

THE ACADEMICS OF CICERO

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The Academics of Cicero by Marcus Tullius Cicero

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MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

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OF CICERO**

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS translation of Cicero's *Academics* is intended to form an adjunct to a revised issue of my edition of the Latin text, with explanatory notes, now in the Press. The translation will ultimately appear together with the edition, in the same volume. This volume I originally intended to publish in time to be of use to the candidates for the ensuing Classical Tripos in Cambridge, who are required to prepare the 'Academica' as one of their 'set subjects.' Circumstances having rendered this impossible I decided to issue some copies of the translation separately for their use. It also occurred to me that a trustworthy rendering of this important book might at the same time prove to have some interest and value for another class of students--those whose special study is philosophy rather than Classics, and who, while wishing to learn something of the early history of their subject, have neither the leisure nor the particular acquirements necessary to enable them to read with profit the ancient philosophical writings in the original languages. I am aware that for such students the history of ancient thought has hitherto practically closed with the name of Aristotle. But it is, I think, beginning to be felt, in Germany at least, that the vast historical importance of the post-Aristotelian systems entitles them to more attention than they have hitherto received. In any case, whatever may be thought of the later Greek speculation as a whole, the controversy presented to us in Cicero's 'Academics' is one which ought to possess an enduring interest for the

modern student of philosophy. Though the struggle between philosophic scepticism and philosophic dogmatism covered a much smaller field in ancient than it has occupied in modern times, it yet opened up to the ancients problems which are being discussed today as vigorously as they were discussed then. There is no ancient work (if we exclude the writings of Sextus Empiricus) which presents to a greater extent than the 'Academics', points of resemblance to the modern literature of philosophy.

The Introduction and Notes are intended to smooth the chief difficulties likely to stand in the way of a modern reader. Where fuller information is wanted it must be sought in the more detailed elucidations attached to my completed edition of the original text. Much of the help that is needed may be gained from any good history of philosophy—that of Zeller, or Schwegler, or Ueberweg—all of which are easily accessible to students.

In the translation accuracy has been studied rather than finish of style, though harshness has been avoided so far as was possible without resort to paraphrase. I hope it will be found that this rendering is more trustworthy than any others which have yet appeared. The question how to represent in English the ancient philosophical terms is always full of difficulty. I have explained in my notes the reasons for my modes of rendering the leading phrases.

The text from which the translation is made is that of my own edition, which differs considerably from the German texts most in use.

INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. It is of the utmost importance clearly to understand that Cicero, in his philosophical works, never professed to perform any other function but that of an *interpreter* to Roman readers of the Greek systems with which he deals. He did not even leave himself free to expound the systems in his own manner, but usually took certain Greek writings and translated pretty closely from them. So the 'Academics' consists in substance of certain passages rendered from leading Greek books which had been called forth by the Sceptical controversy. All that Cicero supplies is the framework in which the whole is set, with sundry illustrations drawn from Roman history, which are scattered here and there throughout the discussion.

§ 2. A somewhat low estimate has hitherto prevailed of Cicero's trustworthiness as an expositor of Greek doctrine. I do not hesitate to say that he has had great injustice done to him in this matter. When modern scholars have found in Cicero a philosophical statement hard to understand or patently absurd, they have usually assumed, without more ado, that he has failed to catch the meaning of the author from whom he copied. It is far safer to suppose in such cases that the difficulty existed in the original source from which he drew his information. In the majority of instances this can be distinctly proved by a comparison of Cicero's statements with those of the other ancient authorities from whom our knowledge of the Greek thinkers is derived. Cicero's very want of originality has led him to preserve all

the defects of the writers whom he translated ; and the post-Aristotelian philosophers abounded in illogicalities and inconsistencies which to a modern reader seem very superficial indeed.

§ 3. The form in which the discussions are cast by Cicero is generally that of the dialogue. But the style of dialogue best known to us—that of Plato—had found no imitators among the later Greeks. The vivid dramatic interchange of question and answer was abandoned in favour of those ‘long speeches’ which Plato often condemned as unsuited for the discovery of truth. Accordingly we find the ‘Academics’ to consist of several long disquisitions delivered by the different interlocutors. Each is allowed to carry the exposition of his own views to completion without interruptions from the listeners, excepting those caused by expressions of polite admiration and encouragement.

§ 4. It has been well said that no ancient work illustrates so strikingly as the ‘Academics’ the saying ‘habent sua fata libelli’. Cicero first wrote the work in two books, entitled ‘Catulus’ and ‘Lucullus’ respectively. He then recast it and divided it into four books, addressed to Varro. By some accident these two editions, generally called the ‘Prior Academics’ and the ‘Posterior Academics,’ remained in circulation together. Time has, however, preserved neither edition to us entire. Of the ‘Prior Academics,’ only the latter half, i.e. the book entitled ‘Lucullus,’ has come down to us ; while of the ‘Posterior Academics’ we possess only a portion (though the larger portion) of the first book, along with some fragments of the remaining three, preserved by Augustine, Nonius, and others. Rather more than a quarter of the matter contained in the whole work has therefore perished.

§ 5. In the first edition the interlocutors were all leading members of the ‘Optimate’ or Senatorial party, who were already dead when Cicero wrote. The feigned date of the discussion was about 62 B.C. In the second edition the feigned date was almost the actual date of composition, that is 45 B.C. Both Varro and Atticus, who in the ‘Posterior Academics’ carry on the debate with Cicero, outlived him.

§ 6. Cicero’s object in writing the ‘Academics’ was to justify the sceptical criticism of the New Academy. The inquiry is into the