



TREATISE ON THE
COMMONWEALTH

CICERO

Treatise on the Commonwealth

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Treatise on the Commonwealth, Cicero
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PREFACE BY THE EDITOR.

This work was one of Cicero's earlier treatises, though one of those which was most admired by his contemporaries, and one of which he himself was most proud. It was composed 54 b.c. It was originally in two books: then it was altered and enlarged into nine, and finally reduced to six. With the exception of the dream of Scipio, in the last book, the whole treatise was lost till the year 1822, when the librarian of the Vatican discovered a portion of them among the palimpsests in that library. What he discovered is translated here; but it is in a most imperfect and mutilated state.

The form selected was that of a dialogue, in imitation of those of Plato; and the several conferences were supposed to have taken place during the Latin holidays, 129 b.c., in the consulship of Caius Sempronius, Tuditanus, and Marcus Aquilius. The speakers are Scipio Africanus the younger, in whose garden the scene is laid; Caius Lælius; Lucius Furius Philus; Marcus Manilius; Spurius Mummius, the brother of the taker of Corinth, a Stoic; Quintus Ælius Tubero, a nephew of Africanus; Publius Rutilius Rufus; Quintus Mucius Scævola, the tutor of Cicero; and Caius Fannius, who was absent, however, on the second day of the conference.

In the first book, the first thirty-three pages are wanting, and there are chasms amounting to thirty-eight pages more. In this book Scipio asserts the superiority of an active over a speculative career; and after analyzing and comparing the monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic forms of government, gives a preference to the first; although his idea of a perfect constitution would be one compounded of three kinds in due proportion.

There are a few chasms in the earlier part of the second book, and the latter part of it is wholly lost. In it Scipio was led on to give an account of the rise and progress of the Roman Constitution, from which he passed on to the examination of the great moral obligations which are the foundations of all political union.

Of the remaining books we have only a few disjointed fragments, with the exception, as has been before mentioned, of the dream of Scipio in the sixth.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST BOOK,

BY THE ORIGINAL TRANSLATOR.

Cicero introduces his subject by showing that men were not born for the mere abstract study of philosophy, but that the study of philosophic truth should always be made as practical as possible, and applicable to the great interests of philanthropy and patriotism. Cicero endeavors to show the benefit of mingling the contemplative or philosophic with the political and active life, according to that maxim of Plato—"Happy is the nation whose philosophers are kings, and whose kings are philosophers."

This kind of introduction was the more necessary because many of the ancient philosophers, too warmly attached to transcendental metaphysics and sequestered speculations, had affirmed that true philosophers ought not to interest themselves in the management of public affairs. Thus, as M. Villemain observes, it was a maxim of the Epicureans, "*Sapiens ne accedat ad rempublicam*" (Let no wise man meddle in politics). The Pythagoreans had enforced the same principle with more gravity. Aristotle examines the question on both sides, and concludes in favor of active life. Among Aristotle's disciples, a writer, singularly elegant and pure, had maintained the pre-eminence of the contemplative life over the political or active one, in a work which Cicero cites with admiration, and to which he seems to have applied for relief whenever he felt harassed and discouraged in public business. But here this great man was interested by the subject he discusses, and by the whole course of his experience and conduct, to refute the dogmas of that pusillanimous sophistry and selfish

indulgence by bringing forward the most glorious examples and achievements of patriotism. In this strain he had doubtless commenced his exordium, and in this strain we find him continuing it at the point in which the palimpsest becomes legible. He then proceeds to introduce his illustrious interlocutors, and leads them at first to discourse on the astronomical laws that regulate the revolutions of our planet. From this, by a very graceful and beautiful transition, he passes on to the consideration of the best forms of political constitutions that had prevailed in different nations, and those modes of government which had produced the greatest benefits in the commonwealths of antiquity.

This first book is, in fact, a splendid epitome of the political science of the age of Cicero, and probably the most eloquent plea in favor of mixed monarchy to be found in all literature.

BOOK I.

I. [Without the virtue of patriotism], neither Caius Duilius, nor Aulus Atilius,²⁹³ nor Lucius Metellus, could have delivered Rome by their courage from the terror of Carthage; nor could the two Scipios, when the fire of the second Punic War was kindled, have quenched it in their blood; nor, when it revived in greater force, could either Quintus Maximus²⁹⁴ have enervated it, or Marcus Marcellus have crushed it; nor, when it was repulsed from the gates of our own city, would Scipio have confined it within the walls of our enemies.

But Cato, at first a new and unknown man, whom all we who aspire to the same honors consider as a pattern to lead us on to industry and virtue, was undoubtedly at liberty to enjoy his repose at Tusculum, a most salubrious and convenient retreat. But he, mad as some people think him, though no necessity compelled him, preferred being tossed about amidst the tempestuous waves of politics, even till extreme old age, to living with all imaginable luxury in that tranquillity and relaxation. I omit innumerable men who have separately devoted themselves to the protection of our Commonwealth; and those whose lives are within the memory of the present generation I will not mention, lest any one should complain that I had invidiously forgotten himself or some one of his family. This only I insist on—that so great is the necessity of this virtue which nature has implanted in man, and so great is the desire to defend the common safety of our country, that its energy has continually overcome all the blandishments of pleasure and repose.

II. Nor is it sufficient to possess this virtue as if it were some kind of art, unless we put it in practice. An art, indeed, though not exercised, may still be retained in knowledge; but virtue consists wholly in its proper use and action. Now, the noblest use of virtue is the government of the Commonwealth, and the carrying-out in real action, not in words only, of all those identical theories which those philosophers discuss at every corner. For nothing is spoken by philosophers, so far as they speak correctly and honorably, which has not been discovered and confirmed by those persons who have been the founders of the laws of states. For whence comes piety, or from whom has religion been derived? Whence comes law, either that of nations, or that which is called the civil law? Whence comes justice, faith, equity? Whence modesty, continence, the horror of baseness, the desire of praise and renown? Whence fortitude in labors and perils? Doubtless, from those who have instilled some of these moral principles into men by education, and confirmed others by custom, and sanctioned others by laws.

Moreover, it is reported of Xenocrates, one of the sublimest philosophers, that when some one asked him what his disciples learned, he replied, "To do that of their own accord which they might be compelled to do by law." That citizen, therefore, who obliges all men to those virtuous actions, by the authority of laws and penalties, to which the philosophers can scarcely persuade a few by the force of their eloquence, is certainly to be preferred to the sagest of the doctors who spend their lives in such discussions. For which of their exquisite orations is so admirable as to be entitled to be preferred to a well-constituted government, public justice, and good customs? Certainly, just as I think that magnificent and imperious cities (as Ennius says) are superior to castles and villages, so I imagine that those who regulate such cities by their counsel and authority are far preferable, with respect to

real wisdom, to men who are unacquainted with any kind of political knowledge. And since we are strongly prompted to augment the prosperity of the human race, and since we do endeavor by our counsels and exertions to render the life of man safer and wealthier, and since we are incited to this blessing by the spur of nature herself, let us hold on that course which has always been pursued by all the best men, and not listen for a moment to the signals of those who sound a retreat so loudly that they sometimes call back even those who have made considerable progress.

III. These reasons, so certain and so evident, are opposed by those who, on the other side, argue that the labors which must necessarily be sustained in maintaining the Commonwealth form but a slight impediment to the vigilant and industrious, and are only a contemptible obstacle in such important affairs, and even in common studies, offices, and employments. They add the peril of life, that base fear of death, which has ever been opposed by brave men, to whom it appears far more miserable to die by the decay of nature and old age than to be allowed an opportunity of gallantly sacrificing that life for their country which must otherwise be yielded up to nature.

On this point, however, our antagonists esteem themselves copious and eloquent when they collect all the calamities of heroic men, and the injuries inflicted on them by their ungrateful countrymen. For on this subject they bring forward those notable examples among the Greeks; and tell us that Miltiades, the vanquisher and conqueror of the Persians, before even those wounds were healed which he had received in that most glorious victory, wasted away in the chains of his fellow-citizens that life which had been preserved from the weapons of the enemy. They cite Themistocles, expelled and proscribed by the country which he had rescued, and forced to flee, not to the Grecian ports which he had preserved, but to the bosom of the barbarous power which he had defeated. There is,

indeed, no deficiency of examples to illustrate the levity and cruelty of the Athenians to their noblest citizens—examples which, originating and multiplying among them, are said at different times to have abounded in our own most august empire. For we are told: of the exile of Camillus, the disgrace of Ahala, the unpopularity of Nasica, the expulsion of Lænas,²⁹⁵ the condemnation of Opimius, the flight of Metellus, the cruel destruction of Caius Marius, the massacre of our chieftains, and the many atrocious crimes which followed. My own history is by no means free from such calamities; and I imagine that when they recollect that by my counsel and perils they were preserved in life and liberty, they are led by that consideration to bewail my misfortunes more deeply and affectionately. But I cannot tell why those who sail over the seas for the sake of knowledge and experience [should wonder at seeing still greater hazards braved in the service of the Commonwealth].

IV. [Since], on my quitting the consulship, I swore in the assembly of the Roman people, who re-echoed my words, that I had saved the Commonwealth, I console myself with this remembrance for all my cares, troubles, and injuries. Although my misfortune had more of honor than misfortune, and more of glory than disaster; and I derive greater pleasure from the regrets of good men than sorrow from the exultation of the worthless. But even if it had happened otherwise, how could I have complained, as nothing befell me which was either unforeseen, or more painful than I expected, as a return for my illustrious actions? For I was one who, though it was in my power to reap more profit from leisure than most men, on account of the diversified sweetness of my studies, in which I had lived from boyhood—or, if any public calamity had happened, to have borne no more than an equal share with the rest of my countrymen in the misfortune—I nevertheless did not

hesitate to oppose myself to the most formidable tempests and torrents of sedition, for the sake of saving my countrymen, and at my own proper danger to secure the common safety of all the rest. For our country did not beget and educate us with the expectation of receiving no support, as I may call it, from us; nor for the purpose of consulting nothing but our convenience, to supply us with a secure refuge for idleness and a tranquil spot for rest; but rather with a view of turning to her own advantage the nobler portion of our genius, heart, and counsel; giving us back for our private service only what she can spare from the public interests.

V. Those apologies, therefore, in which men take refuge as an excuse for their devoting themselves with more plausibility to mere inactivity do certainly not deserve to be listened to; when, for instance, they tell us that those who meddle with public affairs are generally good-for-nothing men, with whom it is discreditable to be compared, and miserable and dangerous to contend, especially when the multitude is in an excited state. On which account it is not the part of a wise man to take the reins, since he cannot restrain the insane and unregulated movements of the common people. Nor is it becoming to a man of liberal birth, say they, thus to contend with such vile and unrefined antagonists, or to subject one's self to the lashings of contumely, or to put one's self in the way of injuries which ought not to be borne by a wise man. As if to a virtuous, brave, and magnanimous man there could be a juster reason for seeking the government than this—to avoid being subjected to worthless men, and to prevent the Commonwealth from being torn to pieces by them; when, even if they were then desirous to save her, they would not have the power.

VI. But this restriction who can approve, which would interdict the wise man from taking any share in the government beyond such as the occasion and necessity may

compel him to? As if any greater necessity could possibly happen to any man than happened to me. In which, how could I have acted if I had not been consul at the time? and how could I have been a consul unless I had maintained that course of life from my childhood which raised me from the order of knights, in which I was born, to the very highest station? You cannot produce *extempore*, and just when you please, the power of assisting a commonwealth, although it may be severely pressed by dangers, unless you have attained the position which enables you legally to do so. And what most surprises me in the discourses of learned men, is to hear those persons who confess themselves incapable of steering the vessel of the State in smooth seas (which, indeed, they never learned, and never cared to know) profess themselves ready to assume the helm amidst the fiercest tempests. For those men are accustomed to say openly, and indeed to boast greatly, that they have never learned, and have never taken the least pains to explain, the principles of either establishing or maintaining a commonwealth; and they look on this practical science as one which belongs not to men of learning and wisdom, but to those who have made it their especial study. How, then, can it be reasonable for such men to promise their assistance to the State, when they shall be compelled to it by necessity, while they are ignorant how to govern the republic when no necessity presses upon it, which is a much more easy task? Indeed, though it were true that the wise man loves not to thrust himself of his own accord into the administration of public affairs, but that if circumstances oblige him to it, then he does not refuse the office, yet I think that this science of civil legislation should in no wise be neglected by the philosopher, because all resources ought to be ready to his hand, which he knows not how soon he may be called on to use.