

## Deliberation And Character

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Rhetoric, Aristotle said, is an offshoot of ethical studies; while the philosopher cultivates the principles on which good deliberations are conducted, the student of discourse tries to transplant the principles into the ground of actual practice. But then, Aristotle was a philosopher. Among rhetoricians, one might get away with the opposite thought: that philosophy springs from some twig of the tangled practices of deliberation, snipped off and hothouse bred.

Whichever view is preferred, it should at least be evident that philosophies of the human good and the ordinary means of deliberating about that good are interdependent. Who can doubt, for example, that our argument textbooks' careful attention to reasoning about causes and consequences is encouraged by utilitarianism, and that utilitarianism in turn arises from taking just such reasoning seriously? A similar observation might be made about Kantian or deontological ethics and reasoning from moral rules.

I want to draw the outlines of a form of reasoning that may best be thought of as the offshoot to what has been called "virtue ethics." Associated with such names as Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre, virtue ethics tries to follow Aristotle and other ancient thinkers in focusing on the goodness of agents, not of actions. Our aim, these philosophers say, should be to develop good characters, not to achieve good outcomes or to follow good rules.

What sort of deliberation does a virtue ethics support? One could proceed deductively to explore this question, deriving the forms of reasoning from the philosophical principles. Instead, I proceed in the opposite direction, growing inductively toward the philosophers. I look to see how one ancient people, the Romans, actually deliberated. We are lucky to still possess many works by Rome's greatest orator/theorist, Cicero, which document Roman reasoning practices.

### Roman Reasoning in Practice

In 49 B.C.E., as civil war loomed, Cicero reasoned with himself about the course he should take. He reported almost daily his rather vacillating deliberations in letters to a friend. Should he stay at Rome and risk Caesar's invasion, or retreat overseas with Pompey's army? As recounted in the letters, Cicero was wavering between two clusters of considerations: what he could do safely, and what he could do honorably.<sup>1</sup> Each sort of reason had for Cicero a distinctive force. Considerations of honor did not pick out an end to be achieved by some course of action; rather, they referred to a quality of the action itself, an end to be achieved in acting. While Cicero worried that joining Pompey might result in harm to his family, he feared that giving in to Caesar's despotism would be unworthy.

It is this second kind of reasoning that I want to focus on here. Explicit references to it occur frequently when Cicero spoke of his own deliberations and those of others, good or ill. *Rationem dignitatis habere*--"to have reason of dignity," that is, to take dignity into account, to calculate or reckon or consider with an eye toward dignity--such was the common expression for this line of reasoning.<sup>2</sup> The phrase was not a technical but rather an ordinary way of speaking, and other language could just as easily be used. Thus Cicero recorded that certain Senators clearly had "thought nothing of their dignity" when they received envoys from one revolutionary. He, on

James F. Klumpp, ed. *Argument in a Time of Change: Definitions, Frameworks, and Critiques* (Annandale, VA: National Communication Association, 1997). 70-74.

the other hand, "takes counsel with his dignity" in deciding to speak out against those undermining the Republic, and "attends to his dignity" in struggling to save the same.

What was this Roman *dignitas* which so controlled deliberation? A man's dignity was the intersection of his personal worth with the public recognition that worth was due.<sup>3</sup> With respect to a candidate for office, for example, *dignitas* referred to the character and achievements which rendered the man worthy of election, the public honor which would be shown to him in the election, and the office itself, in which the character and the honor were united. Dignity was thus civic stature or standing, it was a man's public character.

Deliberations with an eye toward dignity turn up frequently in Cicero's works. Dignity, as one classicist has noted, was "of overwhelming importance to every outstanding politician of the late Republic" (Baldson 1960, 45). Caesar, for example, publicly justified his civil war as a necessary defense of his dignity; there is evidence that his opponent, Pompey, had a similar aim. According to Cicero, moreover, it was the Romans' wholehearted pursuit of dignity which distinguished their Republic from other polities and helped it endure: "other nations can stand slavery; our community cannot. The reason is simply this: they shrink from labor and pain and are ready to put up with anything in order to avoid them, whereas we have been thoroughly schooled by our ancestors to make dignity and virtue our touchstones in every decision and act."<sup>4</sup>

What did it mean for a Roman to make dignity his touchstone when deciding what to do? The forms such reasoning took can be observed when Cicero represented the deliberations of himself and others. At times his language directs attention to the quality of the act to be performed. When Cicero stayed away from a Senate session, it was for a "reason of dignity": namely, that "it does not seem to be of my dignity to state my views about public affairs where I would be heard better and with more attention by armed men than by the senators."

It wasn't necessary to use the word "dignity" to express the thought. Often Cicero framed the consideration in cognate language, as whether the action is worthy, *dignum*, of the actor. Thus he praised one of his associates for "most carefully thinking over what was worthy of the Republic and what was worthy of himself" in deciding on a plan of action. Talk of "fittingness" could also express a reason of dignity. For example, Cicero could say that the crux of his decision during the civil war was *quid me deceat*--"what befits me."

Another way of expressing such considerations referred to qualities of the actor as opposed to the act. The language of "fittingness" could be transferred: a person who did not take dignity into account was himself "inappropriate." There was also talk of memory. Cicero said that one man "remembered his rights and his dignity" and so refrained from participating in the mockery of a trial. Cicero adjured the Senate not to think that he was "forgetting himself" when he responded vehemently to insults. Other things could also be remembered: one could be mindful of one's role in the Republic, of the good name of one's family, of one's character and achievements.

There was, finally, the possibility of reasoning in terms of being "like oneself." One noble Roman had gone on mission for the Senate despite ill health, considering that he would be "unlike himself" if he refused. Letters of other prominent men preserved among those of Cicero employed the same expression. Caesar's assassins, as well as Caesar himself, each asserted that they act to be like themselves. To consider one's dignity thus involved considering carefully "who one is."

### Deliberation in the Roman Rhetoric Books

Aristotle had seemed a thoroughgoing utilitarian when he claimed in his *Rhetoric* that all deliberation aims at what is advantageous.<sup>5</sup> By the time the Greek doctrines were published in Latin manuals, however, deliberative rhetoric had grown to encompass two "ends." To advantage had been added the question of what serves *dignitas*, or, using a near-synonym, *honestas*, "honorability." Cicero's own early treatise was quite explicit: "in deliberative oratory,

although Aristotle accepts only advantage as the end," he explains, "we prefer to include both honorability and advantage."<sup>6</sup>

The rhetoric books were a little uncertain about to how these two "ends" fit together. Considerations of advantage related to personal or national survival and flourishing. Honorability or dignity, on the other hand, included the virtues--wisdom, justice, courage, temperance--but also things of a more "mixed" nature--glory, greatness, honors, reputation and in general any sort of honorable recognition from one's fellow citizens.<sup>7</sup> Although these forms of public notice could be advantageous--among the Romans, as among us, a politician needed name-recognition to get elected--the manuals tended to stress that the goods of virtue and honor were ends in themselves; as Cicero stated, "by their own dignity" such goods attract us. While "uncultivated and rude people" might prefer advantage, the "truly humane and civilized" put dignity above all things. Consequently, Cicero concluded in his mature work, "in a deliberative speech nothing is more worthy of choice than dignity. . . . For there is no one--especially in so renowned a polity as ours--who does not think that dignity is to be sought most of all."<sup>8</sup>

### Fast Forward

What from Cicero's way of speaking and from his theories can be salvaged for modern deliberations? His reasoning is not precisely our own. Our way of speaking of dignity often relies on metaphors of what Barry Schwartz has called vertical classification: we tell ourselves to live up to our worth, or that some course of action is beneath our dignity, or would lower us. Cicero is more concerned to have himself fill out or fit into the shape of his worth. It is necessary for him to be, actively, the person of dignity that he is. Roman dignity seems to have been more "objective": it referred not a person's feelings as evident to himself, but to his character, manifest before others.

Despite these differences in language, the reasoning about dignity is still recognizable for us. We know it when we see it--for example, when we see it in Clinton's address prior to sending troops to Bosnia. Clinton opens by specifying the two classes of considerations that he will bring to bear:

Tonight, I want to speak with you about implementing the Bosnian peace agreement and why our values and interests as Americans require that we do so.

The second category, "national interests," includes matters such as the stability of Europe and the maintenance of American prestige abroad. But Clinton leans much more heavily on the first category: what he calls "values," or (several times) "the right thing to do." Why is the proposed action "right"? Clinton proceeds by establishing who the Americans are in the eyes of the world, their public character:

From its birth, America has always been more than just a place. America has embodied an idea that has become the ideal for billions of people throughout the world. Our founders said it best: Our ideal is life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In this century especially, America has done more than simply stand for these ideals we have acted on them, and sacrificed for them. . . . Today, because of our dedication, America's ideals --liberty, democracy and peace--are more and more the aspirations of people everywhere in the world. It is the power of our ideas, even more than our size, our wealth and our military might, that makes America a uniquely trusted nation.

Because of the American achievements, America has gained a position of recognized leadership in the world. But the situation in Bosnia now "demands" that America stand up to its leadership role. If it does, Clinton promises, "then the sacrifices that the American people have

made this century will be renewed. And the next century can be the greatest our nation has yet known."

Clinton's distinction between interests and "values" or "the right thing to do" runs in parallel with the Roman handbooks' separation of advantage and dignity. It thus further confirms that deliberating about dignity cannot be reduced to the considerations of expediency featured in a utilitarian ethics. Nor, again, is talk of duties appropriate. Considerations of dignity may induce a person to fulfill duties owed another. But reasons of dignity are themselves reflexive: they direct attention not to that other, but to the self. So the reasoning about dignity seems not to fit into Kantian or deontological frameworks either.

What talk of duty does seem to capture is the commanding force of dignity. Acting worthily is something one has to do, even if it is inexpedient. In the rhetorical textbook he composed as a young man, Cicero spoke of dignity as a form of necessity. It is not, he points out, the necessity of external causes, like the necessity that a town fall to a general with overwhelming resources. Rather, it is a "qualified" necessity: a person must act thus, unless he prefers the consequences of alternative courses. But indignity is never preferable; so Cicero concludes, "it is apparent that the greatest necessity is the necessity of the honorable."<sup>10</sup>

Cicero seems to be isolating here the necessity that Bernard Williams (1993) has termed "internal," one "grounded in the ethos, the projects, the individual nature of the agent." Its compulsion is not "the 'must' of duty, the categorical imperative of morality." Rather, it is a necessity a person experiences "grounded in his own identity, his sense of himself as someone who can live in some social circumstances and not others." It is what drives a person "in virtue of the relations between what he expected of the world and what the world expects of a man who expects that of it."

This last phrase captures what we find most odd about the necessity of maintaining dignity. We are comfortable with having to live up to our self-ideal; we find more disturbing that this ideal necessarily includes what other people think of us. But that does appear to be an inevitable feature of "having a reason of dignity." It was evident in the Roman choice of *dignitas*, public character, to express the reasoning; it was evident also in the Roman handbooks' association of dignity with the goods of reputation--fame, honor, glory. It was evident, indeed, even in the brief selection from Clinton, for the character he calls his country to live up to is its character as a leader as recognized by other nations, and the result he promises is continued greatness among them. Although perhaps odd to our ordinary way of thinking, this concept of a person as necessarily among other persons and recognized by them resonates with a theme common in virtue ethics, and provides further confirmation that "having reason of dignity" is the rhetorical offshoot of that philosophy.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Tutum (Att. 7.22.2); related terms include utile (Att. 7.3.3 and 8.2.4), *salubre* (Att. 8.12.5), *cautum* (Att. 8.15.2); *honestum* (Att. 7.22.2 and the passages just mentioned).

<sup>2</sup>E.g. *Fam.* 10.2.2, 2 *Verr.* 2.48, 5.94.

<sup>3</sup>From the extensive literature on *dignitas*, see especially Poeschl 1990; Drexler 1966; Fuhrmann 1960; Wegehaupt 1932.

<sup>4</sup>Caesar *B Civ.* 1.7.7; *Phil.* 2.38; *Phil.* 10.20, see also *De or.* 1.196, *Leg. Man.* 7.

<sup>5</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.3; 1358b.

<sup>6</sup>*Inv. rhet.* 2.156, see also *Part. or.* 87.

<sup>7</sup>*Gloria, amplitudo, honos, existimatio, honesta commemoratio* (*Inv. rhet.* 2.157, 166, *Part. or.* 87, *Her.* 3.3).

<sup>8</sup>*Inv. rhet.* 2.157, see also 158-9, 166, *Part. or.* 86-7; *Part. or.* 90, *De or.* 334; see also Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.8.2.

<sup>9</sup>"President Clinton's Address on Bosnia - 11/27/95," Internet <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/html/bosnia.html>.

<sup>10</sup>*Inv. rhet.* 2.173.

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