Book Reviews

Orazio Cappello, *The School of Doubt: Skepticism, History and Politics in Cicero's Academica*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019. Pp. xiii + 382. ISBN: 978-90-04-38986-1.

In this ambitious and wide-ranging monograph, Cappello [hereafter C] seeks to place Cicero's *Academica* in its wider literary, historical and political context, and to explore the ways that an appreciation of those contexts can help inform our understanding of the work itself and its position in Cicero's philosophical output.

The monograph is arranged in three Parts. Part 1 focuses on Cicero's correspondence around the time of the composition of the *Academica*, including, of course, as a source for Cicero's decision to recast the work into four books rather than the original two. C's discussion, however, encompasses not just the letters that relate explicitly to the writing of the *Academica*, but those that bear on it more indirectly as well. C argues for a formal continuity between the respective epistolary and dialogic structures of the letters and the *Academica* itself; and he makes the case that we should see these letters not just as historical documentation of the process of composing the *Academica*, but as a self-conscious effort by Cicero to begin shaping how we as readers see the work.

Part 2 focuses on Cicero's attitude towards the history of philosophy, arguing that we should regard the *Academica* as revealing a deep Ciceronian engagement with philosophy's relation to its past. C builds a picture of a Cicero who uses this relation to carve out a space for the *Academica* as inheritor of a mainstream tradition of philosophising, a tradition that the work thereby shows itself to be ideally placed to carry forward and develop in a Roman context.

In Part 3, C turns more closely to the content of the *Academica* and, in particular, the vexed question of what form of scepticism it espouses. C comes down on the 'radical' side of the 'radical vs. mitigated' debate, while seeking to offer a fresh perspective on the nature of Cicero's 'radical doubt'.

As C himself emphasises, the *Academica* is a peculiarly challenging work to interpret. It is not just that we only have parts of the work (albeit some

substantial ones), but some of the parts we have are from the first, and some from the second, 'edition'. C has some interesting and sensitive discussion of the saga, as recorded in the letters, of Cicero's revision of the work, and of what it means to speak of 'publication' at this time and place. He does not seem as beset by doubt as he perhaps might have been about the evidentiary value of the original two-book version, of which we possess only the second book (the *Lucullus*). The latter is of course of incalculable value in tracing both the history of ancient scepticism and Cicero's engagement with it. On the other hand, in a work as concerned as C's is to present a Cicero who is endeavouring to locate the *Academica* as both the rightful heir of a Greek philosophical tradition and the beginning of a properly Roman one, the fact that so much of our evidence is based on the version that, it seems, Cicero didn't want us to see, suggests a greater reckoning with the phenomenon of history as accident than C cares to give us.

That aside, C's approach to the *Academica* is a welcome and refreshing one. Rather than see the work as principally an abstruse technical discussion—Cicero's contribution to logic and epistemology in his 'encyclopedia'—C treats it much more holistically, as a composition that springs from, and is deeply connected with, its Roman milieu, serving both as a reflection of and a response to the intellectual and political climate of its day. While there will not, I think, be need for major reassessment of Cicero as a philosophical author as a result of C's efforts in regard to the *Academica*, what he does achieve with distinction is a sewing in of the work into a wider picture of Cicero as an author who is not a servant of his philosophical inheritance but a creative appropriator, driven by a quest to fashion a place both for himself and for philosophy in the chaotic history of (as we now label it) late Republican Rome.

That said, it wasn't always clear to me how C's reading of Cicero's response to the Roman crisis was supposed to work. C suggests—here in the context of the letters, but later applied to the *Academica* itself—that "Cicero emerges as primarily interested in reacting to the anarchy and uncertainties of his world and in situating his philosophy of doubt as a potential response to it. Ciceronian skepticism ... enacts the pursuit of a way to deal with instability" (61). To this an immediate riposte might be: why would a "philosophy of doubt"—by which C seems to mean, roughly, a philosophy characterised by rejection of certainty and avowal of doubt as a core epistemological approach—be a way of *dealing with* instability? Would not espousal of a position that offers the prospect (as the Stoics did) of certainty being attainable constitute a more hopeful response to chaos than one that apparently validates the situation by contending that doubt is the best one can epistemically achieve?

Here C's response is subtle and ingenious, if not altogether convincing. He argues that Cicero "finds a language and a means to develop a community committed to dialogue" (80). Later sections of the monograph offer careful elaboration of what it means to form such a "community of practice" (136). C argues that Cicero dramatises the debate between Zeno and Arcesilaus as a "search for shared premises," thereby "drawing the reader's attention to the co-operative and constructive nature of that interaction" (267). C contends that the figures of both Arcesilaus and Carneades are deployed by Cicero "to establish the paradigm of a co-operative form of philosophy" (271).

In short, Cicero, on C's reading, conceptualises "Hellenistic philosophy [as] nothing but an expression of Academic debates. Divisions, discord and tensions are a quintessential part of that Academic fabric" (284). C goes on to speak of Cicero setting up a "narrative paradigm of continuous debate and self-contradiction that offers a strategic position from which to embrace—absorb, even—the history of philosophy" (*ibid.*). C evidently does not attempt to present the 'community' which, in his view, Cicero advocates by the device of framing the history of philosophy as setting its norms, as one characterised entirely by shared premises and agreement. There will be a significant, indeed essential, residue of critical, open-ended debate, underwritten epistemologically by a disavowal of certainty. More precisely, Cicero is "encouraging a doubting attitude without prescribing it" (312).

I have no quarrel with C's imputing to Cicero the idea of casting the history of philosophy as constitutive of a community of practice that will license his sceptical approach as the rightful inheritor of that history. Moreover, the notion of a community seems in principle to be along the right lines for combating social fracture and division. But how would *this* community, predicated as it is on continuous debate and encouragement of doubt, do more than simply reflect the fragmentation that we started with? Cicero's withdrawal of epistemic certainty and his substituting of an alternative epistemic approach "stand," according to C, "as coping responses to the socio-political uncertainty" (339). Yet it remains unclear just why Cicero should opt for this as a coping strategy—why indeed it is a form of coping at all—rather than insist that certainty is, after all, possible and that reaching for it is what will extricate us from the chaos. Taking refuge in the latter sort of stance is, after all, hardly an unfamiliar reflex in times of crisis.

C does seem implicitly to be aware of the difficulty. His final verdict is that "the *Academica* represents the fine balancing act between an expression of private despair and the search for a collective way out" (339). As with 'community', so too the semantic overtones of 'collective' give a superficial appearance

of something being invoked that will by its nature stand against chaos and crisis—a balancing out of “private despair.” But without more analysis than we get from C of how exactly such notions are meant to do substantive work for Cicero, I am not sure that I see what is grounding, in this form, such a way out.

There is, I think, a further tension that arises in C’s appeal on Cicero’s behalf to the collective: how does C reconcile that emphasis with what seems to be an equal emphasis, in his reading of Cicero’s project, on the importance of the individual? As with the issue of explaining how a community of critical debaters is supposed to be a means of addressing crisis, so too here it is not that one cannot reconcile a concern for the collective with a recognition of the importance of the individual: one might think that any decent social or political framework would have to offer a way of encompassing both. But I saw little sign, in C’s characterisation of Cicero’s approach, of a sense that there is a *prima facie* tension between the two that may need reconciling.

Thus C speaks of Cicero’s method as one that “privileges the subjective or personal experience of the individual thinker; and that celebrates philosophical enquiry as the practice of a transhistorical community” (119). One rather expects in what follows to receive an explanation of how the ‘privileging’ of the individual, on the one hand, and the ‘celebrating’ of the community, on the other, are to work together. Instead what one mainly finds are statements that appear to raise, without acknowledging, that very issue. So C states that Cicero’s approach is “predicated on a network of individuals who collaborate and drive the discipline forward, even if from conflicting standpoints” (170). C then proceeds to say that “Cicero’s design hands pride of place to the individual” (*ibid.*).

Yet we also find a Cicero who, for C, is aiming “to create a philosophical community through the work” (212) and “to establish the paradigm of a co-operative form of philosophy” (271). But then again, we read that “Cicero’s brand of skepticism centers the debate back onto the individual” (312) and that “Ciceronian skepticism ... depends on ... its grounding in the individual and her or his experience of the world” (325). Retrospectively, C asserts that his reading nonetheless found in Ciceronian philosophy “reason and dialogue as the basis for shaping a network of readers and philosophers into a community” (337–338).

I think the problem here, as before, is identifying what weight is being placed by C on the notion of a community. If we take a rather thin conception coordinate with the idea of a network of individuals with (possibly) conflicting standpoints, then it looks as if relatively straightforward room can be made for the privileging of the individual, while leaving it obscure how *that* conception is supposed to serve as the basis for a response to social crisis. If, on the other

hand, weight is placed on the idea of shaping a body that can function in a co-operative and collaborative way, then it becomes less clear in what way the idea of privileging the experience of the individual has purchase.

One final thought on community. It seems to me that there is a ghost at the feast here: the Epicureans. They receive scant attention in C's discussion, and that mainly in relation to their views on sense-perception and knowledge. At one level this is understandable, a reflection of their subordinate role in the *Academica* in comparison with the centrality of the Academic-Stoic debate. But one cannot help wondering whether C should have spent a little more time in consideration of the one Hellenistic school fashioned self-consciously as a community. It seems no accident that *this* community was based on a thoroughgoing like-mindedness that stands in contrast to C's reading of a paradigm Ciceronian community characterised by dissension and debate. There might be mileage here for further exploration of whether it is the Ciceronian, rather than Epicurean, paradigm that shows after all why we need the idea of a community in the first place.

My focus on this aspect of C's work, while critical, also serves to illustrate the way in which his investigation of the *Academica* represents, itself, something of a paradigm-shift. By seeking to integrate the work as comprehensively as he does into Cicero's wider concerns, C opens up fresh fields of interpretation. The monograph does bear some signs of its origins as a doctoral thesis, in its sometimes rather lengthy expositions of secondary literature, and in its invoking of methodological frameworks (from Derrida, Rorty, MacIntyre and Cavell, to name but a few of the more recent) that, for this reader at least, didn't necessarily pull illuminative weight in a Ciceronian context. I rather wish that C had at times allowed himself more unmediated access to Cicero's texts. But make no mistake: in its scope and seriousness of purpose this painstaking and stimulating study sets new standards for interpreting the *Academica*. Cicero scholars, and anyone interested in why scepticism matters, will be in its debt.

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