

Horace - Epistle VI Book 1: Ad Numicium

Post by "Joshua" of November 2, 2020 at 6:30 PM

Quote

Virtutem verba putas, ut

Lucum ligna?

Do you think virtue is only words, and a forest only firewood?

This is a striking passage out of one of Horace's most famous epistles.

The letter (to Numicia) seems to be asking two questions; *what is the good of life*, and, *how then should one live?*

He goes through a series of possible answers to the first, and then explores the necessary steps of acting upon each. If A, then B. If X, then Y.

This particular "if...then" I found to be interesting. The Loeb edition suggests that *lucum ligna putas* was a proverbial Latin expression of materialism. *Lucum* can mean forest, but also a grove sacred to the gods—which a materialist might consider through a purely economic lens. What follows is a suggestion to be diligent in the pursuit of wealth, and use it to buy leisure and pleasure.

This strikes me as another case where Horace is giving short shrift to Epicurus, but I'd be curious to know what others think. It seems to be yet another extreme, opposite 'tranquillism' and asceticism. Our poor philosophy was not made for so many contortions!

I'll summarize my own thinking:

1. I do not think that virtue is 'only words'. Virtue is not an end in itself, but it is a non sequitur to say that virtue is nothing. It is a means to an end, defined conditionally by the benchmark which is pleasure.
2. I do not think that a forest is 'only firewood'. I think that a forest is atoms and void, but that shouldn't stop us from assigning value to it other than the merely pecuniary. A forest is an ecology—a system of organic and inorganic relationships, and even kinships. It's a place, a little world, even for some a home.
3. Still less do I think that a materialist understanding of the universe suggests the heedless pursuit of wealth as the best mode of living. It might be that walking through the forest, studying its lifeways, climbing its trees, fording its streams, picking its fruits and flowers etc. provides more pleasure than the wealth accrued by cutting it down.