

In his *Epistles* 1.6, Horace invites his addressee to consider possible sources of “living well.” Virtue is the first possibility considered, but is immediately rejected: “You think virtue is <just> words, and a sacred grove is <just> timber” (*virtutem verba putas et / lucum ligna*, 1.6.31-2). My aim in this paper is to explore how we might best appreciate the force of this passage. The line closely recalls *Ep.* 1.17.42, where Horace contemplates that virtue may be an “empty name” (*virtus nomen inane est*). Porphyrio rightly calls attention to the Epicurean resonance of that position (cf. Epic. fr. [42] Arrighetti), but applying a doxographical label is not the best way to make meaning of Horace’s handling of philosophical and popular ethics. The doxographical background is certainly relevant, but here I begin rather from a close reading of *Ep.* 1.6. To say that a sacred grove is just timber might mean, as in the modern proverb about “failing to see the forest for the trees,” that one fails to grasp the whole constituted by the parts. But it seems more promising to emphasize the contrast between the sacred quality of the grove, which is consecrated to a super-human being, and the reduction of that grove to building supplies. This reduction is crassly materialistic, suggesting both the pursuit of financial gain that occupies the next sixteen lines (1.6.32-48) and, more importantly, the evacuation of religious and civic meaning from the landscape. The heart of this paper is dedicated to sketching the analogue to this reduction in terms of virtue (here analogous to “sacred grove”), mere words (here analogous to “timber”), and the realm of linguistic behavior which constitutes the “landscape.” The theoretical skeleton on which I flesh out this analogy is loosely existentialist and pragmatist, meaning I am interested both in the feeling of the world created by this perspective and on the opportunities and obligations it creates for action. In order to illuminate the passage, I make comparisons with Epicurean and Cyrenaic thinking about virtue, with *Ep.* 1.17, and also with the last words attributed to Brutus—Horace’s commander at Philippi—by Dio Cassius (47.49.2, cited by Mayer 1994: 150): “Alas poor virtue, you were <but> words, but I practiced you as deed” (ὦ τλήμων ἀρετή, λόγος ἄρ’ ἦσθ, ἐγὼ δὲ σε ὡς ἔργον ἥσκου). My paper concludes with a brief consideration of how this way of looking at virtue fits within the ethical project constituted by *Epistles* 1 as a whole. For this I draw on Courbaud, McGann, Mayer, Johnson, and especially Moles.

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