Matthew Fox, *Cicero's Philosophy of History*.

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Abstract:

The purpose of Matthew Fox's (hereafter F.) latest book is to examine Cicero's use of historical exempla in his philosophical and rhetorical dialogues. These exempla reveal the depth and influence of Cicero's academic skepticism and his belief that Rome did not possess any sort of historical or ideological consistency. F. enjoins us to replace the "unseemly" desire (4) to discover Cicero's own thoughts in his philosophical works (which Cicero's own comments at Nat. Deo. 1.5.10 indicate to be a fruitless exercise) and instead look at them through the very lens that Cicero himself used, that of strict Academic skepticism. History is consistently treated by Cicero with an open-ended skepticism that denies certainty; we should not seek, nor will we find, coherence of thought regarding Rome, her history, or her future. Historical exempla open up the possibility of argument rather than closing it down. Cicero made no attempt to create a sort of dogmatic world view, for to do so would countermand his adherence to the Academy; history provides its own authority, and does not need Cicero's. A book on Cicero's philosophy of history would seem to be an impossible one to write because, as F. notes, "there was no such thing as 'philosophy of history' in the ancient world, and Cicero did not write it" (1). F. has nevertheless succeeded in writing a book which, though it will not satisfy the need to seek the "real" Cicero in Cicero's works, will at least give cause for a reexamination of the evidence.

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This is not a book for the Cicero specialist, but for readers with a concentrated concern for literary and ideological questions of the Late Republic; thus F. avoids detailed discussions of *Quellenforschung*, prosopography, and political entanglements. The bibliography is up-to-date, which fits with his expressed desire to escape outmoded avenues of thought. The works of Krostenko (2001), Fantham (2004), and Dugan (2005) are omnipresent, as are the works of Michel on the self-consciousness present in the dialogues. There are eleven chapters (inclusive of introduction and conclusion), with a bibliography, general index, and *index locorum*. F. focuses his discussion on the *De re publica*, *De oratore*, *De divinatione*, and the *Brutus*; the *De legibus*, *De natura deorum*, and *Academica* are given over to brief and, in the case of the *De legibus*, tangential discussion.

The introduction lays out the origins of the work and the basic methodology. F.'s approach is literary "in that it uses close readings to explore the consequences of the tensions over history and philosophy that are intrinsic in Cicero's project" (11), and, as he will discuss further in Chapter 10, he does not give preference to critical interpretations over the words of the texts themselves. Chapter 2 ("Struggle, Compensation, and Argument in Cicero's Philosophy") picks up on these themes, and explores what Cicero's own words tell us about his philosophical position. Because of the influence of the Academy, we should not expect to find in Cicero's philosophy any sort of clear delineation of his personal views. Cicero never makes a claim for any sort of philosophical authority, and this non-authoritarian position is actually central to the reading of the philosophical works, particularly the dialogues. Cicero perceived philosophy to be a marginal activity in Rome but was convinced that it had the potential to change the way Rome functioned. Through philosophy historical *exempla* become a way of gathering instruction from the past. But philosophy is also a compensation for political impotence, though not a form of withdrawal from the public world, and Cicero had mixed feelings about the potential success of his program. Thus, philosophy has an unstable relationship to politics, and this instability will affect Cicero's use of Rome's history in his dialogues. A second function of philosophy is as a salve for grief, though F. believes that philosophical composition could not have been any source of real comfort for Cicero. All of this combines to create a body of historical philosophizing works that complicates the

identification of the author's own beliefs and erases from Cicero's philosophical persona any semblance of doctrinal authority.

"Reading and Reception" seeks to dispel the notion that literary interpretation and philosophical investigation are different things. The historical grounding found in Cicero's philosophy serves to provide empirical proof of the philosophical discussions at hand. Cicero wrestles with the concept of history as verification of philosophical doctrine and philosophy as a form of thinking that moves beyond history, and Academic skepticism provides the only method for Cicero to address this struggle. Moreover, modern readings of Cicero as a dogmatist, which lead us to look for unequivocal statements of the author's own views, are rooted in his position as the canonical school-text of medieval and Renaissance Europe. His rhetoric and oratory were judged on their usefulness, and this ascribed authority became attached to his philosophy as well, though some later philosophers condemned Ciceronian philosophy in no uncertain terms as not being "real" philosophy; Kant, for example, called it simply a branch of literature. There is, however, no room in F.'s view of Cicero for any traditional method of separating literature and philosophy.

The next chapter, "Literature, History, and Philosophy: The Example of the *De re publica*" is the most compelling of the book. The underlying thread that runs through the whole of the *philosophica* is that philosophy must be suited to a Roman context. In the *De re publica* Cicero is concerned "to provide Rome with a theoretical framework" which will provide his contemporaries with "a conceptual map and language" with which to verbalize their thoughts about the *res publica* (81). Unlike Plato, Cicero has chosen a real city for his discussion of the ideal constitution. The character of Scipio attempts to reconcile history with theory, and through him (though F. is adamant that we should not read Scipio simply as Cicero's mouthpiece) Cicero succeeds in raising the suspicion that this is not really history but the use of historical anecdotes to demonstrate constitutional theory. By not using himself as a character Cicero is appealing to the resistance of the Academy to assign dogmatic authority and attempting to break from Plato, but at the same time the *De re publica* cannot be said to represent Cicero's vision of the ideal republic any more than Plato's does his. Rome's history as found in the *De re publica* is idealized to be sure, but it is also presented as a history that needs to be considered for the excessive idealization that it is. The role of historical anecdote in Cicero's philosophy is to produce a philosophical discourse that never strays from familiar tropes and themes, and for a Roman audience nothing could be more familiar that Rome's own glorious past.

Chapter 5, "History with Rhetoric, Rhetoric with History: *De oratore* and *De legibus*", contains, despite the title, a discussion limited almost exclusively to Book 1 of the *De oratore*, since that book is most concerned with the function of rhetoric as a cultural and historical phenomenon. Reading with an awareness of Academic principles of

philosophical discourse reveals the *De oratore* to be both an introduction to rhetorical theory in Latin and also a reflection on the character of Rome itself. The question addressed here is to what extent rhetoric is an essential part of Roman political life. The problem is difficult to resolve, since rhetoric's popularity has not been matched by corresponding success in producing good orators; conversely, political power has not corresponded to oratorical excellence in Rome, despite all the conditions that promoted it; Cicero argues that "Rome's history is characterized by the wealth of its *consilia*, the absence of *verba*" (126).

In the following chapter ("History and Memory") F.'s argues that history via *exempla* is compelling but by no means authoritarian. Cicero's own ambiguous use of history provides the best evidence for a tradition of historical writing that includes an ironic critique of its own methods, a tradition that culminates in Tacitus' *Annales* 1.1 (151). We should not think that the historical examples require consistent interpretations, since the models chosen lend themselves to a number of different interpretations; while the function of exemplary history may remain static, individual *exempla* can be molded to a great variety of different needs. For historiography to advance beyond the annalistic tradition, it must both stimulate *memoria* and enhance it. For Cicero, *memoria* is concerned with representation and effect, and it is a function of the memory of the past to bring a positive influence to bear on future generations, as with the Janiculum flag-raising episode in the *Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo*. *Memoria* then becomes a process aimed at producing a particular effect, rather than one determined by the process of actual recollection.

The eponymous work of chapter 7, *Brutus*, is read by F. as a deliberation on both the nature of rhetoric at Rome and the attendant problem of writing history, as well as the question of the type of person who should exercise political control. The *Brutus* also continues the theme of the *De re publica* that history is a repository of practical rather than theoretical wisdom, but here, for Cicero, that practical wisdom is manifested in rhetorical prowess. Thus we can see this history as an attempt to substantiate the question from *De oratore* 1 addressed in Chapter 5: to what extent can rhetoric be said to be important in Roman political culture? The history of rhetoric which Cicero gives is part and parcel of his interpretation of his era. Rather than resulting in a respectable retirement, Cicero's rhetorical skill has imposed a public withdrawal in which his previous service and his considerable learning have no effect and yield no personal satisfaction; glory, and by extension *memoria* is something that only dead men are able to enjoy (183).

In Chapter 8, "Divination, History, and Superstition," *De divinatione* becomes an exploration of Cicero's relationship with the institutions of the Republic and a bleak encounter with the impossibility of reconciling philosophical self-awareness with

traditional ways of conducting public life. F. identifies two main challenges to interpreting the *De divinatione*: reconciling the dialectic between Quintus and Marcus, who represent the irrational and the rational views of divination, and recognizing the depth of historical representation in this work. History is examined "for its ability both to contain and to justify a sense of political world order" (214). The complexities of *De divinatione* can be better understood by keeping in mind Cicero's ambivalence about the connection between philosophy and public life (see Chapter 2). On the subject of dreams, Cicero's skepticism is brought fully to the front; without *imagines*, a rational universe becomes a possibility. The maintenance of social bonds is purely for the sake of tradition, but these bonds do not indicate any sort of universal philosophical system. Cicero leaves the reader of the *De divinatione* with an appeal to the Academic position (2.72.150) and the enjoinder that, though we are presented with different ways to view divination, social practice, and tradition, we should not feel pressured to select one as superior to the others.

In the ninth chapter on "Ironic History in the Roman Tradition," F. argues that Cicero's dealing with Roman history is indeed ironic and that ironic history is also evident in the work of Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus, though these later authors, especially Tacitus, are treated cursorily (F. hopes for more work in this area). The neglect of irony in Cicero's philosophy has led to a failure to appreciate the full possibilities of Cicero's engagement with historical exempla. Historical knowledge is not part of philosophy, but the lack of truly Roman philosophy has made Rome's history a significant part of adapting Greek philosophy to a Roman context, and thus history becomes quite important for Cicero's philosophizing. Cicero's use of history is always ironic: while history can connect Cicero's present to the Republican past, he is always aware that it is difficult to make the past confirm the present, and though philosophy has perhaps been irrelevant to Roman society up to this point, it can and indeed must be relevant in the present. Sallust's writings, particularly the *Bellum Jugurthinum* parallel Cicero's own concerns about working with history, such as the relationship between power and virtue, and the ironic potential of using historical *exempla*). Livy, on the other hand, cannot be considered an ironic historian, since his history depends fully on the authority of the historian. Both Sallust and Livy, however, do not express the same anxiety that Cicero does over the nature of Rome's political elite and their ability to influence history.

The final chapter of the main text (the eleventh chapter is for recapitulation) is "Cicero from Enlightenment to Idealism." F. investigates what he calls the "rupture in understanding" (274) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This rupture caused Cicero to be viewed as a philosophical collector and thus squashed any interest in his sophisticated use of irony. John Toland's *Cicero Illustratus*, an admittedly little-known monograph which made Cicero the paradigm for the politically-engaged

philosopher, is the focus of this chapter. F. sees Toland as a microcosm for Cicero's reception in the post-Renaissance world. Toland's reading encourages us to think of reception as a dynamic process -- it is a work concerned with representing Cicero in a manner which makes him easier to read for Toland's contemporaries. Toland's strictly literary approach uses Cicero's own works as the primary evidence and does not try to see through the rhetoric (as most modern scholarship is inclined to do); Toland refuses to concede an advantage to the critics over the content of the texts themselves. In this respect, Toland provides a precursor to F.'s own argument that we ought to engage the texts without judging them by previous scholarly approaches, though F. stops short of recommending Toland as the authoritative source for Ciceronian hermeneutics.

Only three negative items deserve comment, and they concern content and formatting rather than factual or interpretational errors. First, F. is not consistent with translating Latin citations; this is most obvious on pgs. 123-124, where all citations on the first page are translated, but none on the second. Second, as mentioned above, Chapter 5 is devoted almost exclusively to the *De oratore*, though the chapter title would seem to indicate equal discussion of both *De oratore* and *De legibus*. The four pages devoted to the *De legibus* seem to be an afterthought and do not add much to the chapter or the place of the *De legibus* in the overall picture of F's argument. It would have been better to append this slight digression to the end of Ch. 4, and perhaps expand upon it, since F. states that the *De legibus* was "clearly composed as a supplement to the *De re publica*" (244). As a further point here, the switch from the *De re publica* to rhetoric's place in Rome in Chapters 5-7 and back again to a discussion of the institutions of the Republic in Chapter 8 is not jarring per se but does seem a bit disconnected. The chapters are a valuable contribution to the overall theme of this book, especially the discussion of*memoria,* but it seems as if F. has combined two books, "Cicero's Philosophy of History" and "Cicero's Rhetoric of History." I do find F.'s conclusions about *memoria* to be intriguing, and I hope that he will expand his work here to a detailed investigation of *memoria* in the speeches, and how it interacts with the full force of Cicero's rhetoric.

Third, in an effort to "shake up preconceptions about the character of Cicero's philosophical project," (24) F. has devoted the first eighty pages of this work to a summary of what he will be discussing in the following two hundred and forty-two. This seems a bit unnecessary and repetitive at times, and if there is one major complaint to make about this book it is that the constant repetition becomes, well, repetitive. The chapters begin with a summary of what was discussed in the previous chapter, then a brief summary of the main points to be covered and their relation to the previous chapters, and then a summary of what was discussed at the end of the chapter (except Chapter 9, which ends with a single paragraph relating Tacitus' style of historiography with Cicero's). Typographical errors are few; there is the odd

missing quotation mark, as on pg. 127, and a strange symbol used only once on pg. 107; more often, what may appear to be misspellings are merely alternatives ("premiss" for "premise," for example, throughout the book).

The quibbling just mentioned does not, however, detract from an enjoyable and thought-provoking book. F. exposes and eloquently expounds on Cicero's use of history as a tool for establishing Greek philosophy at Rome yet simultaneously providing a non-dogmatic, self-scrutinizing foundation for Roman political life. By revealing the origins of the traditional method of reading the philosophical dialogues as constructs of the Enlightenment, Cicero's authority as the canonical schoolhouse author, and the anti-Ciceronian bias of the great German scholars and philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries, F. has given us the foundation and justification for a reevaluation of previous judgments on these works. Like Cicero, F. promises no answers or dogmatic readings for us to follow. He states in the beginning of the work that we all make our own Ciceros (1), and this book certainly gives us new impetus and new tools with which to remake ours.