

GUIDANCE ON CICERO'S *DE OFFICIIS*

WOOLF (R.) (ed.) *Cicero's De Officiis. A Critical Guide*. Pp. xii + 256. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-316-51801-4. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000155

While some children can manage *sine parentum disciplina*, others need *parentum praecepta* (*De officiis* 1.118), Cicero writes to his son in *De officiis*; similarly, some readers of *De officiis* can fare just fine without a critical guide, and others could use the support. That latter group might be venturing into *De officiis* out of interest in Cicero as philosophical writer, or Stoicism, or the work's consequential reception in the early modern period, or its relationship to contemporary virtue ethics. Whoever they may be, readers will find in this guide dispositions, orientations and interpretations that sensitise one to what Cicero was up to in *De officiis*, for whom and why.

The editor of the volume, Woolf, claims that it is the first 'collection of essays devoted to the work' (p. 1), the sort of claim that induces one to ask first with surprise 'why did it take so long?' and then with scepticism 'why do we need one now?' Arguments for exigence, relevance and resonance dot but do not drive the volume. Considered in the context of its emergence in the fall of 44 BCE, *De officiis* is a work worth engaging with because it operates as a stand-in for a conversation Cicero hoped to have in person with his son Marcus in Athens, where Marcus was being tutored in philosophy, but had to call off due to trouble in Rome. (Cicero might have composed *De officiis* and the *Second Philippic* at the same time.) The entire situation – a wayward son, a wayward republic – offered an instructional opportunity that Cicero could not let pass unseized.

The form of *De officiis* reflects its compositional circumstances. Woolf approaches it as a treatise-letter hybrid, footnoting, with a caveat about important differences, *Between the World and Me*, the 2015 book in the form of an open letter Ta-Nehisi Coates addressed to his then 15-year-old son Samori, preparing him to be a young black man in U.S. America (p. 3 n. 5). I found thinking about *De officiis* as an open letter to be invitingly provocative, since an open letter uses intimate epistolary elements to do the work of public persuasion. After all, the constant *mi Cicero* address pattern indicates a sole, filial recipient, but Cicero also writes that the work *non de te est, sed de toto genere* (2.45). It is a public father-to-son letter. Additionally, it is a complex philosophical study of how to do the right thing, taking into account the givens of being a unique yet socially and politically situated human being.

Woolf prepares readers not to expect a unified translation of the titular and central term, *officium* (variously translated as 'right action', 'duty' and 'obligation'), itself the Latin rendering of the Greek term *kathēkon*. In the preface to the first book Cicero explains why he has selected *officia* as the theme: they have the 'widest application' of all the matters philosophers discuss (1.4). The notion is central for Stoics, Academics and Peripatetics, and Cicero opts to draw from the *fons* of Stoicism (1.6); in particular, he draws from the no-longer extant treatise *Peri toū kathēkontos* of the Rhodian Stoic Panaetius (c. 180–109 BCE), who was part of the Scipionic circle. It might have been helpful for Woolf to have set up the Panaetius Question – essentially, when does Cicero seem to be working within Panaetius' framework and examples, and when not? – since several contributors take it up, each as if they are introducing it. At the minimum, Cicero saturates the Roman cast Panaetius gave to Greek Stoic concepts, lessons and

attitudes in the previous century, putting them to vibrant purpose as he attempts to reach and reorient his son – but not only his son.

Woolf organises the eleven contributions, authored by some of the most recognisable scholars of Cicero's place in ancient intellectual history, into a quinquepartite structure, and internal citations keep the weave of the text from feeling too loose. Two chapters on the 'Framework' of *De officiis* lead the way. In what is the longest chapter in the volume J.P.F. Wynne names the family as the starting point of emotional and ethical life in *De officiis*. G. Tsouni takes on the infamous 'Conflict of Duties' between the *honestum* and the *utile* that Cicero resolves. 'The Role of Virtue', the second partition, opens with B. Inwood's emphasis on Stoic *oikeiōsis* theory, according to which all creatures naturally respond to what it is familiar. From that perspective, Cicero stipulates what is natural to humans. Following is M. Schofield's overview of the focus of the second book of *De officiis*, which he interprets to be justice and beneficence on both social and political scales. Last is the contribution by C. Gill, which reaches into contemporary virtue ethics to clarify how Cicero conceives of Stoic decision-making. The third section, 'Exemplary Ethics', pairs two pieces by R. Langlands and by G. White about how Cicero uses *exempla* from the distant and the more recent past to motivate moral behaviour, while at the same time allowing for enough variation in personality and positionality that doing the right thing cannot be the same thing for everyone.

In the penultimate part, 'Self and Society', C. Bishop examines the inward turn she detects in Cicero's emphasis on *decorum* to claim for *De officiis* a largely uncredited role in the development of the idea of the self, an identity unit made famous by M. Foucault and, for Cicero by means of S. Greenblatt's concept of 'self-fashioning', by J. Dugan (who, to be clear, does not ignore *De officiis*). In the emphasis on *decorum* throughout Horace's ostensibly inter-generational instructional poem *Ars poetica*, Bishop sees the influence of *De officiis*. In 'Cicero and the Cynics' S. McConnell attends to how Cicero handles a term in the *decorum* cluster, *verecundia* (a sense of shame), to outmanoeuvre Cynics on the matter of whether there are outrages against decency by nature or only by convention. The fifth and final section, on 'Politics', opens with the views of J. Atkins on both the apparent and the actual tensions between republicanism and cosmopolitanism in *De officiis*. In the closing chapter I. Gildenhard takes on 'Cicero's Extremist Ethics', walking readers through the ethical logic of assassination to protect the republic and arguing that *De officiis* is the philosophical counterpart of Cicero's *Philippics*.

On what other points might guidance have been welcome? Given Cicero's rhetorical inclination, the relationships between and among the talk terms Cicero uses – namely, *oratio*, *contentio* and *sermo* – go curiously unexplored. The way in which he parses them in *De officiis* is distinctive and suggests Stoic sociality runs deeper than the agonism of oratory-driven public life as Cicero lived it. Is Cicero merely being faithful to his Stoic source material? Furthermore, given that Cicero offers meta-reflection on (other) famous fathers who wrote to their sons about the value of *sermo* – naming Philip's letters to Alexander, Antipater's to Cassander, and Antigonus' to Philip (2.48) –, that word in particular seems significant to Cicero's aims.

To be a critical guide for a twenty first-century reader of Cicero's *De officiis* is not only to take the ancient work on its own terms (to the degree to which that is ever possible), but also to ease readers into that conceptual world. It is to point to its past reception and present relevance, too. The popularity of Stoicism among tech bros, entrepreneurs, influencers and their legions of emulators goes unremarked upon. Perhaps that is because Seneca and Marcus Aurelius are their chosen Stoics. Cicero was not a Stoic, but one wonders how

the Stoicism of his *De officiis* would be metabolised by the fast-moving, thing-breaking set. It is both tempting and disappointing to think it could not be assimilated.

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