
Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics and Society by
Michael Trapp

Burlington, VT/Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007. Pp. xiv + 285. ISBN
978-0-7546-1618-6. Cloth \$99.95, £55.00

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Philosophy in the Roman Empire addresses philosophy (*philosophia*, as Trapp likes to refer to it, to remind us of its immigrant status in Rome) as an aspect of Imperial culture [x]. Its principal focus on ‘ethics, politics and society’ makes for a slightly artificial sense of the range of philosophical activity at this period (especially striking is the absence of cosmology and metaphysics, not least because it effectively marginalizes the Platonist revival, which is arguably the most distinctive and influential product of Imperial philosophy). Nevertheless, it also allows Trapp to focus on writers unduly neglected by many philosophical histories—e.g., Dio Chrysostom, Maximus of Tyre, and the Neopythagoreans. Furthermore, it establishes limits within which Trapp is able to develop a narrative that keeps philosophical doctrine and social context in close dialogue with each other—something he does to great effect.

The topics covered in the book reflect Trapp’s conviction that it is the Stoics who set the agenda for philosophy in the Roman period [cf. esp. 144]: ethics, emotions and their control, selfhood, interpersonal relations, and political theory. In each case (not to make things sound too formulaic) the prevailing pattern is that Trapp sets out the issue, breaks it down as necessary, and explores under distinct headings how it was treated by the various schools and individuals of the time. The influence of scholars such as Miriam Griffin (on Seneca), A. A. Long (on Epictetus) and R. K. Sorabji is palpable, but so is Trapp’s own familiarity with his wide-ranging material, which he surveys in a very assured and elegant manner. Trapp’s partiality for the Stoics, although expressed as a dispassionate historical thesis, is in the end not furnished with any evidence independent of his Sto-

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ISSN 1549-4497 (online) ISSN 1549-4470 (print) ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)
Aestimatio 4 (2007) 117-121

icizing selection of topics; and the fact that other schools, especially and strikingly the Epicureans, end up with so little to say, and that of such little value, suggests that the story could have been told very differently. In one respect, too, it seems to me that Trapp does not give full credit even to the Stoics, and that is in ascribing to them a decidedly dualistic anthropology which lands them in some philosophical embarrassment. In developing this dualism, Trapp reflects well enough the fact that our texts talk about the superior value of the soul over the body. But if one thinks of the soul as something like the life that the body has, this need not mean more than that *what we do with the body* is more important than (mere) corporeal integrity. It might, to this extent, be misleading to think that the Stoics ask us to value one entity (the soul) above another (the body). The difficulty that Trapp's position leads to lies in the Stoics' claim that altruism has the same basis as our natural instinct to self-preservation. Trapp is inclined to see here an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable: roughly, the demands of soul and body, respectively. It is (he thinks) not to the credit of the Hellenistic Stoics that they overlooked the point; and the adherence to their position by Seneca and Epictetus can be no less than 'willful blindness' [141]. But perhaps, after all, the Stoics had a perfectly coherent way of saying that one cannot feel at ease with oneself if one's behavior is at odds with the world (including the social world) of which one is a part? The inclination to self-preservation for a rational creature should, in this case, be an instinct to preserve oneself as a creature that behaves in a certain way—a way which crucially includes treating other people as no less intrinsically valuable than oneself.

Trapp is, however, surely right to think that Seneca and Epictetus, blindly or not, are in close conformity with the Hellenistic school; and in general that 'Roman' Stoicism (and Epicureanism, and Cynicism) differs hardly at all in philosophical substance from the schools of the second century BC—or even the fourth [e.g. 63, 96]. It is to his credit that Trapp does not fight shy of the conclusion, even if it leads him on occasion to the rather desperate expedient of soliciting our interest precisely in the *static* nature of the debates [74–75]. But not all is stasis, as we discover in the last chapter, which deals with the place of *philosophia* itself in society. Here Trapp discerns an interesting failure in alignment, peculiar to his period, between the language and values of *philosophia* and the norms of the audience it

wishes to educate. Useful though the doxography of the earlier chapters will be found, his remarks here will surely constitute the book's most valuable contribution to scholarship—for they address in very lucid terms one of the most serious challenges to our understanding of philosophy at this period.

Trapp considers the dissonance that he identifies in narrowly social terms as an attempt on the part of philosophers to establish a 'detached vantage point' whose defamiliarizing language enabled its adherents to develop 'a principled mistrust of the ordinary' [233]. What might perhaps deserve more emphasis is the way in which this vantage-point is achieved precisely by the conservatism of the debates, the philosophical stasis, described in the earlier chapters of the book. It is, after all, the failure of philosophical texts to keep up, as it were, with an evolving social context which leads to the friction in which Trapp is here interested. Not only does it help to elucidate the two principal phenomena addressed by Trapp's discussion to make this connection, it also suggests a way of relating them to a characteristic obsession of Imperial philosophy with its own history. The reasons for this obsession are reasonably well understood [cf. Hadot 1987, Sedley 1989]: it is to do with the fact that philosophers in the Empire were operating without the benefit of the living Hellenistic institutions which for centuries were the reference-points for philosophical identity and orthodoxy. A post-Hellenistic philosopher who wished to establish his credentials as a Stoic, for example, or an Epicurean, had only one way to look, and that was backwards. This dynamic fits very well with the idea that their texts turn out to be uncomfortable and defamiliarizing because of their anachronism: they comment on their own society precisely by tracing the distance between themselves and the past by which they too are validated. An interesting case-study in the kind of dialogue that results may be found in the surviving *Epitome of Greek Theological Traditions* by the first-century Stoic Cornutus. Cornutus in this work is addressing himself to the education of a *child* through the study of *ancient* religious traditions. (His very first words make a programmatic juxtaposition of ancient material and a youthful recipient—who is not just *παῖς* but emphatically *παιδίον*.) Much of the work involves the recognition that the philosophical roots of these traditions in distant antiquity have been obscured by every kind of corruption and accretion in their subsequent transmission. But the conclusion is that it is

precisely by becoming conscious of our own distance from the purer theology in which the tradition originally took its rise that we can benefit from it [Lang 1881, 76.9–16]. Of course, in most philosophical writing, the defamiliarizing historical gap is a structural feature, not something thematized in this way. But it is a structural feature of Cornutus' work *as well*. There is the usual conservatism of doctrine; there is also, in this case, the fact that the work is dominated by traditional Greek material, although one might imagine that its ostensible recipient was a Roman child (Cornutus worked at Rome, after all). If this were not enough, Cornutus explicitly represents his work as a summary account of work pursued more fully in earlier (*scil.* Hellenistic) studies [Lang 1881, 76.7–9].

In general, then, there is reason to think that the gap Trapp identifies between the Hellenistic continuations and their social environment is not *just* a gap (as the conservatism of doctrine by which it is created is not *just* conservatism): it is not any old defamiliarization that it offers. It is a gap that calls attention specifically to the cultural past of the readers of this material. This, quite specifically, may be what gives them a means of standing outside of their own society in order to understand it the better.

A final remark on this point. The tools for the kind of engagement envisaged may be as much literary as philosophical, just in so far as it involves the interplay and reception of earlier texts. One thing worth emphasizing, then, is the astonishingly rich overlap of literary and philosophical activity we find in the Roman period. The 'Second Sophistic', with which Dio Chrysostom and Maximus of Tyre are often associated, constituted a major renaissance of literary philosophy; the literary output of Plutarch and Seneca hardly needs comment; Cornutus, to whom I have just appealed as a philosopher, was also a grammarian, commentator on Virgil, and tutor to Persius, one of the major poets of his age. One could go on. These connections are important enough if one is interested in the cultural and educational context of philosophy (it is relevant that Seneca and Cornutus were active in a lively intellectual scene at the court of Nero). But beyond this, the Imperial period above all shows, if it needed showing, how the tools of literature can subserve rigorous philosophical argument and debate. Without them, as Trapp goes some way to demonstrating, the texts of this period will seem more naive, philosophically, than a principle of charity can bear.

The Imperial period is a difficult and multifaceted area which remains very much work in progress for historians of philosophy. Trapp's study of ethical thought in the continuations of the Hellenistic schools and derivative contexts provides us with a reference work of lasting value—and much food for further thought.

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