

Book Reviews



Raphael Woolf

Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Sceptic. New York: Routledge, 2015. Pp. viii + 260.
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It may seem odd that scholars have worked so hard at reconstructing the views of Hellenistic philosophers from the few surviving fragments and testimonia while ignoring or even dismissing this task when it comes to Cicero, whose extant philosophical dialogues are extensive by comparison and who has left such a deep imprint on the history of ideas. Despite a significant increase in attention paid to Cicero the philosopher, he still occupies a much lower position today than at any point prior to Mommsen's contemptuous assessment of his character and work over 150 years ago.

Raphael Woolf's engaging and thoughtful study serves as an important corrective by documenting the rewards of reading Cicero as a philosopher in his own right. Woolf demonstrates that we still have much to learn from Cicero not only regarding the content of competing Hellenistic philosophical theories, but from his understanding of the nature and purpose of philosophical inquiry in general. Both students and scholars of the history of philosophy should find this book of considerable value. As the goal is to provide a coherent overview of Cicero's philosophical outlook, there is no discussion of secondary literature or scholarly controversies. There is, however, a great deal of detailed engagement with Cicero's core philosophical dialogues—*Academica*, *On the Nature of the Gods*, *On Divination*, *On Fate*, *Republic*, *Laws*, *On Ends*, *On Duties*, and *Tusculan Disputations*.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Cicero's project, and a brief account of what Woolf takes to be its distinctive themes. Chief among these is the attempt to substantiate philosophy's promise to improve the lives of actual, imperfect human beings while respecting both the universalist aspirations of rational inquiry and the parochial sensibilities of his readers. To Romanize Greek philosophy requires more than linguistic translation; cultural adaptations are required as well. First and foremost, Cicero's readers need to be convinced of the importance and value of philosophy.

Chapter 2 explores epistemology and the Academic method of inquiry. Cicero notes that we all must start from somewhere as we set out in search of wisdom, but making decisions about which school to follow is hardly a suitable task for a beginner (cf. *Acad.* II 9). As an Academic skeptic, Cicero refuses to bind himself to any philosophical system that would require him to defend something simply because it is part of that system. Instead, he seeks to develop in himself and his readers the skill of rational adjudication through the practice of argument pro and contra. This insistence on the authority of an individual's informed, rational judgment is more fundamental than any particular cultural authority. So here, it seems to me, at the foundation of Cicero's philosophical project, the universalist aspiration is most apparent.

The constraints of Roman culture come to light when we turn to the discussion of the nature of the gods and fate (Chapter 3), the best political system (Chapter 4), the proper understanding of virtue and external goods and their roles in a flourishing life (Chapter 5), and the nature of emotion and its role in a flourishing life (Chapter 6).

In *De Natura Deorum*, for example, Woolf takes Cicero to be highlighting the apparent incompatibility of the authority of tradition and culture on the one hand, and the impersonal authority of reason on the other, especially with regard to the Stoic attempt to provide a rational foundation for theology. But even if Roman religion cannot be fully rationalized, as the Academic character Cotta argues, it continues to play an integral and perhaps indispensable role in promoting social cohesion and cultural identity. As long as we maintain the importance of religion's positive social function we are led to acknowledge a serious limitation on the authority of reason, rooted in contingent facts about human life. The lesson we are to learn from this, Woolf thinks, is not to abandon reason for the sake of comforting illusions, but to adopt a more modest outlook on what reason has in fact accomplished, and to extend that caution to what reason may in fact accomplish, at least with regard to our understanding of the divine.

Cicero's concern with the contingency and particularity of human life is prominent in his works of political philosophy, though even here we find the aspirations of Stoic cosmopolitanism and universal, natural law. The ideal statesman and the ideal mixed constitution that are defended in *De Republica* are the products of Cicero's extensive personal involvement in, and disappointment with, Roman politics as well as a thorough grounding in Greek philosophical theory. These ideals are not offered as the final, conclusive word, but rather as useful tools for the assessment of real politicians and guidance for would-be politicians. Central to Cicero's view, according to Woolf, is the recognition of the need for constant striving and a willingness to revise and