

# Cicero's philosophy

Stefano Maso, *Cicero's philosophy. Trends in classics*, 3. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2022. Pp. xiii, 178. ISBN 9783110658392 \$28.99.

## Review by

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Scholarship on Cicero's philosophical works has proliferated over the past few decades, and this resurgence of interest in Cicero the philosopher shows no signs of abating any time soon. This timely book aims to give those new to the field a helpful overview of key trends and developments in that growing edifice of scholarship. A major virtue is that this overview is not limited to English but takes into account a wide range of work in German, French, Italian, and other European languages. As well as showcasing the vibrancy of the field, this wide-ranging survey succeeds in highlighting different scholarly traditions, questions, approaches, and methods when it comes to the study of Cicero's philosophy.

The first two chapters are essentially summative. Chapter 1 focuses on biographical details concerning Cicero's role in Roman political history, his interest in oratory, and his philosophical education and development. It includes brief accounts of his rhetorical training, his time in Athens, and the role of Philo of Larissa, as well as a survey of different views held by modern biographers of Cicero. Chapter 2 then offers a catalogue of Cicero's philosophical works along with brisk summary of content, with the emphasis on his constant engagement with Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Academy. This is informative and does a helpful job for those relatively unfamiliar with the scope of Cicero's output. It was something of a

surprise, however, to see this summarising begin with the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* and *Hortensius* and not with earlier works such as *De inventione* and *De re publica* (which are listed but not surveyed in the same fashion as the various works of the 40s down to *De officiis*). This is a striking feature of the book as a whole: it is very much focused on Cicero's philosophy as it appears in the sequence of works in the 40s, and there is little sustained attention given to the major works of the 50s such as *De re publica*.

The third chapter shifts attention to contemporary research on Cicero as a philosopher. It begins with an excellent literature review (one of many in the book) that traces changing scholarly views on what philosophy involves in the Roman cultural context, including detailed synopses of major work in the field from the mid-twentieth century to the present. There then follows more focused discussion on three issues that have proved particularly contentious among scholars: (1) the precise nature of Cicero's Academic scepticism and his treatment of epistemological issues in the *Academica*; (2) the precise connection Cicero advocates between rhetoric and philosophy, including the ways in which philosophical modes of argument feature in his own speeches and the ways in which rhetorical modes of persuasion, such as emotional appeals, figure in his philosophical works; and (3) questions concerning the proper application of philosophical theory in the realm of practical ethics. Again, in each section there are helpful surveys of the relevant scholarly literature and directions for people to pursue matters in further depth and detail.

The fourth chapter, 'Problems in Cicero's Philosophy', identifies a number of key issues that exercise the attention of critics and that readers of Cicero should be aware of when delving into his philosophical writings. First of all, there is discussion of the perennial question of Cicero's originality as a philosopher and the

ways in which he uses his Greek source material. How much of what Cicero writes is genuinely new and innovative as opposed to reporting or artfully repackaging Greek material for a Roman audience? The long debate on this question, including the tradition of *Quellenforschung*, is presented effectively, with copious references. There are then sections on Cicero's distinctive treatment of complex questions of freedom, determinism, and causality in the fragmentary *De fato*; his place in the history and tradition of the Academy; his critical engagement with the arguments and postulates of the Stoics and Epicureans across a number of key works of the 40s; the question of 'eclecticism'; and finally, on the relationship between philosophy and political life. On the whole, these sections are all very helpful guides to the newcomer, containing a good blend of explanatory discussion and directions to the most important works of secondary scholarship. That said, the final section on political life is somewhat perfunctory and felt like a real missed opportunity given the current richness and diversity of scholarship on Cicero's political philosophy. A major work such as Straumann's *Crisis and Constitutionalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016) does not get a mention; and Zetzel's recent *The Lost Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2022) – published after the volume under review – has shifted perspectives in the field again. Anyone with a particular interest in obtaining a solid grounding in Cicero's political philosophy would be well advised to look elsewhere: for instance, to Schofield's *Cicero: Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

The fifth chapter focuses on Cicero's development of a philosophical vocabulary as he sought to render Greek technical terms and concepts effectively into Latin. Through a series of case studies, each focusing on a particular problematic technical term, it is shown that Cicero consistently saw philosophical concepts and the reasoning behind them as the key things to capture in the Latin, rather than just finding simple equivalents for the Greek terms themselves. This then opened up

space for Cicero's own imaginative and creative practice: to do philosophy while at the same time crafting appropriate Latin terms for what he found in his Greek sources. Cicero's thought processes, his agonising, and his deployment of various working methods in doing this are presented well. This chapter is a real highlight of the book as a whole, and it will be particularly informative for those who have not given much thought to the processes and challenges of philosophical translation. In particular, it deals with what risks being quite dry and off-putting philological material in an engaging and lively manner, along the way providing clear and concise explanations of tricky things like the Stoic concepts of *oikeiosis* and the cataleptic impression. As well as drawing attention to the lasting impact Cicero's efforts had on the later tradition of philosophical literature in Latin, this chapter serves as a reminder that we have yet to chart fully the scope and sophistication of Cicero's practice in the development of a Latin philosophical vocabulary.

All in all, this is a good introductory handbook to Cicero's philosophy: stimulating, clear, and very easy to follow. It will be of most value to graduate students and those approaching Cicero's philosophical works for the first time.