CICERO'S ECLECTICISM AND ORIGINALITY

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One of the most strenuous debates in regard to Cicero turns upon the controversial subject of his eclecticism and originality, or lack of originality. Much of what is said on this subject, however, is simplistic or ill-considered, since it does not take account, on the one hand, of the relevant circumstances pertaining to Cicero's eclecticism nor, on the other hand, of the basis upon which his originality should be adjudicated.

Cicero's education at Rome and his subsequent peregrination to Greece and Asia Minor brought him into contact with virtually all the then-known schools of thought. He drank deeply from the cup of learning offered to him, and by virtue of his academic bent, soon acquired the skill to distinguish between discrete doctrines, to accept what appealed to him and to reject what he found objectionable. This task must have been greatly facilitated by his knowledge of the Greek language, which opened up a new world of thought and culture unknown to the average Roman. It must likewise have been facilitated by his basic knowledge of Roman law and his love of literature, Latin and Greek. In his deep-seated urge to acquire knowledge and to enjoy success in his career, he doubtless required no persuasion to fling himself wholeheartedly into the study of rhetoric and philosophy. It was inevitable that his own thought in respect of every aspect of existence should develop accordingly. And even if such thought was not, as appears to have been the case, original in any marked degree, he was nevertheless soon equipped with a vast store of knowledge which he was able, in his inimitable way, to convey to the world of his time and to countless subsequent generations.[1]

Cicero was introduced to Greek Stoic philosophy at an early age, thanks to the teaching of Diodotus the Stoic. His attraction to Stoic doctrines also encouraged him to study under Posidonius at Rhodes, where he renewed his acquaintance with the thought of Panaetius, who had introduced the doctrines of the Middle Stoa to Rome. Panaetius and the historian, Polybius, had both spent some time at Rome, where they exerted a powerful influence on the circle of Scipio Aemilianus and Laelius. They not only contributed towards a redefinition of typically Roman concepts, such as virtue, law and the state, but they provided a new insight into the relationship between man and nature, in which regard they found support in Democritus, Plato and Aristotle. They furthermore developed Roman ethical ideas in accordance with the Roman approach to life and government; they assisted in tempering strict law by a greater application than hitherto of equitable principles; they taught that the positive law of the Romans could be reconciled and harmonised with the Stoic idea of natural law and that Stoic philosophy and Roman theology should be fused into a "philosophical state religion". This strong movement in the direction of the Romanisation of Stoic philosophy was further encouraged by the visit to Rome of Posidonius. It is hence not surprising that Cicero became a strong adherent of Stoic doctrines, as appears from his introductory remarks in the *De officiis*, where he states that, at the particular time and in regard to the question under investigation, he prefers to drink from the Stoic sources, not merely as a translator (*interpretes*) but in the measure and manner that will seem appropriate in accordance with his judgment and discretion.[2]

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1 On Cicero's education see D.H. van Zyl *Cicero's legal philosophy* (1986:3-6) and the authorities cited there.

2 *Off.* 1.2.6. Books 3 and 4 of the *De finibus* and the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* are dedicated entirely to a discussion of Stoic philosophy. See in general on Cicero and Stoicism P.M. Valenté *L'éthique stoïcienne chez Cicéron* (1956); G. Kilb "Ethische Grundbegriffe der alten Stoa und ihre Übertragung durch Cicero" in Büchner *Das neue Cicerobild* (1971:38-64); G.B. Kerferd "Cicero and stoic ethics" in *Cicero and Virgil* (1972:60-74); D. Pesce *L'etica stoica nel terzo libro del de finibus* (1977); Van Zyl (1986:20-21) and the authorities cited there in n. 68.

Despite his general adherence to Stoic doctrines, Cicero was indeed influenced by Plato and the (Old) Academy, and this was not merely because he liked to be regarded as a member of this illustrious school of thought. His reverence for Plato appears from his description of him as "that divine man" (*divinum illum virum*) and "our Plato" (*noster Plato*) (*Leg.* 3.1.1; 3.2.5; 3.14.32). That does not, however, mean that he accepted everything that Plato said. Though fascinated by Plato's eloquence and his outstanding moral and political doctrines, Cicero was not attracted to his theory of ideas nor his emphasis on mathematics.[3]

It was probably Philo, the Academic, who first managed to temper somewhat Cicero's dedication to Stoicism and to instil in him a love of Platonism. The difficulty was, however, that the Old Academy of Plato was rapidly changing its stance towards settled Platonistic doctrines so that, by the time Carneades took over its leadership, it was called the New Academy and was characterised by Scepticism rather than Platonism.[4]

It would appear that Cicero was, to a certain extent, inclined to Scepticism as a result of the conflicting doctrines of different philosophical schools. His *Academica* and *De natura deorum* are in fact regarded as the main source of knowledge of this school of thought. Yet he amply realised the dangers of Scepticism to morality and he strove to place moral judgments beyond its influence. He regarded moral precepts as proceeding from nature and being confirmed by general agreement (*consensus gentium*). It was hence particularly in the field of natural philosophy that Cicero approached Scepticism.[5] To this extent he may be said to have rejected the impractical idealism of Stoic doctrine in the same way as he rejected Epicureanism because it was offensive to morality. His brief flirtation with Epicureanism, which he had been taught by Phaedrus and of which he had heard from Zeno of Sidon, had little effect on the development of his thought other than to elicit from him strong anti-Epicurean sentiments, a process probably initiated by Philo.[6] Yet he did not reject Epicureanism entirely, just as he did not reject Scepticism or the impractical idealism of Stoicism entirely.[7] It was eventually Antiochus who made him realise that Stoicism and Platonism could be reconciled with each other and also with the Aristotelianism of the Peripatetics. The eclecticism of Antiochus intrigued him and he willingly exposed himself to the influence of a variety of philosophers and schools of thought,

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3 E. Rawson *Cicero: a portrait* (1975:18). See in general on Cicero and Plato, Th. de Graff "Plato in Cicero" in *Classical Philology* 35 (1940:143-153); A.E. Douglas "Platonis Aemulus?" in *Greece and Rome* (1962:41-51).

4 See F.A. Copleston *A history of philosophy* 1.2 (1962:161); K. Vörlander *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte* 1 (1971:133).

5 See Copleston (1962:163); A. Weische *Cicero und die neue Akademie: Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Geschichte des antiken Skeptizismus* (1961); W. Burkert "Cicero als Platoniker und Skeptiker: Zum Platonverständnis der neuen Akademie" in *Gymnasium* 72 (1965:175-200); C. Lévy "Ciceron et la quatrième académie" in *Revue des études latines* 63 (1985:32-41); See also E.R. Bevan *Stoics and sceptics* (1913); M.Y. Henry *The relation of dogmatism and scepticism in the philosophical treatises of Cicero* (1925).

6 See G. d'Anna *Alcuni aspetti della polemica antiepicurea di Cicerone* (1965); T. Maslowski "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-Epicureanism" in *Eos* 62 (1974:55-78).

7 In this way an important link between Cicero and the Epicurean poet and philosopher, Lucretius, has been established. See E.J. Boerwinkel *Burgerschap en individuele autonomie: Epicurus en epicureisme in het oordeel van Lucretius en Cicero* (1956); I. Trencsényi-Waldapfel "Cicéron et Lucrèce" in *Acta Antiqua* 6 (1958:321-383); G.C. Pucchi "Ecchi lucreziani in Cicerone" in *Studi ital fil class* 38 (1966:70-132); T. Maslowski *Lucretius and Cicero* (1969).

thus paving the way for his particularly eclectic attitude towards life, politics and law. By virtue of his eclectic approach he was able to draw something from each of these philosophies.[8] This appears from certain passages in the *De officiis*. He points out, in one such passage, that his works do not differ much from those of the Peripatetics, since both they and he like to be regarded as followers of Socrates and Plato.[9]

The discussion of Cicero's eclecticism is usually linked to the debate as to his originality - or lack of it - and his contribution to Western philosophy. Cicero may himself have sparked off this debate by creating the impression that he saw himself as a translator of Greek philosophy rather than as an original philosopher in his own right. A text which is frequently cited in this regard appears in a letter written by him to his great friend, Atticus. With somewhat uncharacteristic modesty, he informs Atticus that his works are "copies" (*apographa*) produced with little effort: he merely supplies the words, of which he has an abundance in store (*Ep. Att.* 12.52). Similarly, in the preface to the *De finibus bonorum et malorum* addressed to Brutus, he informs the reader that he is rendering in Latin subjects which philosophers of the greatest learning and outstanding erudition have dealt with in Greek (*Fin.* 1.1.1). He justifies the rendering of Greek philosophy in Latin, referring to the popularity of Greek poetry which has thus been translated (*Fin.* 1.2.4-5). From a hypothesis which he puts in this regard, however, it is clear that he does not consider himself as a mere translator, in that he suggests that he respects the writings of the philosophers whom he has chosen to discuss, but applies his own judgment, arrangement of writing and style in dealing with their works.[10]

In a further hypothesis, Cicero states that, even if he had simply translated Plato or Aristotle, as Roman poets have done in respect of Greek plays, he would still be rendering a service to his fellow citizens if he acquainted them with the "divine intellect" of the Greek philosophers. He emphasises that he has not done so hitherto, although nothing has restrained him from doing so. Indeed, should he deem it fitting and should the occasion warrant it, he would take over certain passages from those writers (Plato and Aristotle), as the poet Ennius has borrowed from Homer and Afranius from Menander (*Fin.* 1.3.7). In fact, Cicero declares, there is no reason at all to hold Latin in contempt since, as he has often observed, it is even richer than the Greek language (*Fin* 1.3.10). As he has done his duty and faced perils and hardship in his capacity as a lawyer and statesman appointed by the Roman people, so he feels constrained to promote, as far as possible, the advancement of learning among his countrymen. Thus he expresses the desire not to join issue with those who prefer to read Greek, provided they do not simply pretend to do so, but to serve those who wish to avail themselves of literature in both languages or, if they have literature in their own language, have no particular urge to have access to that which is available in another language (*Fin.* 1.4.10). In the *De finibus* he has hence treated exhaustively of a particular subject and propounded not only the views of which he himself has approved, but also those of the various schools of philosophy (*Fin.* 1.4.12).

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8 "Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 120-68 BC) succeeded Philo as head of the Academy and was known as an Eclectic *par excellence*." The influence on Cicero of other philosophers, such as Heraclitus, Socrates and Aristotle, has also been widely researched. Interesting contributions are those of H. Diller "Heraclitea bei Cicero" in *Festschrift Büchner* (1970:60-65); J. Langan "Socrates and Cicero: Two approaches to the role of philosophy" in *The Classical Bulletin* 37 (1960:17-19, 25); O. Gigon "Cicero und Aristoteles" in *Hermes* 87 (1959:143-162). On Cicero's eclecticism see further P. Giuffrida *Richerche sull 'eclettismo ciceroniano* (1963); Van Zyl (1986:82-83) and the authorities cited there in n. 460.

9 *Off.* 1.1.2. See also *Off.* 1.2.6 where Cicero states that, for the most part, he makes use of Stoic sources.

10 *Fin.* 1.2.6. See also *Off.* 1.2.6, where he says that he follows the Stoics, not as a translator (*interpretes*), but adopts from their sources what seems meet. Likewise, in *Off.* 2.17.60, he declares that he has often relied on Panaetius, but not as a translator.

Cicero expresses similar sentiments in the preamble to his *Tusculanae Disputationes*, wherein he adopts the view that, since the basis of all the arts are contained in the study of wisdom, which is called philosophy, he should illustrate it by means of Latin terminology. This does not mean that philosophy cannot be learnt from Greek literature and teachers but it has always been his opinion that his own people have demonstrated more wisdom than the Greeks in finding out things for themselves. Alternatively they have improved on that which they have received from the Greeks in so far as they have considered it worthy of their efforts (*Tusc.* 1.1.1).

The superiority which Cicero felt in respect of the Greeks is likewise encountered in various other passages. By commenting in this manner he apparently wished to make it clear that much of his work was original in concept and treatment and owed nothing to the Greeks. Thus, for example, in a letter to Atticus he states, on pain of being accused of egotism (*philautia*), that his treatment of the subject in his *Academica* is original, since nothing of a similar nature exists among the Greeks (*Ep. Att.* 13.13-14). Elsewhere he points out, by means of a dialogue in which his brother, Quintus, is addressing him, that he has differed from Plato in subject-matter and opinion, although his oratorical style appears to be similar (*Leg.* 2.7.17).

From this it appears that Cicero does not see himself as a mere translator of Greek philosophical works, but as a person who has introduced Greek philosophy to Rome. This he has done, not only by rendering it in Latin, but also by adapting it to the needs of and circumstances prevailing in the Roman world and by supplementing it with his own ideas and in accordance with his judgment and discretion. At the same time his critical attitude towards the various schools of philosophy, coupled with his desire to reconcile conflicting opinions, may even be regarded as a novel, if not original, approach to philosophy.[11]

On the subject of Cicero's originality and contribution to Western philosophy, posterity has not always been kind to Cicero. It is true that the Dutch lawyer, Antonius Schultingh (1659-1734), regarded Cicero as an outstanding philosopher and on a par with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.[12] The general consensus of opinion, however, is that Cicero was an eclectic, who borrowed from various schools of Greek philosophy, particularly those of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, so that he had no claim to any originality as a philosopher.[13]

Armstrong goes so far as to refer to Cicero as "a real Eclectic, that is not a systematic thinker, but one who collected little bits and pieces of whatever pleased him in the teaching of all schools". He sees him as a "translator and transmitter" who made no contribution to the development of ancient thought.[14]

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11 See for example the critical discourses in *Leg.* 1.13.38-39; 1.20.53-54; 1.21.55-56.

12 A. Schultingh *Oratio de jurisprudentia historica* (1712:47): *Tali philosophia Romae conspicui fuerunt Cicero, Seneca et omnium principum optimus, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus imperator, ex ipsa re dictus Philosophus. Horum ac similium scientia, cujus vis et usus in ipso rerum actu versatur, verae et non simulatae philosophiae titulo proprio quodam jure splendere poterit.*

13 See A. Verdross *Abendländische Rechtsphilosophie* (1963:48-50) and the authorities cited in Van Zyl (1986:83) n. 460.

14 A.H. Armstrong *An introduction to ancient philosophy* (1957:142, 155). At p. 156, however, he concedes that Cicero had some value to the West as "the creator of philosophical language".

Cicero has indeed frequently been regarded as a mere translator and interpreter of Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato.[15] On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that most of the available philosophical material of Cicero's time had been rendered in Greek which was not familiar to all Romans. Cicero's aim was to introduce Greek philosophy to Rome and to provide his countrymen with a kind of philosophic encyclopaedia.[16] In order to achieve this aim, it was essential for him to create a virtually new vocabulary of Latin philosophical terminology. Davies sees this as the creation of new literary **genre**, which entitles Cicero to some credit for originality. The learned author further suggests that Cicero's philosophical works were intended as a "moral guide" and an expression of his political and philosophical idealism.[17] This is perhaps why Douglas has been moved to say:

> "We must still not claim for Cicero a degree of 'originality' which he does not claim for himself, yet it is true that reaping where others had sown, selecting, adapting, and above all giving eloquent expression to other ideas, he made of himself a 'source' - not of philosophical propositions and arguments but of an enlightened and humane outlook, the Roman spirit at its best."[18]

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15 On Cicero as a translator of Greek philosophy, see the early contributions of C.M. Bernhardt *De Cicerone graecae philosophiae interprete* (1865) and C. Atzert *De Cicerone interprete Graecorum* (1908). See also R. Poncelet *Cicéron traducteur de Platon: L'expression de la pensée complexe en latin classique* (1957) (his conclusions at pp. 362-368 appear in Kytzler *Ciceros literarische Leistung* (1973:170-180) under the title "Cicero als Übersetzer Platons"); T. de Villapadierna "Cicerón traductor" in *Helmantica* 9 (1958:425-443); A. Traglia "Note su Cicerone traduttore di Platone e di Epicuro" in *Studi de Falco* (1971:305-340); M. Puelma "Cicero als Platon-Übersetzer" in *Museum Helveticum* 37 (1980:137-178).

16 J. Ferguson "Cicero's contribution to philosophy" in Ferguson *Studies in Cicero* (1962:97-111) at 104. See also D.H. van Zyl "Cicero's contribution to Western philosophy" in *Codicillus* 28.8 (1987:11-16).

17 J.C. Davies "The originality of Cicero's philosophical works" in *Latomus* 30 (1971:105-119) at 118-119.

18 A.E. Douglas "Cicero the philosopher" in Dorey *Cicero* (1965:135-170) at 139-140. See also G. Tarozzi "La romanità del pensiero filosofico di Cicerone" in *Archivio di storia della filosofia italiana* (1933:132-151); A. Guillemin "Cicéron et la culture latine" in *Revue des études latines* 25 (1947:148-157); P. Krarup "Quelques remarques sur l'originalité de Cicéron dans ses oeuvres politiques" in *Mélanges Boyancé* (1974:455-460).