

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 2: Principles of the American Revolution

2.2 Primary Source

CICERO

Background: Cicero (106-43 B.C.) was a political theorist, a leading statesman in Ancient Rome, and the author of *De Officiis (On Duties)* and *The Tusculan Disputations*. Many key founders—including John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson—drew important lessons about happiness and virtue from Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. Today, we define happiness as the pursuit of short-term pleasure. In contrast, Cicero defined it as the pursuit of long-term virtue—requiring each of us to practice the four classical virtues (temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice) and use our powers of reason to convert our turbulent emotions into calm, rational ones.

Excerpt:

View the document on the National Constitution Center’s website [here](#).

Cicero, *The Tusculan Disputations*:

Virtue is the key to happiness. All men think that a divine power and divine nature exist [and] in every inquiry the unanimity of the races [or nations] of the world [or the common sense of all people] . . . lay the foundation of our happiness in the strength and greatness of our minds, in a contempt and disregard of all earthly things, and in the practice of every virtue. . . .

Human beings are flawed; reason helps us move past our flaws and commit to a life of virtue; this leads to self-control. As a rule, all men’s minds contain naturally an element of weakness, despondency, servility, a kind of nervelessness and flaccidity. Had human nature nothing else, no creature would be more hideous than man; but reason, the mistress and queen of the world, stands close at hand and striving by her own strength and pressing onward she becomes completed virtue. It is man’s duty to enable reason to have rule over that part of the soul which ought to obey. The whole, then, consists in this—that you should have command over yourself. . . .

We are all born with the ability to live virtuous lives, but the world corrupts us. The seeds of virtue are inborn in our dispositions and, if they were allowed to ripen, nature’s own hand would lead us on to the happiness of life; as things are, however, as soon as we come into the light of day and have been acknowledged, we at once find ourselves in a world of iniquity amid a medley of wrong beliefs, so that it seems as if we drank in deception with our nurse’s milk. . . .

These worldly influences lead us to distress; we must resist them if we want to live a peaceful, quiet, and happy life. It is wholly in an idea that we find the cause not merely indeed of distress but of all other disturbances as well. We must with all our might and main resist these disturbances which folly looses and launches like a kind of evil spirit upon the life of mankind, if we wish to pass our allotted span in peace and quiet. . . .

A virtuous life is one led by reason, not the passions. Virtue may be defined in a few words to be right reason itself, [while vice includes all the] turbid and violent motions of the mind,

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repugnant to reason, and enemies in a high degree to the peace of the mind and a tranquil life. .

. .

Reason will lead us to a virtuous and happy life. [T]he man, whoever he is, whose soul is tranquilized by restraint and consistency and who is at peace with himself, so that he neither pines away in distress, nor is broken down by fear, nor consumed with a thirst of longing in pursuit of some ambition, nor maudlin in the exuberance of meaningless eagerness—he is the wise man of whom we are in quest, he is the happy man who can think no human occurrence insupportable to the point of dispiriting him, or unduly delightful to the point of rousing him to ecstasy.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**