

Review

NATHAN GILBERT, MARGARET GRAVER & SEAN McCONNELL (EDS), *POWER AND PERSUASION IN CICERO'S PHILOSOPHY*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 268. ISBN 9781009170338 (hbk), £85.00; 9781009170352 (ebook).

Writing his treatise *De senectute* in the aftermath of civil war, Cicero (speaking through the persona of Cato the Elder) draws on a rustic metaphor to flesh out an argument about intergenerational obligation. A wise Roman farmer plants trees whose fruit he will never taste: ‘and in truth a farmer, however old, does not hesitate to reply to those asking for whom he is planting, “For the immortal gods, who have wished not only that I should receive these things from my ancestors, but also that I should hand them on to posterity”’ (*Sen.* 25).

In isolation, that passage strikes me as an effective deployment of a rhetorical commonplace. But in context — as Sean McConnell argues in this volume’s concluding essay — it is something more: a link in an argumentative chain joining Cicero’s response to Plato on the political duties of the wise, a defence of the institutional primacy of the Roman Senate and a call ‘for a return to traditional norms of senatorial politics’ (239). In Cicero’s philosophy, in a sort of collective claim that emerges from this important new book, rhetoric does not remain ‘mere’ rhetoric for long.

Of course, Cicero himself is something handed on from ancestors to posterity. Counterintuitively, I think, that fact increases the pressures of coherence and timeliness on an edited volume like this one: with so many generations of commentary to learn from, what, beyond chronological coincidence, unifies these ten essays as a distinctive and new contribution to our understanding of Cicero’s thought?

I see two unifying claims at work in *Power and Persuasion in Cicero’s Philosophy* — which, in combination, more than earn it a place as a significant contribution to the study of Cicero and of Roman political and social thought. The first claim is that Cicero was more than a transmitter or populariser of existing philosophical ideas. That view of Cicero, as essentially intellectually passive, once secured a high enough degree of scholarly consensus that it was itself popularised. My own first encounter with Cicero came in Anthony Everitt’s general-audience biography, which bluntly states that ‘Cicero was not an original philosopher’ (*Cicero* (2001), 322). *Power and Persuasion*, on the other hand, decisively breaks with that view. The Cicero who emerges here is an informed and assertive contributor to Roman and Hellenistic philosophical debate. Along these lines, James E. G. Zetzel traces intertextual links between Ciceronian and Platonic dialogues; Geert Roskam argues that Cicero’s eclecticism and flexibility are the mark of a serious thinker rather than a ‘philosophical dilettante’ (79); Nathan Gilbert shows how Cicero’s considerable engagement with Stoic and Epicurean ethical debates enables him to speak ‘as a fully fledged philosopher’ in *De officiis*; Malcolm Schofield explicates Cicero’s use of the ambiguous phrase ‘*iuris consensu*’ in *De re publica* with reference to long-standing classical debates about regime type; and McConnell reads *De senectute* as a work in dialogue with Plato’s *Republic*.

The second unifying claim is that rhetoric itself offered Cicero a powerful set of conceptual tools for doing philosophy. Every student of Cicero is familiar with the notion that he drew from rhetoric a commitment to philosophical argument *in utramque partem*, or that his philosophical writing is often rhetorically embellished, or that he saw philosophy as irreplaceable to the ideal orator’s education. But *Power and Persuasion* goes well beyond these commonplaces, offering granular and often unexpected accounts of the intellectual resources that Cicero found in his rhetorical training and practice. For instance, Raphael Woolf shows how Cicero’s use of the rhetorical techniques of exempla and emotional appeals in his philosophical writing is grounded in a sophisticated moral psychology; Georgina White explores how the overtly fictionalised details of the dialogue *Academica* ‘reinforce the epistemological message of the text’ by promoting scepticism in the reader; Margaret Graver argues that Cicero’s reflections on public honour, its value, and its dangers — such a prevalent theme in his oratory — also set *De re publica* apart from its Platonic namesake; Jed W. Atkins considers how that pervasive concern with honour drives important aspects of Cicero’s work on the justice of war; and Katharina Volk shows how the speech *Pro Marcello* ingeniously blurs the lines between philosophy and rhetoric.

In fact, reading *Power and Persuasion* left me convinced that its two unifying claims may in fact be closely related, or could even be synthesised: perhaps Cicero was an original contributor to philosophical debates precisely because he had something that many of his philosophical interlocutors lacked — a deep theoretical and practical grounding in rhetoric. We all know that Cicero was a distinctively philosophical orator, because he himself told us so: ‘whatever ability I possess as an orator comes not from the workshops of the rhetoricians, but from the spacious grounds of the Academy’ (*Orat.* 11). *Power and Persuasion*, however, reminds us that the inverse claim is equally plausible: that Cicero was a distinctively oratorical philosopher, and that his intellectual contributions can be profitably traced to the workshops of the rhetoricians.

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