

The Simile of the Talus in Cicero, De Finibus 3.54

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According to Aristotle, Plato in the *Republic* (at least when describing the communism of women and children) forgets the tenacity of traditional religious views.<sup>20</sup> In Plato's best city, there will still be murders, abuse, fights, etc. The communism of women and children, Aristotle argues in *Politics* 2.3–4, will not make a city one big, happy family. And since the citizens of this city will not know who their real family members are, their religious views (which will surely be the traditional ones), combined with these "impious" actions, will produce fear and shame—and thus distrust and alienation—thereby undercutting the unity of the city.<sup>21</sup>

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20. In the *Laws*, a later dialogue generally regarded as less utopian than the *Republic*, Plato does seem to take traditional religious views into consideration. See *Laws* 868b–869e, 871a–d, and Trevor J. Saunders, *Plato's Penal Code: Tradition, Controversy, and Reform in Greek Penology* (Oxford, 1991), 301–4.

21. I should like to thank Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Henry Richardson, Gerald Mara, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and criticisms. Any remaining errors are my own.

#### THE SIMILE OF THE *TALUS* IN CICERO, *DE FINIBUS* 3.54

In his discussion of the Stoic doctrine of things indifferent and preferred, Cicero has Cato use a simile involving the *talus*, one of the Roman forms of dice. The Romans had two forms of dice, and a game involving either was called an *alea*. The *tessera* was a cube bearing different marks on each side, as does our modern die, and it was thrown in threes. The other form of die was the *talus*, or knucklebone. The original *talus* was the knucklebone of certain animals, and later was made of other material in the same general shape, like the Greek ἀστράγαλος. The *talus* was rounded or pointed on its two ends, which were unmarked, and marked on the remaining four sides, of which two were apparently wider than the other two. The wider two sides bore the numbers three and four; the narrower two sides bore the numbers one and six. The *tali* were thrown in groups of four. The best throw, called a *Venus*,<sup>1</sup> revealed four different numbers; the worst throw, four of the same. But the point of the simile for Cicero's purposes concerns the shape of the *talus*, not the rules of the game itself. The simile is as follows:

... ut enim, inquit, si hoc fingamus esse quasi finem et ultimum, ita iacere talum, ut rectus assistat—qui ita talus erit iactus ut cadat rectus praepositum quiddam habebit ad finem, qui aliter, contra, neque tamen illa praepositio tali ad eum, quem dixi, finem pertinebit, sic ea quae sunt praeposita, referuntur illa quidem ad finem, sed ad eius vim naturamque nihil pertinent.<sup>2</sup>

... for it is, they say, as if we imagine that we have, as it were, the goal and end to throw the die so that it stands upright—and thus the die which will have been thrown so as to fall upright will have a certain preferred inclination towards that end; and the die thrown otherwise will have an inclination against that particular end; but nevertheless the preferred inclination of the die will not pertain at all to the stated goal of standing upright.

1. *OLD*, s.v. "Venus," 2b.

2. The punctuation of this passage follows that of M. R. Wright in her 1991 edition (Warminster).

In the same way those things which are preferred are so called in reference to the desired goal, but they have no bearing on the power and essential nature of that goal.<sup>3</sup>

The context, once again, is the distinction between things that are good or bad and those things that are neither but have some positive value, which Cicero calls *praeposita*, usually translated as “preferred.”

We will address two principal questions. In what position is Cicero imagining the *talus* to fall and lie? Can this simile shed any light on the problematic relationship between the “preferred indifferents” and virtue in the Stoic definition of the Good?

Some confusion stems from the number of positions that Cicero seems to count. He refers to the position *rectus assistere*, of “standing upright,” and that of *rectus cadere*, of “falling upright.” There also seems to be at least one more position denoted by the *aliter, contra*. There must be only two possible ultimate positions: one is upright, on one of the narrower long sides (numbered one and six), and the other is flat, on one of the wider sides (numbered three and four). All other positions are then intermediate.

In fact, Cicero seems to be focusing on only one ultimate position (*assistere rectus*) and two intermediate positions (*cadere rectus* and *aliter*). Most translators and commentators have understood it in this way, at least in part. In his note in the Loeb translation, H. A. Rackham says succinctly: “*cadere rectus*, to alight upright when thrown, would be the first stage towards *assistere rectus*, to remain standing upright.”<sup>4</sup> The intermediate position of landing upright momentarily is designated “falling upright” in Cicero’s terms, and it is a precursor to the *talus* standing upright, but it does not ensure that it will remain upright. The *talus* may, and probably will, fall flat.

Our interpretation sheds new light on Cicero’s point regarding the intermediate positions of the *talus*. There are virtually an infinite number of “intermediate positions” of the *talus* as it tumbles through space, but what matters is how it falls. The crucial point is that the intermediate positions are essentially different in kind from the ultimate position. This can easily be grasped by imagining a film of a skittering *talus* that is then cut up frame by frame, each frame representing one intermediate position. We can then clearly see how remote the first bounce in the first frame is from the ultimate position in the final frame. Cicero may embed an acknowledgement of the nearly innumerable intermediate positions in his laconic *aliter, contra*. On the other hand, Cicero concentrates only on the penultimate position in the words *cadere rectus*, which is the last intermediate position before the *talus* comes to rest. This penultimate position of the *talus* seems to manifest more of an “inclination” towards the goal of standing upright than any of the previous intermediate positions. But the fact that the penultimate position is the last intermediate position of the tumbling *talus* in no way distinguishes it from the other intermediate positions in their impermanence.

The simile underscores the parallel between the impermanence of all of the intermediate positions of the *talus*, even that of the penultimate position, and the impermanence of all “indifferents.” The “indifferents” need not be saved, since they in no way constitute the virtuous life. By their very nature, the “indifferents” have a limited duration, can be virtually infinite in number, and can all be lost. In the same way, the

3. Translations of this passage run the gamut, as one might expect. A little explanatory padding is usually necessary to make sense of it. For a particularly concise and incomprehensible translation, see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*<sup>2</sup> (California, 1986), 193.

4. Cicero, *De Finibus*, Loeb Classical Library (1931), 272.

*talus* can tumble temporarily through virtually numberless positions, and then roll onto one side penultimately before ultimately coming to rest permanently on that or another side.

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#### ACOUSTIC INTRATEXTS IN *AENEID* 7.122 AND 4.408

At Dido's banquet Aeneas emphatically re-creates the moment when he and the Trojan refugees first caught sight of their new homeland (3.522–24):

humilemque uidemus  
Italiam. Italiam primus conclamat Achates,  
Italiam laeto socii clamore salutant.

Servius' comment is right on the mark (*ad* 3.524): *ITALIAM tautologia usus est ad exprimendum adfectus navigantium.*

Prominent repetition of the same key word also occurs in Aeneas' attempt to explain to Dido his reluctant decision to leave Carthage (4.345–47):

sed nunc Italiam magnam Gryneus Apollo,  
Italiam Lyciae iussere capessere sortes;  
hic amor, haec patria est.

After the Trojans have arrived in Italy, Aeneas confirms that their quest is over. They have just eaten their "tables," exactly as Anchises (or the Harpies) had predicted (7.122–23):

hic domus, haec patria est. genitor mihi talia namque  
(nunc repeto) Anchises fatorum arcana reliquit.

The first hemistich of the initial verse is certainly intended to echo the climax of Aeneas' attempt at justifying his actions to Dido (4.347): *hic amor, haec patria est.* The second part of the verse introduces the paternal prophecy which certifies that the Trojans have arrived at their destined goal. It also contains an acoustic evocation of that land itself: *mihi TALIA*. The juxtaposition of the dative pronoun and the substantive-object of the verb is not fortuitous. I suggest that Vergil intended those who apply their imagination to the epic text to hear/read *Italia*—the specific reason for Aeneas' confidence.

A modest measure of support for that suggestion is provided by a verse from earlier in the epic. After Dido realizes that Aeneas is about to sail away from Carthage, Vergil addresses an apostrophe to the Queen (4.408): *quis tibi tum, Dido, cernenti talia sensus . . . !* Again, the immediately adjacent personal dative and its substantive-object (*cernenti TALIA*) yield *Italia*—the specific reason for Dido's despair.<sup>1</sup>

1. Servius' note to 4.408 deserves citation: "Totum hoc magna prosphonesi dictum est: plus enim est in re quam in verbis: quamvis enim totum dictum non sit, tamen et cogitatur et capitur ab auditore."