

**Raphael Woolf.** *Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Sceptic*. Routledge 2015. 260 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781844658404); \$49.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781844658411).

The Roman statesman and orator Cicero (106-43 BC) is most celebrated for his stunning speeches, the elegance of his Latin prose, and his role in the febrile politics of the late Roman republic. Less celebrated is the fact that in the final two decades of his life he also wrote a host of philosophical dialogues and treatises, making him without a doubt the most important figure in introducing a Latin speaking Roman audience to Greek philosophy in the 50s and 40s BC. His reputation as a philosopher has suffered especially from the impression that his work is derivative and simply reproduces the ideas of others. In recent years there has been a growing appreciation of Cicero's own distinctive philosophical voice, and as a result serious interest in Cicero's philosophical thought has been increasing among classicists, intellectual historians, and political theorists—but not, as yet, so much among philosophers. This fine book by Raphael Woolf, the first in Routledge's 'Philosophy in the Roman World' series, promises to change this state of affairs: in compelling fashion it conveys the impressive scope and sophistication of Cicero's philosophical thinking to an audience who are presumed to be most interested in the concerns and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy.

Woolf offers an engaging account of Cicero's philosophical enterprise, presenting six chapters that cover the topics of epistemology ('Scepticism and certainty'), the place of human beings in the natural world ('God, fate and freedom'), politics ('The best form of government'), ethics ('The good life in theory and practice'), and the emotions ('The role of the emotions'). He leaves to one side the secondary sources and scholarly debates (while providing a detailed list of further reading at the end of the book), instead opting to take on the central primary texts afresh (some of the minor texts—such as the *Stoic Paradoxes*, *On Friendship*, and *On Old Age*—are omitted). This is a welcome strategy that makes for a brisk and engaging read, while allowing Cicero's own voice to come through strongly. Indeed, Woolf makes a concerted effort to convey the content of Cicero's works to a readership who have not necessarily read any of the primary texts, let alone the scholarly literature, and he does this summative work very effectively (and with very little off-putting textual work on the Latin). In addition, there is a robust critical assessment of the material. As such, the book serves as an excellent companion for those approaching Cicero's philosophical works for the first time, but a decent level of philosophical acumen is assumed—this is not an elementary introduction.

Woolf writes as a philosopher for philosophers. He expounds and analyses the philosophical arguments that Cicero presents, assessing their cogency and plausibility. He seeks in particular to ascertain why the arguments might be plausible not only to a contemporary analytic philosopher but also to an ancient Roman reader. This involves a healthy engagement with the historical, political, and cultural environment in which Cicero was writing. Woolf is very sympathetic to the notion that philosophy does indeed have a geographical, political, and cultural context, factors that must be taken into account for a full appreciation of particular philosophical arguments, what philosophers thought they were doing, and what they were seeking to achieve. This approach is often enlightening with regard to the plausibility of some of Cicero's arguments, particularly those that relate to religious matters, such as his support for the practices of soothsaying and augury on the basis of their social and political utility (what makes sense in the cultural context of ancient Rome may appear less convincing today, and vice versa), and the forays into Roman history and politics never obscure the central thrust of the philosophical discussion.

The central argument of the book, as indicated in the title, is that Cicero develops and showcases in his philosophical works a distinctive form of scepticism—heavily influenced by the sceptical

tradition of the so-called New Academy (hence the fact that Cicero is elsewhere often described as an Academic sceptic)—that is not only congenial to a Roman man of practical affairs but also has a real contemporary appeal today. In essence, Cicero advocates a form of principled pragmatism, promoting intellectual curiosity and careful forensic reasoning on both sides of the issue when confronting all problems and seeking solutions. For Cicero, the practice of philosophy is about being open-minded, well-informed through continuous critical enquiry, and free and able to make appropriate judgements in specific circumstances, rather than just learning and then following dogmatic rules and precepts. As a sceptic, Cicero advocates that, since complete or objective certainty is not attainable, one must always judge what appears most plausible or persuasive or reasonable to oneself—and such judgements are always subject to reconsideration in the light of new evidence, new arguments, or changed circumstances (as his private correspondence shows, a sceptical philosopher like Cicero is always on the lookout for such new information that will undermine a previously held judgement). Sceptical philosophy is thus very intellectually demanding, but at the same time it offers each individual the freedom and flexibility to craft an examined life of her own, as befits each individual's unique attributes and circumstances.

Woolf demonstrates, moreover, that in his own philosophical works Cicero not only showcases but also invites others to do this form of sceptical philosophy with him as they engage with the text: that is, he invites his Roman readers to weigh the strength of the evidence and the arguments that he presents and then to come to the conclusions that seem most plausible to them (modern non-Roman readers are of course free to reach their own conclusions too). This pragmatic sceptical mode of doing philosophy is perhaps most pertinent to ethical questions concerning how the individual can live a good life in a political community, given her own particular attributes and limitations and the nature of the society in which she finds herself—and Woolf's subtle and sympathetic treatment of Cicero's grand final work on this issue, the *De officiis* ('On Duties'), for centuries a central text in European moral education but latterly rather out of fashion, is especially convincing in displaying the continuing relevance and appeal of Cicero's thinking.

There are a few minor annoyances that might have been remedied: there is no summarizing final chapter and the book finishes rather abruptly; and there might also have been some more substantial exploration of the influence of Cicero's philosophical thinking on other philosophers in the Western tradition. That being said, on the whole this book offers a comprehensive treatment of Cicero the philosopher that fills a major gap in the scholarly literature, and it should succeed in bringing Cicero to a wider philosophical audience.

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