goodwill** (32): awakened by "kind service", "the will to do a kind service", and "name and reputation for generosity, kindness, justice, honour, and all those virtues that belong to gentleness of character and affability of manner."
 - ii. **Good faith** (33-35): awakened by "practical wisdom combined with a sense of justice" and "no suspicion of dishonesty or wrong doing"; "he who has one virtue has them all" (35).
 - iii. **Good name** (36-51): awakened by "excel others in ability and to be free from all dishonor and also from those vices which others do not easily resist" (37); be just and "uninfluenced by money"; Socrates says the "short-cut" to honor is be just (43).
 1. **Ambition** (45-46): "set a high ideal" and "strive with unswerving zeal towards its realization."
 2. **Intellectual and Moral Character** (46): "brain-work is far more important than mere hand-work"; "self-restraint, filial affection, and devotion to kinsfolk."
 3. **Association** (46-47): "attach...to men who are at once wise and renowned as well as patriotic in public affairs."
 4. **Eloquence** (48-52): speak "in the interest of the state (50); "never prosecute the innocent" and defend the guilty (51).
 - c. **Generosity** (52-64): *Is being generous with your money actually useful to the one who gives the money?*
 - i. **Lavish** (56): spend their money on public or private "vanities."
 - ii. **Generous** (59): give because of necessity "proportioned to our ability and regulated by the golden mean."
 - d. **Service**: (65-85): "benefit as many people as possible with such kindness that the memory of them shall be handed down to children and to children's children, so that they too may not be ungrateful" (63): *Is serving others actually useful to the one who provides the service?*
 - i. **Service to people** (65-71): especially through law and eloquence.
 - ii. **Service to state** (72-85): protect private property; ensure "an abundance of the necessities of life"; "avoid even the slightest suspicion of self-seeking" and avarice; repay debts.



5. Conclusion (86-89)
 - a. **Other useful things** (86-87)
 - i. **Health** (86): “preserved by studying one’s own constitution, by observing what is good or bad for one, by constant self-control in supplying physical wants and comforts...by forgoing sensual pleasures.”
 - ii. **Wealth** (87): “it is a duty to make money, but only by honorable means; it is a duty also to save it and increase it by care and thrift.”
 - b. **Comparison of useful things** (88-89): from reputation to health to wealth to strength to pleasure.

Book 3: The apparent conflict between the Honorable and the Useful: *Is there really no conflict between the honorable and the useful?*

1. Introduction (1-7)
 - a. **The active life and the contemplative life** (1-4): “I am turning my leisure to account”: *Is Cicero correct in putting his civic duty before his leisurely interests?*
 - b. **‘Duty’ and duty of the liberally educated** (5-6): duty is the richest and most fruitful branch of philosophy; study of duty gives “rules for leading a consistent and moral life”; duties should be studied “by all who look forward to a career of honor”: *What are the duties of a someone who has studied philosophy and the topic of duty?*
 - c. **Panaetius began well but did not finish** (7-13)
2. Apparent Conflict with the Honorable in General (14-39) [See Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* I-II.100.1.reply]
 - a. **Absolute duties vs. intermediate duties** (14-18): *Why does Cicero focus on the secondary kind of duties?*
 - b. **Rules of Procedure** (19-37): principle: “take something from his neighbor and to profit by his neighbor’s loss”: *What is the relationship between nature and law?*
 - i. **Law of Nations** (23): “no man shall be allowed for the sake of his own advantage to injure his neighbor.”
 - ii. **Law of Gods** (23): “Reason...in Nature” says do not covet “anything that is his neighbor’s.”
 - iii. **Law of Nature** (24-32): ‘we are all subject to one and the same law of Nature.’
 1. **For interest in self** (24): “loftiness and greatness of spirit, and courtesy, justice and generosity are much more in harmony with Nature thana re selfish pleasure, riches, and life itself.”
 2. **For interest of friends** (25-27): “prefer the life of service to the life of pleasure.”
 3. **For interest of society** (27-28): “chief end of allmen” is “to make the interest of each individual and the whole body politic identical.”
 4. **Against self-gain** (29-30): “disregard of common interests is repugnant to Nature.”
 5. **Against harming friends** (31): “the good man will always perform his duty, promoting the general interests of human society.”



6. **Against lawless tyrants** (32): “we have not ties of fellowship with a tyrant.”
 - c. **Recapitulation** (33-37): “that which is good is certainly expedient; consequently, that which is good is morally good is also expedient.”
 - d. **Ring of Gyges** (38-39): *What is Cicero's conclusion about the Ring of Gyges story?*
3. Apparent Conflict with Justice: Case studies (40-96)
 - a. Conflict of apparent usefulness and morally good (40-49)
 - i. **With oneself** (40-42): *Does Cicero neglect personal interest?*
 - ii. **With friends** (43-46): “God himself has bestowed upon man nothing more divine” than “conscience”: *What are the limits within friendships?*
 - iii. **With city** (46-49): *What is the “established principle” that Cicero wants to make?*
 - b. Conflict in case studies of apparent usefulness and morally good (50-92)
 - i. **With buying and selling** (50-57)
 - ii. **With business deals** (58-64)
 - iii. **With contracts and law** (65-72): *Given 69, what is the relationship between divine, natural, and civil law?*
 - iv. **With those regarded as honest men** (73-88): “Work out your own ideas and sift your thoughts so as to see what conception and idea of a good man they contain”: *What is your idea of a good man?*
 - v. **With Hecato the Stoic's cases** (89-92)
 - vi. **With promises** (92-95): when life, reputation, or other's expediency is at stake.
 - c. **Summary** (96)
 4. Apparent Conflict with Magnanimity (97-115): *Do some great actions really never conflict with what is useful, and vice versa?*
 - a. **Example of Ulysses** (97-99)
 - b. **Example of Regulus** (99-111)
 - i. **Story** (99-100)
 - ii. **Objections** (101-103)
 - iii. **Refutations** (104-111)
 - c. **Counterexample of Pomponius** (112)
 - d. **Counterexample of Hannibal** (113-115)
 5. Apparent Conflict with Decorum (116-120): *Is pleasure a good sign if something is truly useful or truly honorable?*
 - a. **Decorum is incompatible with hedonism** (116)
 - b. **Epicureanism is a bad guide to prudence, courage, and justice** (117-120): goodness, generosity, courtesy, and friendship should be sought for their own sake.



6. Conclusion (121): *What makes the study of duty valuable?*
 - a. Value of studying duty depends on “the spirit in which you receive it.”
 - b. Accompany study of duty with study of “Cratippus’s lectures” (Aristotelian philosophy).

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Cicero's *On Duties*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.