

The philosophical conceptions in the antic Rome and their influences on the evolution of personality

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Abstract

Although never amounted to the subtlety and depth of the Greeks, the Roman thinking, as well as diplomacy, being dominated by rigidity, lack of imagination and excessive formalism, the Roman philosophers have their role in shaping the concept of human dignity. This notion has been used since the early stage of Roman city foundation, its meaning being either of quality related to a high status occupied by the individual, or of moral virtue. According to Cicero's philosophy, dignity is based on the human capacity to reason, to be above its own sensuality, emotions, impulses, on self control and on the fact that man leads the world and the rest of the animals. Seneca believes that the supreme moral value of man is virtue, philosophy is the pursuit of virtue, for straightening spirit, and the two concepts - virtue and philosophy - can not exist one without the other. For Ulpian, the will to carry out justice, to give every man what is his, came from a rational source of a man convinced of the ideal of moral good. Ulpian has also determined law's precepts as: *honeste vivere* (a decent living), *alterum non laedere* (not to hurt anyone), *sum cuique tribuere* (to give everyone what is his). In the conception of Gaius, the law of nations was established by natural reason, belonging equally to all citizens. Ancient Roman philosophy is

characterized by the analysis of two moral qualities that man has - reason and virtue, values which characterize the concept of human dignity.

Key words: dignity, virtue, law, philosophy, human being.

Although it had never reached the level of Greek development, the Roman thinking, along with the law and diplomacy, was dominated by rigidity, lack of imagination and excessive formalism, and the Roman philosophers had a well-determined part in the shaping and the affirmation of the human dignity.

The moral basis for the development of the Roman state was represented by the belief that the emperor and the imperial power constituted a necessity for the entire world, as it used to be known during those times. The royalty, the republic, and later the empire, would represent a state that had taken the duty to get through the two important requests: to lead powerfully a wide territory, with a great number of individuals of different cultures, religions and languages, and to lead with permissiveness and ability a conglomerate of ethnicities, populations and peoples. Moreover, the structure of the Roman society was generally made of patricians and plebeians. The patricians („*populus romanus*”), originally being the members of the people who had founded Rome, constituted the class of those appointed with “full powers”, who used to exercise exclusively the leadership of “the social affairs”. The plebeians, originally the members of the autochthonous populations defeated by Rome (the remaining of the Ligurian population), to whom were added the people who practiced trade or different professions, represented the category that had been previously excluded from the political life.

In a world characterised by stratification, the concept of dignity was initially used with the meaning of hierarchic distinction, of attribute of the few (the patricians), as a quality through which they distinguished themselves from the ordinary people. Furthermore, dignity was considered by the Romans a moral quality recognised to an individual according to his merit and honour gained in the society,

a quality that could be lost or gain. Conceived as an attribute of the high officials, related to “the rank” and the honour resulted from a function or the social and political position (Donnelly, 2009: 15), “*dignitas*” had to be respected by the common people.

Nonetheless, we need to underline that from the incipient stage of the Roman city’s founding, the notion of dignity was also used with a different meaning from an individual’s simple attributing of a high status in a certain social order, from “the external aspect of the social role played by the person who claims respect and personifies the charisma and the respect that resides from the function, rank or personality” (Canicik, 2002: 19). Dignity was conceived as a virtue too, meaning that some, or all the people, had the potential to be endowed this virtue. Yet, the element that would confer value to a person and made the other respect him/her was the accomplishment of that potential.

Izhak Englart dates the appreciation of dignity according to the moral qualities of an individual, during Cicero: “Cicero was the first author who used the term “*dignity*” not with the traditional meaning of social statute, but with the purpose to describe generally the position of man in world, according to his nature itself – such is his rational capacity. The special quality, inherent for a rational being had been obviously recognised in Antiquity, long before Cicero, but he was the first who shaped the idea, basing it on the concept of dignity” (Englart, 2000: 1903-1904).

The philosophy of Cicero is centred on different ethical and moral values that he approaches in his works: About duties, About friendship, About the old age, About the supreme good and the supreme evil, About the nature of gods, About consolation, About state, About laws. In his works, Cicero uses the word “*dignitas*” with the meaning of rank or merit, not with the meaning of inherent dignity of the human being: “The dignity is someone’s virtuous authority that makes them being honoured with consideration and respect”. The term “*dignitas*” used by Cicero refers to the public dignity or the social position, with accent on the general value, the characteristics of the man, the manly physical aspect, the character.

Nevertheless, one time in *De officiis* (About the adequate deeds), Cicero mentioned the dignity that the human beings have, due to their nature: "But it is more important for any meticulous research of the adequate action to consider to what extent the human nature has priority, unlike the cattle or other animals; they do not experience pleasure (...). Consequently, there can be observed that the physical pleasure is not sufficiently valuable for the human's pre-eminence. Moreover, the nurturing of the body, if we consider that excellence and dignity belong to the human nature, the physical feeding should be measured as regarding the health and the strength, not the mere pleasure. But, at the same time, if we consider excellence and dignity as the human nature, we will recognise how shameful it is to live luxuriously, in a facile and spoiled manner, and how virtuous it is the living of a moderate, restrained and sober man" (*De officiis*). According to Cicero's philosophy, human dignity is founded on the man's capacity to think, to rise above his own sensuality, emotions, impulses, on self-control and on the fact that the man leads the world and the rest of the animals.

By promoting an ethical philosophy, Cicero considered that "the man's first duty is that to maintain himself in his natural state, then to keep for himself what is accordingly to the nature and to reject what it is contrary" (Cicero, 1983a: 125). The conformity with the nature represents the Supreme Good, yet, unlike the stoical, for whom not only reason counts, Cicero underlines that the man is made of soul and body, the latter need not to be neglected: "each sense has its virtues, because neither of the senses should be stopped from fulfilling its function of perceiving rapidly and easily what it is offered" (Cicero, 1983a: 149).

The socio-political and juridical conception of Cicero is also founded on the concept of Supreme Good, and the state cannot have on its basis something else but the moral: "The virtue is such a stringent human necessity and the desire to depend on the common welfare is so great, that their force defeated any forms of pleasure and inactivity" (Cicero, 1983b: 240). The political stability cannot exist

outside the social essence justice, through which the man acts more for the benefit of the others than of his own.

Regarding the optimal form of governing, Cicero considered it to be the monarchy led by a virtuous king, who had to be "like a father who takes care of his sons". The order in a state had to be provided with the help of the law, which was "the nature's supreme wisdom that orders us what to do and forbids what it is against it" (Cicero, 1983c: 374). According to Cicero, the Greek name of the law comes from the idea to "offer everyone what it is theirs", and the Latin name comes from the concept of "choosing". Considering the law one of the greatest assets of the humankind, he says that the laws emitted by the state have to be in a permanent relationship with the universal law, in order to assure the natural stabile basis of the society: "The law is what makes the difference between justice and injustice, formulated according to the universal nature, an old and original principle, towards which all the laws of the humans reach, by punishing the dishonest and protecting the decent"(Cicero, 1983c: 399).

An adept of the stoical philosophy, especially the Epicureanism, Seneca considered that the supreme moral value of the man is the virtue, the philosophy being the aspiration for virtue, for the improvement of spirit, the two - virtue and philosophy - not being able to exist one without the other. He promotes the individual's shedding of the appearances and his knowledge of the human nature's secrets. Without recommending the wise man to restrain from the political activity, Cicero recommends in *De tranquillitate animi*, to not trouble his tranquillity: "That who desires to gain his soul peace must not waste his energy either in the private life, or in the public one, and in whatever he does, to not surpass his strength and nature. On the contrary, he has to supervise himself to that extent that when the fortune smiles upon him and seems that it will bring him on the top of the wave, to be calm and to not push himself over the limitation of his powers. Because the measure of a full recipient is far more certain than of the one that overfills" (Popa, Dogaru, Dănișor, Gh. & Dănișor, D.C., 2002: 79).

As other stoics, Seneca also opts for equality as an ideal form of government, which is in concordance with the nature: “The royal spirit is that to recognise no other authority but that of the Reason. (...) the true royalty is the one that considers as a norm, as God himself in the administration of the Universe, the perfect Reason. On this condition, the people, «rebel animals», will be ready to follow the shown path, while refusing to be led by an arbitrary authority” (Grimal, 1992: 118).

What it is noticeable at the Latin thinkers is that they also defined the concept of law as referring to moral: the law is the art of good and equity („*jus est ars boni et aequi*”). The law was given to the people naturally, having an eternal and immutable character, as Cicero would note in “*De Republica*”: “It is a true law, the correct reason, according to the nature, spread in everyone, constant and eternal. It is not a different one in Rome, another in Athens, one now and another later, but only one eternal and never-changing law that will lead all the people, all the times”. The juridical law is called “*jus*”, and its contrary “*injuria*”. In its acceptance as a moral law, the law is called “*fas*” or “*rectum*”, and its contrary “*nefas*”. The Romans used to make the distinctions between the moral and the juridical duties, which emerge from a moral or a juridical law, in the same way that they would make the distinction between the moral and the strictly juridical rights.

For Ulpian, the justice was the will to give every man what it is due to him, and this will originated from an individual’s rational source, who was convinced by the ideal of the moral good (Danielopol, 1899: 7). In another definition, Ulpian placed the justice in a total dependence on the divinity, being considered the knowledge of the divine and human things. In his belief, there were three sources or divisions of the law: „*jus naturale*”, „*jus gentium*” and „*jus civile*”: “The private law consists of three parts; the natural law perceptions of the tribes and of the civil law”. The natural law is what nature offers to all the animals. Undoubtedly, this right is not proper to the human kind, but to all the animals that live on land, in water, or even the birds. The civil law does not estrange from the

natural law, or that of the tribes, but it does not follow in everything. Consequently, every time we put or take something out of the common law, we create our own law or the civil law". It was also Ulpian who defined the principle of law as being: „honeste vivere" (to live decently), „alterum non laedere" (to harm nobody), „suum cuique tribuere" (to give each person what they deserve). To sum up, Ulpian built his conception about law on his principles, starting from the natural moral law, and from the idea of good.

Gaius divided the civil law, specific for each city, and the tribes' law, which was established through the natural reason, belonging equally to all the citizens: thus, all the peoples recognise a particular law and a law common to all the inhabitants: "The right of every people, to establish for itself what it is particular, is called the civil law, that is the law proper for a city; while the law established by all the people through the natural reason, can be observed equally to all the peoples and it is called the tribe's law, that is the law adopted for all the nations"(Gauchet, 1985: 80).

In conclusion, we might say that the Romans cherished greatly the value of the individual as a moral being (Bloc & Cousin, 1925: 92). The conceptions of the Roman antique philosophers are noticeable through the development of two moral qualities of the man – ration and virtue, values that also characterise the concept of human dignity. The philosophical ideas of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, those promoted by stoicism, cynicism, epicureanism that influenced the thought of the Roman scholars, especially Cicero and Seneca, suffered a great change under the influence of Christianity, which had a great impact on the social and political condition of the society, transforming the old times into modern times.

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