

BOOK REVIEW

Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and Laws. By JED W. ATKINS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 270. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-1-107-04358-9.

The cogency of the two partially extant dialogues *Republic* and *Laws* has often been questioned, as Cicero struggles to reconcile “the rational, divine, eternal, and ideally best on one hand, and the human, customary, contingent, historical, particular, and practicable on the other” (5). Atkins offers a novel account of the essential coherence of Cicero’s thinking in the two dialogues: rather than being indicative of failure, the discrepancies and incongruities highlight the limitations of reason and open up the space for Cicero’s own innovative contributions to political philosophy.

Atkins begins by orientating the reader with well-established interpretative problems before turning to a consideration of the *Republic*. Chapter 1, “Reading the *Republic*”, stresses Cicero’s awareness of his own authorial authority and the ways in which he exploits the dialogue form. There are useful discussions of Cicero’s allegiance to the sceptical New Academy and the nature of his engagement with Plato, which feed into a sensible argument that Cicero fashions the *Republic* as an invitation to the reader to engage in the activity of political philosophy rather than as a dogmatic statement of various principles held by Cicero himself.

In Chapter 2, “The Dream of Scipio and the Science of Politics”, Atkins shows how the concluding Dream of Scipio, which has caused much scholarly consternation, is in fact foreshadowed throughout the dialogue. He argues that Scipio’s use of ideal models of the state, in particular the good order of the heavenly realm, commits him to the view that politics is not wholly rational since it contains so much contingency and disorder – the models highlight constraints and limitations. The Dream emphasizes these while at the same time it prescribes rather than rejects rational rule. In Chapter 3, “Constitutional Change and the Mixed Constitution”, Atkins then demonstrates that the mixed constitution is the best practicable alternative to the ideal model provided by reason alone. The wise statesman seeks concessions in order to establish the best possible state of affairs given the realities of chance and the irrationality of human nature: reason has its limits and

there is not a blunt imposition of the ideal models. The argument in these two chapters is compelling and most informative on the extent of Platonic influence on the dialogue—of particular interest are the parallels Atkins draws between the cave and sun allegories in Plato's *Republic* and the Dream of Scipio, and his argument that the account of the mixed constitution owes more to Plato's thinking in his *Republic* and *Laws* than to Polybius.

Chapter 4, "Political Society and Citizens' Rights", explores Ciceronian innovations in the *Republic*. Atkins detects these in the presence of a 'rights-discourse' that draws on a Roman legal tradition, locating rights firmly in the context of political society rather than human nature. Those interested in the historical development of the notion of 'rights' will find of much value in this chapter. The discussion raises the question of how to reconcile the normative force of nature with the case of Rome, which allows a seamless transition from the *Republic* to the *Laws*.

In Chapter 5, "Natural Law", Atkins first explains the ways in which the *Laws* continues the project begun in the *Republic* and then offers an analysis of Cicero's relationship to a long tradition of thought on natural law, stressing the ways in which his engagement with Stoic thinking is guided by his commitment to Academic scepticism. This chapter provides a helpful guide through the first book of the *Laws*, but those seeking a detailed account of natural law theory more generally would be best to look elsewhere.

Chapter 6, "Legislation for the Best Practicable Regime", turns to the second and third books of the *Laws*, where various laws are posited for the best state. How do these particular laws relate to the doctrine of natural law put forward in the first book? Atkins offers a solution: the conditions pertaining in real states impose constraints on the ideal model provided by the natural law; for that reason, the ideal laws for the best practicable state will not accord fully with the natural law. Atkins traces such an account to Plato's *Laws*. However, why value the conventional law at all if it is at odds with the natural law? This worries the Stoics, who reject the authority of conventional law. Atkins makes the case that Cicero deviates from the Stoics as he privileges the conventional and insists that the normative force of the natural law must be used to support rather than to reject the authority of the customary laws of the state: the natural law serves as a model that human laws strive to emulate and it provides criteria for judging the justness of particular laws, but human laws do not need to share its qualities of immutability and permanence as the wise human legislator must adapt to contingencies and the demands of those subject to legislation. The argument is persuasive and richly illuminative of Cicero's efforts to apply natural law theory constructively given the realities of politics.

Atkins is sympathetic to Cicero, familiar with all the relevant literature, and through sensitive close readings expands our understanding of the dialogues and what Cicero has to offer us today. The book caters for those already familiar with the key issues as well as those approaching these texts for the first time: the scholarly controversies and essential aspects of the texts are introduced clearly and efficiently with sophisticated analyses then offered in turn; all Greek and Latin is translated; the indices and bibliography are comprehensive. The book flows smoothly from start to finish and succeeds in highlighting the essential coherence of Cicero's thinking both within and between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In sum, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason* is a major contribution to our understanding of Cicero's philosophical achievement and his ongoing legacy. It will serve as an essential guide to Cicero's *Republic* and *Laws* for classicists, philosophers, and political theorists.

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