

Cicero Matters

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Review: *Why Cicero Matters*, by Vittorio Bufacchi. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. 192. Paperback, \$24.25 / Hardcover, \$90.00.

Cicero's legacy has fallen on hard times in the past century. Often seen more as a repository of other, better sources than a thoughtful and careful philosopher in his own right, the "Tully" whom previous generations learned to love in public high school has largely vanished from the popular landscape. In his short new book *Why Cicero Matters*, Vittorio Bufacchi pushes back against this modern trend and seeks to restore Cicero to his rightful place as a major influence on politics and American life.

Warm, thoughtful, knowledgeable, and clearly delighted with Cicero, Bufacchi's book introduces us to the basics of Cicero's philosophical thought in a way that is accessible to the newcomer and refreshing to Ciceronian veterans.

Loosely following Cicero's major philosophical works, Bufacchi provides an introduction laying out his project. He then gives an overview of Cicero on the necessity of philosophy for individuals. Chapters follow each on practical virtue, political structures, friendship, aging, and the role of philosophy in the state. An epilogue calls for a return to the prominence of Cicero in our troubled times. Across the book, Bufacchi's stated purpose is to bring Cicero back into the conversation about philosophy, public life, and what it means to be human—and if doing so displaces the prominence currently held by Julius Caesar in contemporary thought about ancient Rome, so much the better.

Why Cicero Matters has two major strengths and a major weakness—and I want to be clear that the strengths outweigh the weakness. This is a book you should read and enjoy, and pass along to others so that they may do the same.

First, as for the strengths, Bufacchi is clearly right that Cicero is important in responding to our modern political ills. And he is even more right to highlight the importance of philosophy in that response for Cicero and us alike. This should not be the high philosophy

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of the academy, caught up in the nebulous twists and turns of *dasein* or *différance* or *the Ground*. Instead Bufacchi follows Cicero by insisting on a philosophy that influences, flows from, and is continually in intimate conversation with the real world around us. Friendship, for example, is not an abstract longing for a missing part of ourselves à la Plato. As Cicero notes friendship is a real connection between human beings that affects how we think, feel, and act. Just as friendships in the real world are connections that drive how we actually live and think, so if we want a healthy republic we need philosophical citizens who understand the intersection between thought and life on a practical level. How we think about virtue must be directly tied to how we live in society. Only citizens so shaped can resist the temptations offered to us by would-be tyrants and demagogues.

Second, and more importantly, Bufacchi is right that those concerned with republican freedom (or even our more contemporary ‘liberal’ freedom, which Bufacchi carefully distinguishes) should be more focused on Cicero than on Julius Caesar. I would perhaps add that this is even more true of Augustus Caesar, given that he succeeded in finishing off the Roman Republic in ways that Julius Caesar may never have even contemplated. In any case, the fascination with Caesar may be understandable at least from a military perspective (just how good a general was he anyway?), but interest in his political revolution as a model to be emulated rather than as a cautionary tale is unsettling to say the least in a society that claims to value republican freedoms. Bufacchi’s continued refrain that Cicero provides a better way than Caesar is a message that needs to be heard.

That said, the weakness of this book is that far too much emphasis is placed on contemporary politics and the threat from the right. The concern with the populist right (certainly something to be concerned about) reaches such heights that it begins to interfere with the application of Cicero’s thought. One line is especially telling:

The aim of this book is to change our perception of Cicero, and to offer a more progressive interpretation of Cicero’s political thought, even if this means sacrificing historical accuracy (111).

It would be far better to admit that Cicero simply doesn’t make all the points we want him to make than to attempt to twist history until it runs counter to reality. No thinker does

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everything—we don't need them to. And if there are times when instead of being the cranky old conservative I want him to be Cicero instead is pandering to the populist masses, it is my responsibility to him, to myself, to my students, and (as a scholar) to the general public to be clear about that side of Cicero as well.

When we forget our obligation to historical truth, we end up making blatantly false overstatements like this:

Cicero highlighted the importance of equality in these [Republican] institutional arrangements; he would be shocked, and alarmed, by the grotesque levels of domestic and global inequality in the modern world (77).

This statement is staggering in its inaccuracy, both about Cicero and about our times relative to those of the ancient world. There is *far* less space today between the poorest and the richest in our modern world than there was in Cicero's day. If anything, Cicero would be stunned by the level of prosperity available even to the most destitute in the twenty-first century.

If perhaps the desire to use Cicero as a bludgeon to beat back the specter of Donald Trump or Boris Johnson is understandable, giving in to that desire ultimately undermines the overall point of the book and erodes Cicero's legacy as a moderating influence on the extreme forces pulling apart the Roman Republic. Cicero is important because of his valuing of philosophy and as a foil against the political extremes, to be sure. But he is also important because he calls us to find a way to live together in the same nation despite our extreme inclinations. Cicero would insist that the populist right and the woke left should be able to collaborate together for the good of the republic. Both should submit to the rule of virtue and the necessity of a functional state. This message is not quite as clear as it could have been, even accounting for the gaps in Cicero's political philosophy.

Even with that weakness, overall *Why Cicero Matters* is an excellent little book and well worth your time. Cheerfully recommended.

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