

Cicero: the philosophical works

(to accompany “Cicero on the Ethics of Waging War,” *Wheelock’s* chapter 8)



(A fresco from 1464 of Cicero, then a precocious boy, at study)

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) was Rome’s greatest orator. During the tumultuous years of the late Republic, he used his skills as an orator and writer to contribute significantly to the political battles that were being waged over how and by whom the Roman state would be governed. He ultimately lost his life (along with his head, tongue, and hands) in his efforts against Mark Antony, who was attempting to take the place of Julius Caesar as head of the Roman state.

Cicero also used his skills as a writer, however, to write philosophical dialogues in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle (the latter of whose dialogues have not come down to us, but whom Cicero especially admired). In addition to his philosophical dialogues, moreover, Cicero produced a few non-dialogical treatises on philosophical topics. Cicero himself tells us that he wrote his dialogues and treatises for a number of reasons.¹ First, he wrote them in order to fill up, in a meaningful way, the time when he was not able to participate in Roman politics. Cicero refers to this time as his leisure time (*otium*). For instance, in the years 46-44 Cicero took up a major

¹ The following quotations and most of the information can be found in Cicero’s *De natura deorum* 1.6-9.

philosophical project, he tells us, because he found himself with “nothing to do, for the political situation demanded that the state be governed by the strategy and supervision of a single man.” The single man to whom Cicero is referring here is, of course, Julius Caesar. A second reason that Cicero wrote his dialogues was to teach Greek philosophy to Roman citizens and thereby induce them to engage in philosophy in the Latin tongue. Cicero’s education suited him perfectly to take on this task, for he was well versed in all the philosophies of his day and in the earlier philosophers of the Greek world. Cicero conceived of this project of communicating and fostering philosophy in Rome as a public duty, one that would enhance both his and Rome’s glory and reputation. A third reason that Cicero gives for the production of his dialogues is that they turned his mind from contemporary ills and, more touchingly, personal tragedies. He informs us that “the incentive” to embark on his final philosophical project “was provided by the mental depression induced by a savage and crippling blow inflicted by Fortune.” This “blow” was the death of his beloved daughter Tullia as she was giving birth in 45 BC.

Cicero’s philosophical writings cover most of the subdivisions of Greco-Roman philosophy. Clearly, Cicero himself was most interested in political and ethical philosophy, but his writings also raise and take up questions in epistemology, metaphysics, physics, law, rhetoric, and religion, as well as topics such as friendship and old age. Here is a brief list of some Cicero’s best known works.

Academica (on the theory of knowledge)

De legibus and *De republica* (on legal and political systems)

De finibus and *Disputationes Tusculanae* and *De officiis* (on ethics and social conduct)

De natura deorum and *De divinatione* and *De fato* (on physics and religion)

De amicitia and *De senectute* (on friendship and old age)

De inventione and *De oratore* and *Brutus* (on rhetoric and oratory)

You have read passages adapted from the *De amicitia* in chapter 4 of *Wheelock’s Latin* and from the *Tusculanae Disputationes* in chapter 5. Now you get another taste of Cicero as a philosopher in “Cicero on the Ethics of Waging War.” Consider the following questions as you reflect on this passage:

1. What would it mean for a *civitas* to wage war *propter iram*?
2. What, according to Cicero, is a *civitas* supposed to foster and defend? Do you agree with him? Would you add anything to his list?
3. Cicero asserts that it is important to defend *libertas*. What would this word mean to Cicero or someone like him? What, in terms of the events of Cicero’s time, is ominous in his statement that war might be necessary to defend *libertas*?
4. What does Cicero mean when he says that the Romans should show *magnam clementiam post victoriam*? Can you give any examples of this practice?