Cicero's Tusculan Disputations

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Some figures in history loom so large they become multiple people in the imagination, and Marcus Tullius Cicero was certainly one. Cicero was a Roman orator, philosopher, writer, exile, father, and many other things. Unfortunately, these “sides” of Cicero are rarely addressed at the same time by scholars, a practice which, while understandable, disrupts the continuity of Cicero as a single human being. The Tusculan Disputations, written in 45 BCE, is one of Cicero’s philosophical works wherein the continuity of Cicero is especially important to a reader. It is comprised of five books, each containing a preface from Cicero and a fictitious discussion (disputation) taking place at his Tusculan villa between two interlocutors denoted merely as “A.” and “M.” Each disputation, in order, addresses these issues, which build on each other: is death an evil? (not necessarily) is pain an evil? (not necessarily), is a wise man susceptible to distress (no) is the wise man free from all disorders of the soul? (yes) is virtue sufficient for a happy life? (yes). Scholarship surrounding this work falls into two general categories: most historians focus on the interplay between Cicero’s career in oratory and his passion for philosophy, but some historians focus entirely upon Cicero’s grief, as his daughter, Tullia, had died as a result of childbirth earlier in the year.

My aim is to reconcile these two perspectives, viewing them together while reading because they are equally significant factors in any given moment of the Tusculan Disputations.

On the one hand, Plato perpetuated the perspective that rhetoric was “insincere and unknowing” and that it was a diminished form of philosophy which led people astray. Thus, many philosophers were wary of oratory. Cicero, on the other hand, suggested that “to commit one’s reflections to writing, without being able to arrange or express them clearly...indicates a man who makes an unpardonable misuse of leisure and his pen.” In other words, oratory is necessary to do philosophy.

On the other side of the controversy, philosophy was primarily seen as a Greek pursuit, and it was not considered particularly respectable for a Roman aristocrat to engage in it. However, Cicero had made clear his opinion on the matter in his work entitled On the Orator. As the title suggests, Cicero’s focus was what the ideal orator should be like. This is a divergence from the typical oratory rule-book. Cicero’s ideal orator is not a rule-follower, but a certain kind of person that can suit their speech to any situation. In order to achieve that, Cicero argued, the ideal orator needs universal knowledge, especially philosophy. Thus, oratory is reliant on philosophy.

In the years before and after the Tusculan Disputations, Cicero had been writing, many philosophical works which incorporated his counter-cultural stand on the relationship between philosophy and oratory. The Disputations are unique, however, in that they are the first philosophical work (that is, not including his Consolation) written after the death of his daughter, and there is clear evidence that Cicero was still grieving at the time. Evidence of his affection for his daughter during her life is frequently found in Cicero’s personal letters, where he speaks glowingly of his “darling little Tullia.” Upon her death, Cicero writes to his friend Atticus about building her a shrine to “consecrate her memory by every kind of memorial borrowed from the genius of all the masters.” Later letters also suggest that Cicero was criticized for grieving an extended period of time, to which Cicero responded “for my part I don’t see what people are complaining of or what they expect of me. Not to grieve? How is that possible!”

The contribution of Cicero’s oratorical, philosophical, and personal backgrounds should be kept in mind while reading the entirety of the Disputations. Here, from Book V, is an example of how they can all factor into any given moment:

Recall how the discussion of Book IV concluded that a wise man (who is also, by default, a virtuous man) is free from all disorders of the soul. One should then conclude that virtue is sufficient for a happy life. However, the character denoted “A.” did not do so. He says: “It does not appear to me that virtue can be sufficient for leading a happy life...if you are going to do any good, you must look out for some fresh arguments. Those you have given have no effect on me.” A’s concern is specifically whether circumstance has a part to play in happiness. In a similar passage in Book I, the interlocutor insists that they have read Plato, have been convinced by him while reading, but have accrued doubt once they put the book down.

These passages leave open the possibility of an airtight philosophical case that which remains unconvincing to the human conscience. In the preface of Book V, Cicero himself admits to having such human doubts which suggests that his work has to do with the difficulty of his own circumstance. Cicero, while he concludes that virtue is sufficient for a happy life, remains ever so slightly unconvincing, and it comes through in his work.

However, Cicero’s grief is not the only factor. Cicero is, of course, engaging in philosophical discourse, and he is relying on oratory. Cicero has spent his professional career persuading others not only through evidence and sound logic but through sounding convincing.

Thus, in the very same passage, Cicero shows himself to be a grieving father who needs to be convinced— not merely logically seduced—as regards whether virtue is sufficient for a happy life, and he shows a need for both philosophy and rhetoric blended in order to properly address the issue. A complete, multi-faceted Cicero wrote this passage, and the same is true of the Tusculan Disputations as a whole.