
Review Essay

Advent Cicero

Daniel J. Kapust

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA.

djkapust@wisc.edu

Cicero's Skepticism and his Recovery of Political Philosophy

Walter Nicgorski

Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016, xviii+283 pp.,

ISBN: 978-1-137-58478-6

Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Skeptic

Raphael Woolf

Routledge, Milton Park and New York, 2015, vii+260 pp.,

ISBN: 978-1-84465-841-1

Contemporary Political Theory (2018) **17**, S164–S170. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0144-9>; published online 14 August 2017

Cicero is undoubtedly the most important Roman political thinker, yet he has not always been appreciated by political theorists. An eclectic who aimed to bring (Greek) philosophy to the Romans, he has been seen as derivative, incoherent, excessively patriotic, reflexively conservative, or a self-justifying politician. Eric Voegelin's remark is illustrative: for him, Cicero 'with a sneer dismissed the best polities of the Hellenic philosophers as fancies of no importance by the side of the best polity that was created on the battlefields by the *imperatores* of Rome' (cited by Nicgorski, 2016, p. 162). Cicero still seems to be a distant third to his two great Greek predecessors – Plato and Aristotle.¹ The books reviewed here – Nicgorski's 2016 *Cicero's Skepticism and his Recovery of Political Philosophy* and Woolf's 2015 *Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Skeptic* – will do much to remedy this situation.

Prior to turning to the books, it is worth situating them in broader developments. Scholarly interest in Roman political thought has grown steadily over the last two decades, with a range of books and articles published by classicists, philosophers, and political theorists. This stands in marked contrast to the 20th century, when interest in the Romans was limited, to say the least. The initial surge in interest can be traced to research on the republican tradition and the turn to classical rhetoric by scholars dissatisfied with Habermasian or Rawlsian accounts of deliberative democracy.²



More recently, though, Roman political thought has become a timely object of study in its own right; one might note Benjamin Straumann's (2016) masterful *Crisis and Constitutionalism*, which grapples with the constitutional crisis of the late Republic. Few periods are as worthy of study today as the late Roman Republic: obsessed with their own decline, Romans grappled with fragmented elite politics, declining faith in institutions, political violence, and the rise of self-styled political outsiders with little regard for norms constraining elite behavior.

What, then, about Cicero? Cicero is the best known figure from antiquity, with hundreds of his letters being preserved, along with more than 50 speeches, and roughly 20 works on rhetoric and various branches of philosophy. While others have brought Cicero to contemporary political theory through a focus on his rhetoric,³ Woolf and Nicgorski do so through a focus on his skepticism, and thus his status as an academic. Cicero's skepticism, though, poses a paradox: how can he defend principles, whether in his writing or in his political actions, while denying certainty? What makes one opinion – let alone the form of a polity – more valuable than another? And if we wind up merely affirming what is probable, or *probabile* in the Latin, why should we engage in philosophy at all? These are questions of contemporary importance, living as we do in a moment in which political theorists and philosophers have increasingly turned away from foundationalism.

Woolf (2015) and Nicgorski (2016) answer these questions, and others, in their studies of Cicero. Woolf, an ancient philosopher, focuses on Cicero by philosophical theme: on epistemology, theology and metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and moral psychology. Nicgorski, a political theorist, develops a systematic reading of Cicero, arguing for a 'profound unity' in his thought rooted in his 'practical perspective' and a 'certain concept of utility' (p. 5). Woolf's focus is 'Cicero's core philosophical writings,' and he does not discuss Cicero's 'letters, speeches or treatises on rhetoric' (p. 8); Nicgorski engages a wide range of Cicero's works, including letters, speeches, and treatises. Whereas Nicgorski's argument develops in tandem with and by engaging a variety of scholarship on Cicero, Woolf does not deal 'explicitly with the growing body of secondary literature on various aspects of Cicero's philosophical thought' (p. 8). These differences indicate the nature and audience of their projects. Woolf seeks to develop 'a cogent reading of Cicero's philosophical works both individually and as a whole' (p. 8), and would seem to be grappling with a reluctance in his readers to view Cicero as a philosopher worthy of study: 'Cicero is no Plato or Aristotle; but what I hope to show...is that he is a thoughtful and sophisticated writer, whose works can and should be read as coherent bodies of philosophical reflection that use...the views and arguments of others to stimulate readers to think through issues for themselves' (p. 2). Nicgorski, by contrast, joins his study to 'the renaissance in the Cicero studies of the last two generations' (pp. 248–249), spending little time justifying Cicero as an object worthy of study.

With an introduction like that, it might seem that I come to bury Woolf, not to praise him, but this is not the case. Writing for the Routledge series *Philosophy in the*



Roman World, Woolf develops very interesting arguments about Cicero – especially regarding his moral philosophy. Woolf strikes me as arguing against a certain understanding of philosophy, particularly one with ‘aspirations to universality’ (p. 6), emphasizing instead (and rightly) that ‘Romans, like all humans – essentially social creatures, as Cicero will insist – are shaped by the history and traditions of the society to which they belong’ (p. 6). Although perhaps a truism in some quarters, especially to those who have read Charles Mills or Carole Pateman, it may need to be said to a reader with a narrow understanding of what constitutes philosophy. But it is precisely this fact about Cicero that leads others to denigrate him as ‘harking back to the good old days of virtuous leadership and stable republican institutions, while lambasting the moral and political decay of his own time’ (p. 7).

Woolf’s study is a portrait of Cicero, rooted in his Academic Skepticism, which highlights a deep concern with the tensions between the universal and the particular. So, for instance, in discussing Cicero’s writings about religion (Chapter 3: ‘God, Fate and Freedom’), Woolf notes that Cicero’s understanding of religion as a buttress of the ‘social order’ (p. 35) stands in tension with his own skeptical inquiry into it, as it might ‘undermine cornerstones of Roman culture and identity’ (p. 37). In Chapter 4, ‘The Best Form of Government,’ Cicero’s love of Rome, and his embrace of what Woolf terms ‘Roman exceptionalism,’ is in tension with his natural law arguments in *On the Laws* that humans are ‘citizens of the world’ (p. 96). *On the Laws* and *On the Republic* show Cicero at the ‘intersection of two realms – philosophy...and...Rome’ (p. 124). Philosophy’s universal aspirations clash with the embodied and social nature of humans in Cicero’s account of moral psychology (Chapter 6: ‘The Role of the Emotions’), which centers on the *Tusculan Disputations*. Woolf writes that ‘no sensible person...can argue pain away, as the Stoics do, or pretend it can be safely avoided, as the Epicureans claim’ (p. 216). Instead, one must meet life’s inevitable suffering with ‘fortitude,’ and philosophy requires ‘factors outside of itself’ to inculcate fortitude and prepare us for suffering (p. 217). Inculcating virtue requires that we recognize, and engage with, those who ‘are fallible,’ and who ‘may need more than theory to change their lives’ (p. 225).

The uneasy relationship between ‘theory and practice’ is especially pronounced, and brilliantly explored, in the most engaging chapter of Woolf’s study: Chapter 5: ‘The Good Life in Theory and Practice’. Dealing with *On Moral Ends* and *On Duties*, Woolf describes a Ciceronian ethic centered on ‘transparency’ (p. 196). This ethic is evident in Cicero’s rejection of Epicureanism. To be sure, Cicero thinks the Epicureans have an unattainable conception of pleasure as the ‘freedom from pain’ (p. 138), but more importantly, he thinks that Epicureans cannot quite live their lives *qua* Epicureans, at least not if they want to take part in the Roman political community. Being an Epicurean means pursuing one’s own pleasure, which makes it difficult to take part in public life. The only solution is to ‘live a lie’ (p. 147), for Cicero. Maintaining a lie of such proportion is profoundly stressful,



and such effort would impede a pleasant Epicurean life. After all, as Shakespeare writes in *Hamlet* II.2:

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.

Keeping murder, or any other concealed behavior, from speaking will be quite unpleasant indeed. The Stoics, too, are not immune from such a critique: given the bizarre and counterintuitive qualities of Stoic doctrines, they cannot proclaim their views in the public sphere, as their ‘doctrines are obscure’ (p. 159). Nor can the Stoics actually persuade people to be Stoics, given how ‘unappealing’ their style is, and the fact that style is ‘inseparable from substance’ (p. 159). The tension between the universal – metaethical theories with single ends – and the particular – metaethical theories with plural ends – leads to an apparent choice between unlivable and incoherent theories. Cicero, on Woolf’s reading, develops a pluralistic ‘anti-theory’ (p. 169) in *On Duties*, honing in on ‘flexible guidelines’ rather than fixed ‘principles,’ emphasizing the performative dimensions of transparency: ‘the good life is the one that can be lived openly’ (p. 199).

Such a reading of Cicero is profoundly interesting, and original; unfortunately, because Woolf does not develop his interpretation within the boundaries of scholarship on Cicero’s ethics, the argument loses some of its punch. This has to do with Woolf’s choice not to embed his argument within an engagement of Cicero scholarship: the desire to develop a coherent reading appealing to a broad audience could undermine the extent to which Woolf is (clearly, in my view) contributing to scholarship on Cicero. And while I am persuaded by Woolf’s emphasis on integrity and transparency, I was struck by his claim that Cicero embraces a kind of pluralism in *On Duties*, recognizing that humans are ‘infinitely diverse’ (p. 173) and showing that he is ‘fundamentally individualist’ (p. 178) to the degree that ‘every sort of character and talent can and should have the opportunity to flourish’ (p. 178). Cicero is no such individualist, and I would point to two factors in *On Duties* that give me pause. First, in articulating his four *personae* theory, which structures his account of what is seemly and unseemly behavior, only one of the roles we play is what ‘we choose for ourselves by our own decision’ (Cicero, 1991, p. 45). Logically and temporally prior are human nature, our particular characteristics, and what we have been given by fortune; these strongly limit our choices. Moreover, whether we can choose a particular way of life with honor is limited by social and status expectations. He explicitly rules out as unfitting ‘for a free man’

those means of livelihood that dislike of other men...for example collecting harbour dues, or usury. Again, all those workers who are paid for their labour and not for their skill have servile and demeaning employment...Those who buy from merchants and sell again immediately should also be thought of as demeaning themselves (Cicero, 1991, I.150).



Worst of all, though, are those ‘that minister to the pleasures: fishmongers, butchers, cooks, poulterers, fishermen’ (Cicero, 1991, I.150). This is not to say that Cicero does not allow for a variety of ways of living, but it is to say that he is not as strong of an individualist as Woolf suggests.

If Woolf’s book is geared towards a broader audience who might harbor suspicions about Cicero for being insufficiently philosophical, Nicgorski writes with an eye to recent literature on Cicero. And while his book is rooted in broader debates, it also constitutes an effort to address ‘a postmodernity widely characterized both by foundational doubts and by yearnings for defenses of democratic practices and commitments’ (p. 1). Indeed, Nicgorski’s book is part of a Palgrave Macmillan series, *Recovering Political Philosophy*, which its editors describe as engaging with ‘postmodernism’s challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives,’ and featuring attention to ‘censorial persecution and didactic concerns’ that lead certain writers to communicate strategically (p. vii). The series seeks to ‘recover the classical grounding for civic reason’ (p. vii).

Yet the book is by no means polemical, nor is its interpretation esoteric; rather, Nicgorski seeks to work through the unity of Cicero’s thought – Cicero’s critical appropriation of philosophy for Rome, or his ‘recovering political philosophy’ (p. 1) – by focusing on the ‘foundational importance’ (p. 16) of his skepticism for his philosophy writ large. As he shows in the first chapter, ‘Skepticism, Politics, and a Philosophical Foundation,’ Cicero, unlike Descartes, does not deploy skepticism to lead to ‘certain knowledge’ (p. 20), but maintains his skeptical outlook throughout his inquiries. What allows Cicero to break out of the ‘cycle of opinion’ (p. 22) is his ‘practical perspective’ (p. 32), which foregrounds our ‘natural moral sensibility’ (p. 33). Humans ‘have lived before we begin to understand how we have lived’ (p. 33), and so philosophical inquiry, guided by the moral sense, focuses on ends, inquiry into which is in turn ‘the foundation of all philosophy’ (p. 36). Cicero, in other words, confronts the problem of deep skepticism, deploying the moral sense to defend positions without relying on claims of certainty, but instead relying on human needs and facts about human development.

The implications of Cicero’s skepticism for his thought emerge over the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2, ‘The Critical and Rhetorical Modes of Philosophy,’ explores the seemingly fraught relationship between Cicero’s two goals for philosophy: ‘seeking the truth’ or the critical mode (p. 59), and serving as a ‘guide and comfort in the conduct of life’ or the rhetorical mode (p. 60). Socrates is the ‘instantiation of the critical doubting and questioning spirit of philosophy, with the realization of the fruit of philosophy in truths of a way of life’ (p. 60). One can be assured of the validity of Socrates’s argument because of his practice; thus, *perfecta philosophia* means that the ‘art of rhetoric is incorporated in the very work of philosophy as rhetoric is...in the service of philosophy’ (p. 73). It is, then, no



accident that Cicero the philosopher is also Cicero the orator, and that the academy to which he gave his allegiance ‘encouraged the simultaneous practice of oratory’ (p. 80). Chapter 3, ‘Duties and Virtue,’ hones in on ‘what is to be done’ (duty) and ‘seeking to do it’ (virtue) (p. 99). The fact of human sociality and embeddedness guides Cicero’s understanding of ‘our awareness of duties to be prior to any clear general conception of the supreme good’ (p. 100). *On Duties*, in this account, is of crucial importance for understanding Cicero, as there he shows that human ‘moral understanding...is at best a developing or progressive process’ (p. 106) in light of the ‘way of nature’ (p. 107). Duty’s social embeddedness, in turn, highlights Cicero’s concern with particular polities, and his deeply *political* thinking: ‘because the well-being of this community is the necessary condition for fulfilling all man’s needs, it is the most important of his needs’ (p. 116).

Chapter 4, ‘Political Philosophy and the Roman Republic,’ grapples in part with the ‘tendency to see Cicero as more a patriot than a philosopher’ (p. 156), noting not just that Cicero is often deeply critical of Rome, but also showing that Cicero differs from both Plato and Aristotle in his emphasis on statesmanship. Political leaders, through ‘speech and reason,’ both help form and maintain communities, a process that involves the consent of the community; the ideal community, then, is ‘formed by consent,’ but this is ‘consent...to true *ius*’ (p. 180). Enabling the statesman to fulfill this role is prudence, and the prudent statesman, as we see in Chapter 5: The Socratic Statesman, is the ‘culmination of his philosophical work’ (p. 205). Unlike the historic Socrates, however, who tended to be both apolitical and insufficiently attentive to rhetoric, Cicero wants to ‘bring Socrates...yet more down to earth’ (pp. 206–207); the earthward journey entails the cultivation of ‘civil prudence’ entailing ‘knowledge and practice’ (pp. 209–210). Achieving the development of the statesman’s knowledge and moral qualities involves glory, an ‘important instrument’ in forming statesmen – an importance that does not belie the fact that Cicero is often deeply concerned with a desire for glory that does not equate it with virtue (p. 228).

Nicgorski’s book is remarkable, engaging the most difficult features of Cicero’s thought and yielding a loving and careful portrait of its unity. It builds, as he puts it with some humility, on his study and teaching of ‘Cicero through the last third of the twentieth century’ (p. 3), and it is no exaggeration to say that Nicgorski, as both teacher and scholar, has played a key role in the resurgence of interest in Cicero’s thought. I found his argument compelling. Were I to raise a criticism, it would be that he does not come full circle to directly address his claim that Cicero is deeply ‘attuned to the needs of the human communities of the twenty-first century’ (p. 4).

That criticism, though, points to the promise of these two books for contemporary political theory scholarship: the productive tensions between the universal and the particular, between philosophy and rhetoric, between polis and cosmopolis, between the ideal and the non-ideal – these are the themes that



characterize Cicero's thought, and that are especially worth exploring in our political moment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jonathan Zarecki for his comments on an early draft of this essay, along with Mihaela Mihai for her invaluable suggestions.

Notes

- 1 To provide but one, albeit limited, data point: a search of the 2017 APSA Annual Meeting program yields 17 'hits' for Plato, 25 for Aristotle, and only 6 for Cicero.
- 2 I discuss both of these strains of scholarship in the introduction to my 2011 book, *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought*.
- 3 See, e.g., Garsten (2009).

References

- Cicero, A. (1991). *On Duties*, Edited by M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garsten, B. (2009). *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kapust, D. J. (2011). *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nicgorski, W. (2016). *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Straumann, B. (2016). *Crisis and Constitutionalism: Roman Political Thought from the Fall of the Republic to the Age of Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woolf, R. (2015). *Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Skeptic*. Milton Park and New York: Routledge.