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1

Introduction

The past is an immense area of stony ground that many people would like to drive across as if it were a road, while others move patiently from stone to stone, lifting each one because they need to know what lies beneath.

—JOSÉ SARAMAGO, *THE ELEPHANT'S JOURNEY*

1. Senator Scholars

In 54 BCE, Julius Caesar dedicated to Cicero his *De analogia*, a treatise in two books on the proper use of Latin. The work was to some extent a response to Cicero's *De oratore*, written only the year before: when laying out the qualities of the good orator, Cicero had given short shrift to the issue of linguistic correctness; Caesar, by contrast, considered this an important enough topic in its own right, proposing morphological regularity or analogy as a significant criterion in the assessment of idiomatic and elegant speech. When in 46 BCE, Cicero composed his history of Roman oratory, the *Brutus*, he took the occasion to come back to the debate, expressing his appreciation of the earlier dedication but also assessing Caesar's own style—in a manner that, while superficially complimentary, made it clear that the two men remained far from agreement on what constituted an effective and aesthetic use of language.

The *Brutus* was named for M. Iunius Brutus, a younger friend of both Cicero and Caesar. Cicero dedicated the work to him at least in part as a thank-you for a philosophical treatise, *De uirtute*, that Brutus had just dedicated to him and that Cicero had read with great enjoyment. The two men shared a vivid interest in philosophy and especially in the question at issue in *De uirtute*, namely, whether virtue should be deemed a sufficient condition for happiness. When Cicero in the following months proceeded to write a whole series of philosophical works of his own, he addressed four of them (*Paradoxa Stoicorum*, *De finibus*, *Tusculans*, and *De natura deorum*) once more to Brutus.

Another person to receive a Ciceronian philosophical text during this period was M. Terentius Varro. Varro had hinted to Cicero that he was working on a major piece of scholarship that he intended to dedicate to his friend, and had expressed an interest in receiving a token of appreciation in turn. To oblige

Varro, Cicero made him both an interlocutor in his dialogue *Academica* and its dedicatee (45 BCE). Varro in turn did not fail Cicero and two years later dedicated to him his monumental *De lingua Latina*. In this monograph on the Latin language, Varro, among other topics, picked up the question of analogy previously treated by Caesar, devoting six of twenty-five books to its discussion. Caesar himself had been the dedicatee of another Varronian work in 46 BCE, the sixteen books of the *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum*, on Roman religion.

What I have just outlined are a few moments in the intellectual history of the late Republic. In the mid-first century BCE, Rome went through a period of cultural flourishing. Some of the most influential pieces of Latin scholarship and philosophy were penned by a close-knit group of intellectuals, men who knew each other, read and reacted to each other's texts, and received the dedications of their colleagues' books. Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Varro, among others, created a body of works on topics ranging from ethics to linguistics, from politics to religion to agriculture and beyond, that would shape the ways the Romans thought of themselves and of their world for centuries to come.

What is wrong with this picture? The story I have been telling is, of course, ludicrously one-sided. The mid-first century BCE has gone down in history primarily as a time of violent political conflict and civil war, and when people think of Julius Caesar, what usually comes to mind is not his achievements as a linguist but his exploits as a politician and general. Even *De analogia* was, we are told, written while its author was crossing the Alps on one of his many campaigns to Gaul, and when Caesar's actions a few years later led to the Civil War, he found himself fighting against not only Pompey, but also his erstwhile dedicatee Cicero and many other learned senators, including Brutus and Varro. The rest is history: Caesar emerged victorious, and most of Brutus's, Cicero's, and Varro's philosophical and scholarly works mentioned above were written in the uneasy time of his dictatorship, after the three men had received the victor's pardon. In the end, of course, it was none other than Brutus who led the conspirators who—to the applause of Cicero—assassinated Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BCE. Less than three years later, Brutus and Cicero were both dead, victims of the turbulent developments in the aftermath of Caesar's death, events in which they themselves had played crucial parts. Varro too barely survived, having seen his life and property twice threatened by proscription and having lost part of his library, including valuable copies of his own works.

My purpose in this book is to combine the two narratives just sketched and to treat them as one and the same story. As we have just seen, some of the most important intellectuals of the late Republic were also leading politicians—or, to look at the other side of what I think of as the same coin, some of the most important political actors in this time of turmoil also engaged in significant scholarly activity. This fascinating historical phenomenon raises a number of

questions: Why are the same men political players and intellectual luminaries? What are the social, political, and larger cultural circumstances that enable this convergence of roles? How do these men's political and intellectual activities relate to one another? And what is the relationship (if any) between the late Republic's cultural flourishing and its concomitant political collapse?

In the following chapters, I hope to arrive at some answers to these questions by studying the intellectual and political activities of Roman senators, and the mutual relationships of and connections among these diverse actions and behaviors. To put it slightly differently, what I aim to offer in this book is a work of intellectual history on the knowledge-producing practices of the late Republican political elite in their historical and cultural contexts. Before I lay out my methodological approach and the structure of my discussion, two preliminary qualifications are in order. I have no ambition to write a general history of scholarship or intellectual life in the late Roman Republic, projects that have been admirably undertaken by other scholars in the past (see 1.3 below), but have chosen a topic much more closely confined both in time and in subject matter. As for time, I will concentrate on the twenty years from 63 to 43 BCE, that is, from Cicero's consulship to his death, with a special focus on the mid-50s to mid-40s. This is when most of the important late Republican works of scholarship and philosophy were written; it is also the time during which the Republican system finally collapsed in chaos and civil war, never to recover.

The second restriction is even more significant. As already hinted, my story's cast of characters will consist nearly exclusively of members of the Roman senate (with the occasional walk-on from a nonsenator, Cicero's friend Atticus being the most prominent). Needless to say, not all writers, scholars, and philosophers in late Republican Rome were senators—far from it. Numerous members of the equestrian order as well as many resident Greeks played crucial roles in the intellectual developments of the period and interacted in multifarious ways with the “senator scholars” who are my topic. Since, however, my specific interest is in the roles intellectual activity played in the lives and careers of politically active men, I will touch on the practices and achievements of nonsenators only where they impinge on my narrative.

Conversely, of course, many important Roman politicians and other members of the senate did not apparently spend any time penning or discussing works on virtue or the Latin language (though note that in most cases, we simply do not know: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence). Such men too will therefore appear in these pages only as supporting characters of the central cast—Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, Varro, Cato, Cassius Longinus, Nigidius Figulus, and numerous less well-known senators with an intellectual bent. We will get to know these protagonists in detail in the following chapters; the remainder of this introduction is devoted to considerations of

methodology—how the intellectual history of the late Republic has been, and might be, written.

2. A Social History of Late Republican Knowledge

The term “intellectual history” has meant many different things to many different people, and the field’s definition and relationship to such sister, or rival, disciplines as, among others, the history of ideas, cultural history, *Geistesgeschichte*, or *histoire de mentalités* is anything but clear.¹ Despite this theoretical and methodological diversity, for many decades one basic tenet has been central to much work on the history of scholarship, literature, philosophy, religion, and science, namely, that ideas and the linguistic structures in which they are expressed arise not in a vacuum but in a historical, political, social, and cultural context. In contrast to a history of thought that views ideas as interacting with and responding to other ideas in a purely intellectual realm, such contextualizing approaches work on the assumption that all processes and products of thought are deeply enmeshed in the culture of their time and place and cannot be properly understood without taking account of the circumstances in which they arise.

As a corollary to this stress on context, intellectual historians have increasingly been directing their focus away from intellectual products (e.g., books or other publications) and toward intellectual practices (e.g., researching, writing, teaching, conducting scientific experiments, attending conferences, etc.). While published works can to some extent be understood as participating in a timeless world of thought—at the very least, they have the potential to transcend the immediate concerns and circumstances of their production and become meaningful to readers in different times and places²—the activities of thinkers are always taking place in a particular historical situation. Furthermore, such practices are very often inherently social, involving not just the individual intellectual but entire communities dedicated to similar pursuits,

1. For helpful introductions, see Brett 2002, Bavaj 2010, Whatmore 2016, and the essays in Whatmore and Young (eds.) 2016, as well as (from the wider perspective of cultural history) Burke 2008 and Arcangeli 2012. The description of the intellectual historian in Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner 1984 (though meant to be a “sympathetic caricature,” 9) is one that I would very much endorse.

2. Note, though, that any expression of thought, whether in oral or written form, can itself be viewed as a—historically contextualized—action or activity. Compare Quentin Skinner’s famous application of speech-act theory to the history of ideas (Skinner 2002 [1969]; cf. Gotter 2003: 174): by *saying* something, intellectuals are *doing* something, i.e., intervening in an ongoing intellectual argument.

be they teachers and students at an educational institution, scholars in the same academic field, authors and their publishers and readers, or any other group engaged in some form of intellectual exchange.

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, the intellectual efforts of senators in the late Republic were likewise strongly interactive:³ Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Varro wrote for one another as well as for other men with similar interests, participated in scholarly debates, and created networks of exchange through the mutual dedication of books. Their activities thus lend themselves to the kinds of social analysis that have fruitfully been brought to bear on other periods of intellectual history. However, as will become clear, there are certain aspects of my protagonists and their pursuits that make them somewhat peculiar exhibits in the greater history of knowledge.

The social aspects of knowledge production have been much studied and theorized in multiple ways, often under such headings as “sociology of knowledge” or “social history of knowledge.”⁴ Such approaches examine the ways in which social structures inform intellectual activity as well as the social forms of such activity itself. Needless to say, the relationships and behaviors that constitute intellectual life differ greatly from period to period and place to place (Italian humanists, say, operate differently from twenty-first-century American academics); nevertheless, there are certain key elements that appear to underlie knowledge production through the ages and on which intellectual historians have therefore often concentrated.

First, intellectual history frequently takes the form of a history of intellectuals.⁵ In other words, its focus is on (groups of) individuals who are the “main discoverers, producers and disseminators of knowledge” (Burke 2000: 18). Depending on the context, such people may be fittingly described as, for

3. A note on terminology: in this book, I use “senators/senatorial class,” “nobles/nobility,” and “aristocrats” interchangeably to refer to politically active Roman males, as defined through membership in the senate, with its requisite property requirements and election at least to the quaestorship (unlike some scholars, I do not reserve “nobility” for a specific subcategory, however defined, within this group); by contrast, “elite” and “upperclass” include both senators and *equites*.

4. “Sociology of knowledge” is the translation of German *Wissenssoziologie*, an approach most famously associated with Karl Mannheim; see Mannheim 1936 and compare Ringer 1990 and McCarthy 1996. For “(social) history of knowledge,” see Burke 2000, 2012, 2016. Since I am not here concerned with writing the history of these scholarly approaches themselves, I will be using these two terms interchangeably and without the wish to express adherence to any particular theory or school.

5. See Ringer 1990: 281: “The social group that most interests the historian of knowledge, of course, is the group or category of the intellectuals.”

example, scholars, academics, philosophers, or scientists or, collectively, as the “intelligentsia” or “clerisy.”⁶ Men and women of these descriptions are usually first and foremost dedicated to whatever their intellectual activities may be,⁷ and may well define themselves, or be defined by their contemporaries, by an appropriate label (“Posidonius is a philosopher,” “Volk is a professor”). In many, if not all, cases, such intellectuals can even be designated professional “brain workers,” that is, people who (attempt to) make a living through researching, teaching, writing, and similar pursuits.

Second, intellectual history is often the history of institutions.⁸ Scholars are so called because they attend or teach at *scholae* “schools,” ranging from the philosophical schools of ancient Greece to medieval classrooms to modern research universities. Scientists conduct experiments in laboratories; men and women of letters congregate at academies and learned societies; intellectuals are employed by courts, by the church, by publishing houses, by museums, libraries, and cultural institutions of all descriptions. By studying the workings of such establishments and of the communities they foster, historians are able to reconstruct the intellectual life and developments of a given period and (sub)culture.

If we now turn back to the men of letters of the late Republic, we encounter a problem: Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Varro, and their friends emphatically do not fit the mold of the traditional sociology of knowledge as sketched above. These men were not members of an intellectual class; they did not define themselves first and foremost via their erudite activities; and they certainly did not practice scholarship or philosophy as a profession.⁹ On the contrary: they were at pains to distinguish themselves from full-time scholars (usually Greeks) and disdained such labels as *philosophus*,¹⁰ showing no sign of

6. See Burke 2000: 18–31. For the manifold meanings of the term “intellectual,” see Collini 2006: 13–65.

7. Compare the definition of the “Person des Gebildeten” by Keck, Wiersing, and Wittstadt 1996: 8 as someone “dessen Berufs- oder bevorzugte Hauptbeschäftigung während einer längerfristigen biographischen Konstellation das Denken und das ‘Mitteilen’ von Gedachtem ist.”

8. On the importance of institutions in the intellectual history of the (early) modern period, see Burke 2000: 32–52, 2012: 239–44 and *passim*.

9. This distinguishes them from, among others, the learned individuals who are the subject of Kendra Eshleman’s recent study of intellectuals in the Roman Empire (2012): the “sophists, philosophers, and Christians” of her subtitle did very much think of themselves as belonging to groups of like-minded thinkers or practitioners (cf. also the following n.).

10. For such efforts at demarcation, see the detailed discussion in 2.1 below. On the rejection of the designation *philosophus* by Latin philosophical writers of the Republic, see Hine 2016; as Trapp 2017 shows, this attitude changed in the Empire.

considering themselves anything but members of the senatorial class.¹¹ In studying the intellectual life of these men, then, we are considering the social behaviors not of a separate group of literati, but of noblemen whose erudite pursuits were part and parcel of their identity as politically active Romans.¹²

Since the second chapter of this book is dedicated to a detailed examination of the kinds of intellectual activity my protagonists engaged in and the ways in which they represented and defined their scholarly pursuits, I here just add some further methodological considerations. Throughout my explorations of the late Republican history of knowledge, I will focus precisely on the ways in which the studies and writings of Cicero, Caesar, Varro, Brutus, and others are inextricably linked to their public life and political actions. In doing so, however, I hope to go beyond an approach that views political and social circumstances as the mere context in which intellectual developments unfold and on which they are ultimately dependent.

What events or circumstances are “contexts” for which others—rather than the other way around—is largely a matter of perspective. Thus, we might say that Caesar’s dictatorship provided the context for Cicero’s philosophical work of the early 40s; at the same time, it would also make sense to state that the author’s philosophical considerations and beliefs informed his experience and actions at this time. While men like Cicero did distinguish between their intellectual and political activities, and often reflected on the relationship between the two, it is also the case that there is no way in which such pursuits can be neatly compartmentalized and kept apart: if the same person wrote scholarship and attended the senate, both activities need to be viewed as part of the totality of that man’s actions and personality.

Furthermore, as this book aims to show, there is a deep connection between my senators’ scholarship and politics: not only were their writings influenced by their political views, but they frequently constituted political interventions in their own right. At the same time, these men’s public actions themselves were colored or even motivated by their intellectual views. Finally, we might even go so far as to question any neat distinction between intellectual discourse and social and political structures on general theoretical grounds. In the wake of the so-called linguistic turn, often associated with such

11. Compare Gotter 2003: 175: “Intellektuelle gab es nicht . . . dem Angehörigen der regimentsfähigen Gruppe stand die *persona* des Intellektuellen nicht zu Gebot.”

12. I will therefore henceforth no longer refer to the subjects of my study as “intellectuals” or “scholars,” modern terms that tend to refer to distinct social or professional groups and are thus misleading in the late Republican context (cf. Fantham 2009: 141–43). I will, however, continue to use “intellectual,” “scholarly,” and “scholarship,” which appear to me to be sufficiently vague. For ancient terminology for intellectual activity, see 2.2 below.

theorists as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, cultural historians have increasingly shifted from examining the ways in which historical reality informs thought to exploring how this reality is itself discursively constructed.¹³ On this view, the realm of the social and political is not a world given a priori and external to discourse; it is part of discourse itself.

While I am not interested in larger theories of discourse formation, and while the focus of this book, qua intellectual history, will be on scholarship and learning rather than political events, I do consider the intellectual and political lives of my protagonists single entities and in my interpretations will not privilege one over the other. In particular, I wish to avoid a currently widespread way of thinking about intellectual life in ancient Rome, that is, the view that cultural pursuits were engaged in not for their own sake, but merely to fulfill ulterior social or political functions. While perhaps no scholar would state this “functionalist argument” so baldly, it is in fact pervasive in discussions of the learned pursuits of the Roman elite. Thus, we are told, for example, that senators practiced religious scholarship for the sake of “elite self-assertion,” that philological or philosophical discussions acted as “social glue” among upperclass individuals, or that private readings of literature “served to cement friendships, make new social contacts, and perpetuate . . . the habits of the cultured *élite*.”¹⁴ While such analyses are not wrong—there was, of course, fierce competition among aristocrats, and as we will see again and again, intellectual activity did play an enormous social role—there has been a tendency in scholarly discussion for sociological abstractions to become reified and to be considered the unquestioned motivators of a vast array of practices and behaviors. By contrast, I in what follows concentrate on the practices and behaviors themselves, not on any functions they might fulfill in any posited social mechanism.

As will have become clear, my focus in this book is—somewhat unfashionably—on individuals and their intentions. This approach distinguishes my project not only from the functionalist perspective just sketched, but also from discourse analysis in the vein of Foucault and others, which radically downplays the role of individuals;¹⁵ instead, it puts me closer to the brand of intellectual history practiced by Quentin Skinner and other members of the

13. This paradigm shift is neatly described by McCarthy 1996: 1–10; its implications for the practice of intellectual history are discussed by Brett 2002: 119–26.

14. “Elite self-assertion”: MacRae 2016: 59 (cf. his entire discussion on pp. 55–59); “social glue”: Damon 2008: 175; “served to cement . . .”: Cavallo 1999: 75.

15. For historical discourse analysis, see Landwehr 2008.

so-called Cambridge School.¹⁶ I certainly do not consider my focus on a few “great men” the only way to analyze the intellectual life of this or any other period; however, I believe that it makes sense in the context of what I hope to achieve, for the following reasons.

First, our sources are skewed toward (these) individuals. Not only is the greater part of all written evidence from Greco-Roman antiquity concerned with the elite, but historiographical sources for my period have understandably focused on such important political actors as Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Cato. In addition, there is what we might call the Cicero problem, which is that Cicero’s voluminous writings—whether speeches, rhetorical and philosophical treatises, or letters—are our single most important source for the political and intellectual life of the period and that these works, for obvious reasons, concentrate on both Cicero’s own doings and those of his fellow senators.¹⁷

Second, it can be argued that my “great men” were, in fact, great men.¹⁸ Setting aside the larger historical significance of such individuals as Caesar, Cicero, Cato, and Brutus, there is no question that Cicero, Varro, and Nigidius Figulus played central roles in the intellectual history of ancient Rome and beyond. Cicero’s towering influence on Latin style and on the development of European philosophy and political theory cannot be overstated, and while Varro and especially Nigidius have fared less well in terms of the transmission of their texts, they were throughout antiquity regarded as the two “most learned” Romans, with Varro’s work in particular acting as a standard reference point in many disciplines.¹⁹ While not all my protagonists were equally important as either scholarly or political players, these learned senators were at the forefront of the intellectual developments of their times, and it thus makes sense for the intellectual historian to concentrate on them.

16. See esp. Skinner 2002 [1969]. For brief introductions to the Cambridge School, see Landwehr 2008: 40–43, Bavaj 2010: 6–8, and Whatmore 2016: 39–44 and *passim*; many of the essays in Whatmore and Young (eds.) 2016 touch on methodologies and individuals associated with the School.

17. See Levene 2005. On the pitfalls and pay-offs of using Cicero’s writings as historical sources, see Lintott 2008.

18. Needless to say, they were also all men: while some upperclass Roman women were well educated and engaged in intellectual exchange with their male contemporaries, they were of course barred from political careers. On women in Roman intellectual life, see Rawson 1985: 46–48; on one attested late Republican woman with learned interests, Cicero’s correspondent Caerellia, see McCutcheon 2016.

19. On the trope of Varro as *doctissimus*, see Volk 2019: 184 with further references. For the pairing of Varro and Nigidius, see 6.2 below.

Third and finally, I believe that my focus on individuals is appropriate for a social and political system that was predicated on individual agency. In the absence of parties or larger administrative institutions, the aristocracy that was the Roman Republic functioned as the sum of its parts: events took place as more or less powerful individuals acted and interacted, aligning and realigning their loyalties according to political, personal, financial, familial, and other concerns. Both in theory and in practice, it was the men who held, or had held, magistracies and made up the senate who by their individual decisions made Roman history. Even if this system was failing at the very period I study in this book, my model of intellectual history as the history of the intellectual activities of individuals is, I suggest, germane to the spirit of the age.²⁰

As hinted above, the analysis of these individuals' activities—including, crucially, their writings—should ideally lead to an uncovering of their thoughts and intentions. I ultimately consider the main question of intellectual history to be, “What were they thinking?,” in the sense of not just “What was the intellectual content of their thought?” but also “What were they trying to do?” To quote Skinner, “Any statement is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and is thus specific to its context in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend” (2002 [1969]: 88). The determination of such intentions is always bound to remain speculative. Nevertheless, such speculation is an intrinsic part of the intellectual historian's task and will play a major role in this book.

3. What This Book Is Not

Given its narrow focus on the doings of a particular group of men over a period of twenty years, my book is by no means intended as a study of the intellectual scene of late Republican Rome in general. Versions of such a history have already been written, by two great scholars in two great, if very different, books: Elizabeth Rawson's *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (1985) and Claudia Moatti's *La Raison de Rome* (1997; English translation 2015). I very much admire both works, whose influence will be felt throughout these pages even where I do not explicitly refer to them. Rawson's painstakingly detailed reconstruction of the erudite personnel and processes of the period has been indispensable for my own study; at the same time, I have been inspired by Moatti's analysis of the spirit of the age and especially her insistence on the specificity and originality of Roman intellectual activity (even if I do not always agree with her larger narrative; see below).

20. Individualist models of agency are found also in some of the period's theoretical writings; see now Woolf 2015, esp. 170–200 on the individualism of Cicero's ethics.

Among the individual subfields of intellectual activity, it is the religious scholarship of the late Republic that has been studied the most systematically. As part of the renaissance of Roman religious studies in the past few decades, the Romans' own attempts at describing and interpreting their practices and beliefs have likewise been subjected to scrutiny, including—to mention just three prominent examples—in Beard, North, and Price's standard text *Religions of Rome*, the work of Jörg Rüpke, and Duncan MacRae's 2016 monograph on civil theology in the first century. There has not been an equally sustained effort to write the history of Roman philosophy,²¹ though over the years a number of edited volumes have helped put this neglected area of philosophical history back on the map.²² Of course, there are, and have always been, innumerable studies of the works and life of Cicero, while the intellectual contributions of Varro and even Julius Caesar are slowly beginning to receive more scholarly attention as well.²³

What this means for my book is that while my perspective is more restricted than that of the *opera magna* of Rawson and Moatti, it is more encompassing and synthetic than that of much other work on the period, which has tended to concentrate on individual fields, figures, and works. Despite this wider scope, however, my focus is mostly synchronic. I am concerned with painting the picture of the thoughts and actions of a particular social set at a particular time, and while certain lines of development and possible chains of cause and effect will emerge in the course of my discussion, it is not my purpose to plot my observations onto a preconceived historic narrative. This approach sets me apart from many other discussions of the culture of the late Republic, which are predicated on the idea that the political change from Republic to Empire went hand in hand with what has memorably been called a “cultural revolution.”²⁴ While individual scholars differ on the exact details of such a change, a much

21. Morford 2002, Maurach 2006, and Maso 2012 are very basic introductions, focusing on individual thinkers; Garbarino 1973 covers only the 2nd c. BCE.

22. See esp. Griffin and Barnes (eds.) 1989, Barnes and Griffin (eds.) 1997, Williams and Volk (eds.) 2016, Vesperini (ed.) 2017, and Müller and Mariani Zini (eds.) 2018.

23. The works of Varro have long been the subject of specialist studies, but few attempts have been made to interpret his oeuvre as a whole (the only recent monograph is the helpful general introduction of Cardauns 2001; compare also Volk 2019); however, recent conference volumes (Butterfield [ed.] 2015 and Arena and Mac Góráin [eds.] 2017) attest to renewed interest. Caesar's scholarship is given its due by Garcea 2012 and chapters in two recent *Companions* (Fantham 2009 and Pezzini 2018).

24. The phrase “Roman cultural revolution,” pointedly calqued on Syme's famous title, was put on the map by Habinek and Schiesaro (eds.) 1997 (compare their introduction to the volume); the concept has been explored and theorized most thoroughly by Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 2008.

simplified version of a narrative widespread in current historiography might run something like the following:²⁵

In earlier periods of the Roman Republic, the Roman nobility was a well-functioning body whose members were inspired by a system of shared values, known as the *mos maiorum*; the Republican political system, as well as the nobles' commitment to the common good, prevented the concentration of power in the hands of individuals. Certain forms of knowledge—for example, religious or legal—were a de facto monopoly of the senatorial class, which passed on this expertise from generation to generation without resorting to written systematization or codification. When with the extension of Rome's empire, the Republican form of government and senatorial esprit de corps came under increased pressure and ultimately collapsed, the structures of knowledge, too, underwent a change. What had been unwritten know-how became the subject of rational analysis and written record, as the control over knowledge was wrested from the nobility and passed into the hands of specialists.

While this is, in many ways, a plausible story, there are a number of serious problems with it. First, in positing a pristine early Republican period in which the *mos maiorum* ruled supreme, scholars seem to be overly trusting in the Romans' own narratives of decline.²⁶ The idea that the *res publica* had fatally deteriorated from a former state of glory to the present ruin was a common refrain of late Republican literature, and the *mos maiorum* was the idealizing retrojection of whatever values a particular speaker or writer wished to promote. While there obviously were political and social developments in the course of Republican history, it is highly unlikely that there ever was a period of blithe aristocratic consensus, when values, policies, or knowledge were uncontested.²⁷ The *maiores* never existed; they are the symbolic guarantors of invented tradition.²⁸

A second, related difficulty is the nature and chronology of the supposed cultural revolution. Claudia Moatti and Jörg Rüpke both posit an increasing

25. Versions of this narrative are found or implied in, among others, Minyard 1985; Hölkeskamp 1996; Moatti 1988, 1997, 2003a; Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 2008; Rüpke 2009b, 2012; and Leonards 2019.

26. Compare Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.117–18: “One of the reasons that *decline* has entered the analysis is precisely because several ancient writers themselves chose to characterize the religion of the period in this way” (emphasis theirs).

27. See Mouritsen 2017: 111: “We should therefore accept the possibility that our picture of the ‘middle’ republic as a period of broad elite consensus and stable senatorial control—over the *res publica* as well as its own members—may be a myth born out of hindsight.”

28. On the invention of tradition, see Hobsbawm 1983. For late Republican constructions of their past, see ch. 5.

dominance of reason or rationality, though the former bases her model on the European enlightenment (*raison*) while the latter uses the terminology of Max Weber (*Rationalisierung*).²⁹ In both cases, there is a danger of anachronism, but we might nevertheless agree that it makes sense to describe Roman writings on civil law, augural methods, or pretty much any other field as attempts to impose some rational order on the material at hand. The real problem is that this form of rationalization is inherent in each and every form of scholarly or technical writing, from any period: ordering, explaining, analyzing, and the very act of putting into language are rationalizing practices. Thus, as soon as the Romans began writing on history, philosophy, grammar, science, and other subjects—that is, as far as our evidence goes, in the early second century BCE, but possibly earlier—they were already rationalizing. What this means is that the posited intellectual sea change begins in the middle Republic and is a long and drawn-out process³⁰—and indeed, both Moatti and Rüpke study material from at least the second century BCE to the beginning of the Augustan period. Since the start of this “enlightenment,” then, coincides more or less with the beginning of Latin literature, it becomes methodologically questionable to contrast it with a supposedly different earlier period, given that we do not have any contemporary sources for what was going on then. As far as we can tell, the Romans were always rationalizers, and they always engaged in intellectual activity.³¹

The less abstract claim that there was a change in the sociology of knowledge production—intellectual mastery passed from senatorial amateurs to nonsenatorial specialists—likewise has some truth to it. We certainly find in the late Republic an increasing “differentiation” of knowledge:³² forms of expertise that had previously been part and parcel of any elite male’s know-how now became distinct subjects of theoretical discussion and publication. Thus, for example, while every magistrate knew how to take the auspices and

29. Note the title of Moatti 1997; the epigraph of her book is Kant’s famous definition of *Aufklärung* (p. 11). Rüpke’s Weberian approach is laid out in, among other places, Rüpke 2012: 2–4.

30. I do not mean to deny that there are changes and developments within this period, or that there appears to be an increase in volume and sophistication of attempts at ordering knowledge in the late Republic (indeed, the very existence of my book is predicated on the latter observation). At the same time, owing to the scarcity of our sources, there is a real danger of underestimating the intellectual achievement of the second century, which remains a seriously understudied period.

31. For a somewhat different argument against the “rationalization” narrative, specifically in the field of Roman religion, see MacRae 2013: 513, 2016: 53–75.

32. See Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.149–56; generally on “structural differentiation” as a model of sociohistorical change in the course of the Republic, see Hopkins 1978: 74–96.

engaged with many other officially sanctioned predictive practices, the many treatises on augury that appeared in the mid-first century, not to mention Cicero's philosophical discussion in *De diuinatione*, suddenly put "divination" on the map as a scholarly subject.³³

It is also undoubtedly the case that sociological specialization and/or professionalization occurred.³⁴ New fields of knowledge, especially those with a Greek pedigree, including grammar and philosophy, came with their own teachers; skills previously passed on informally from generation to generation, such as oratory, gradually became subjects of institutionalized instruction; and increased specialization in elite knowledge, most prominently in law, ultimately led to the emergence of classes of experts, who no longer pursued political careers themselves. Especially once we move into the Augustan period, we find nonsenatorial specialists gaining prominence in a variety of fields and making their voices heard in publications, including both freeborn professionals (e.g., the architect Vitruvius) and imperial freedmen (e.g., the librarian Hyginus).

Nevertheless, it is striking how at least in the period with which I am concerned, the increasing differentiation of knowledge very often did *not* go hand in hand with professionalization. It is exactly senators—such as Cicero, Varro, and Nigidius—who were the most prominent practitioners and innovators in many intellectual fields, without therefore making up some new scholarly class or calling into question the Republican status quo.³⁵ As a matter of fact, this type of "dilettante" persisted into the changed political situation of the Empire, where such eminent scholarly and philosophical writers as Seneca and Pliny the Elder also held public office and had busy political careers.

In addition to the individual problems just discussed, the narrative of the Roman cultural revolution that explicitly or implicitly underlies much scholarship on late Republican intellectual history is questionable, in my opinion, for

33. Compare Volk 2017: 329–34 and 6.1 below.

34. See Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 2008: 213–58.

35. See MacRae 2016: 55–59, who shows that the religious scholarship of the late Republic was largely carried out by members of the senatorial class. Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 213–58 has to contend with the awkward fact that his posited dismantling of the traditional knowledge of the nobility was driven largely by two men, Cicero and Varro, who were not only senators but fairly conservative in their outlook. He concludes, "Cicero and Varro were key figures in articulating this sense of disintegration; but though they implied that the nobility *ought* to be successfully preserving the ways of their *maiores*, they were actively engaged in dismantling their authority" (258; emphasis his). In a similar vein, Binder 2018 attempts to play a "professional" Varro against an aristocratic Cicero.

the very reason that it posits a grand historical arc in the first place. At least since Hegel, Roman Republican history has been haunted by the specter of teleology: since we know that the Republic fell, all events must be inexorably moving toward this end point, and it is the task of the historian to explain the mechanisms through which this development came to pass.³⁶ On the same model, intellectual and cultural events are seen as leading up to the “golden age” of the Augustan period and must likewise be understood as chapters in a story of progress.

In recent decades, the teleological view of Republican political history has at least occasionally been challenged and replaced with a more complex picture of individual and group motivation and action that led to certain results (such as the end of Republic) not because they “had to happen,” but because they “just so happened,” owing to a highly complex and ever-changing set of individual factors and events.³⁷ I view my work on the intellectual history of the period inspired by a similar methodology. To quote from the passage of José Saramago used as an epigraph for this chapter, rather than “drive across” the past as if it were a road that leads to a particular end point, I hope to lift up numerous individual stones in order to find out “what lies beneath” (Saramago 2010: 21). Throughout the book, I wish to draw attention to the intricate synchronic details of learned pursuits from the mid-60s to the mid-40s BCE, always attuned to the multiformity, individuality, and serendipity of intellectual (and, indeed, political) behavior. As mentioned above, my interest is in what my protagonists “were thinking” at the time. If in the end a somewhat larger diachronic tale does emerge, I believe it will be less abstract and messier and more diverse than other stories that have been told before.

One of the corollaries of this approach is that I will attempt, as far as this is possible and makes sense, to employ “actors’ categories,” that is, my protagonists’ own words and concepts, in analyzing their statements and behaviors.³⁸ My goal is to get, if not inside these men’s heads, at least inside their language, that is, the ways in which *they* represented the world to themselves at the time, as opposed to how *we* might designate their thoughts and actions with

36. Schneider 1998: 1–55 provides a helpful overview of modern historiography on the period; see also Walter 2009. Prominent proponents of some version of the idea that the Republic found itself in a “crisis without alternative” (“Krise ohne Alternative,” C. Meier 1997: 201–5) and was doomed to fall include Theodor Mommsen, Mathias Gelzer, Ronald Syme, and Christian Meier, among many others.

37. See Strasburger 1968 and esp. Gruen 1974.

38. To use another set of terms to describe the same approach, my account will strive to be “emic” rather than “etic.”

hindsight. My approach is thus comparable to that of Craig Williams in his recent study of Roman friendship (2012: 28; emphasis his):

Instead of trying to get behind the rhetoric, I stay *with* it and examine its workings: always alert to the non-textual, non-linguistic environments in which these texts arose, circulated, and had their meaning, but keeping my focus firmly on language.

While it is of course impossible to think or speak about the past (or anything else) without applying one's own mental and linguistic structures, there is still an enormous methodological difference between scholarly approaches that describe historical societies and events in deliberately anachronistic terms (e.g., ones drawn from particular modern theories) and others that aim to reconstruct the ways of thinking and speaking of a particular period or set of individuals themselves.³⁹ While I would thus not agree with Quentin Skinner's strong claim that "no agent can be said to have meant or achieved something which they could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what they meant or achieved"⁴⁰—it might make perfect sense, in certain historiographical contexts, to describe an agent's doings with designations alien to his or her own conceptual language—my own approach will be to understand and represent my protagonists' practices as far as possible in their own terms.

4. Overview of Chapters

In this spirit, the following chapter 2 explores the social world of late Republican intellectual activities and the ways in which my protagonists thought, spoke, and wrote about it. I first attempt to debunk the widespread view that learned pursuits carried a stigma among the practically minded Romans and that upperclass men therefore felt the continuous need to justify their intellectual activities. Instead, such studies were a regular part of the educated elite's lifestyle, though Roman aristocrats were at pains to demarcate their own forays into philosophy and other scholarly fields from the activities of Greek professionals, whose practices were felt to belong to a different social and intellectual sphere.

Drawing mostly on the corpus of Cicero's letters, I identify a vocabulary of learned pursuits, which were most often generically referred to as *studia* or *litterae* and felt to consist of reading and writing. Such activities were intensely social, involving the studying aristocrat in multiform interchanges with Greek intellectuals, skilled slaves and freedmen, and his own *amici* with similar

39. Compare Williams 2012: 26–27.

40. Skinner 2002 [1969]: 77; cf. Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner 1984: 1.

interests. From the acquisition of books to the composition and circulation of written works, the learned senator drew on the labor, support, and feedback of a wide variety of individuals and represented such collaboration (especially when it involved members of his own social class) as intrinsically valuable and conducive to forging a closer interpersonal bond.

The letters to and from Cicero are testimony to the value accorded to such instances of *societas studiorum* (“companionship of study”), whose repeated invocation by the letter writers is itself part and parcel of the creation of such intellectual networks. I conclude the chapter with a look at Cicero’s *Brutus*, an amicable dialogue between the author and his friends Atticus and Brutus, which both depicts an idealized instance of “studying together” and—through its publication and dedication to Brutus—aspires to furthering in the real world the close-knit intellectual companionship that is projected by the text. *Studia* and *societas studiorum* clearly mattered to the learned senators at the center of my study; how the practice and content of their studies affected their private and public lives is the question at issue in the remainder of the book.

Chapters 3 through 6 are divided by intellectual field, with chapters 3 and 4 treating philosophy, chapter 5 considering reconstructions of Roman historical and linguistic identity, and chapter 6 focusing on science and theology. Chapter 3 opens with a question. We know that late Republican Romans were enthusiastic about the study of philosophy, and that philosophy billed itself as an “art of life” designed to assist its practitioners with the conduct of their lives—but did mid-first-century senators ever apply their philosophical teachings and beliefs to their own political activities and decisions? In the course of the chapter, I consider three test cases for potentially “engaged philosophy” in the period leading up to and including the Civil War.

I first focus on the younger Cato, the optimate diehard who after his suicide at Utica was turned into both a Republican martyr and a Stoic paragon. While his Stoicism did not shape the content of his conservative politics, I suggest that Cato’s single-minded pursuit of his political goals was crucially informed by Stoic ethical theory, in particular its privileging of (virtuous) intention over (uncontrollable) outcome. In stubbornly pursuing his agenda, including by spectacular methods at odds with customary Roman practice, Cato self-consciously fashioned for himself a recognizable public persona, setting in motion the creation of the Cato legend even during his own lifetime.

By contrast, the period’s most famous Roman student of philosophy, M. Tullius Cicero, subscribed to the Skepticism of the New Academy, submitting epistemological and ethical issues to careful scrutiny and adopting any position only provisionally. His dedication to philosophical studies was complicated by the fact that according to his own understanding of human nature, the ideal lifestyle was the active, not the contemplative life, and in particular

the life dedicated to the welfare of the commonwealth. Following this “political imperative,” Cicero aimed to bring his philosophical insights to bear on late Republican politics, in terms both of his theoretical work on government, *De re publica*, and of his own public actions, in which—as we can follow in detail in his letters—he attempted to conform to his ethical convictions.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the philosophical school most popular in mid-first-century Rome: Epicureanism. Given that Epicurus counseled withdrawal from public life in order to achieve the desired psychological freedom from disturbance, the fact that a fair number of Roman senators displayed allegiance to a doctrine at odds with their political commitments calls for an explanation. Focusing on three prominent Epicureans (C. Cassius Longinus, L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, and T. Pomponius Atticus), I explore the diverse ways in which upperclass Roman Epicureans were successfully able to reconcile their philosophical beliefs and their political (dis)engagement.

Chapter 4 considers the interlinking of politics and philosophy in the period after the Battle of Pharsalus. I first focus on what I call “Pompeian group therapy,” the recourse to sociable philosophizing on the part of defeated Republicans. As Cicero’s letter collection *Ad familiares* shows, both Cicero and his *amici* (many still in exile after the Civil War) turned to philosophy for consolation and the reassurance that they had done, and were continuing to do, the morally right thing.

I then turn to the question of freedom of speech (and the absence thereof) under Caesar’s dictatorship, showing how Cicero and others attempted to cope with the changed political situation. Cicero’s *Brutus* addresses the altered conditions that make a continuation of Republican oratory near-impossible, while the author’s own speech *Pro Marcello* explores new means of expressing one’s political opinions even when speaking to Caesar himself. As the lively publicity war over the legacy of Cato attests (with the most prominent pamphleteers being none other than Cicero and Caesar), a fair amount of *libertas dicendi* still obtained, with aristocratic politeness assuring that personal offense was largely avoided.

The main philosophical product of the period was Cicero’s encyclopedic corpus. The project’s purpose and possible political import have been much discussed, and I examine once more Cicero’s own statements as found especially in the works’ prefaces. By writing his philosophical works, the author clearly meant to comfort himself over the loss of both his daughter and the Republic, while also doing a service to his countrymen that was at the same time cultural, ethical, and political. While there is little overt anti-Caesarianism in the texts themselves, I argue that both their cast of interlocutors and the networks in which they circulated were meant to create a “Caesar-free” zone

that signaled clearly who was excluded from the *uita beata* achieved through virtuous conduct.

The chapter concludes by considering the uses of philosophy in the assassination of Caesar and its aftermath. The most prominent conspirators, Brutus and Cassius, were known for their philosophical interests and, I argue, at least partly motivated by theoretical convictions about the evils of tyranny. After the Ides of March, Cicero became a major apologist of the “liberators,” arguing in speeches, letters, and philosophical works for the primacy of the morally good (*honestum*) over all other considerations, including personal loyalty. Caesar’s friends and supporters, by contrast, maintained that Brutus et al. were traitors for having broken the sacred bonds of friendship, a narrative that won out when Octavian declared himself the avenger of his wronged father.

Chapter 5 turns from the “imported” subject of philosophy to more intrinsically Roman concerns, discussing mid-first-century explorations of Roman identity. I first provide a general survey of the period’s proliferating antiquarian studies, while also considering modern explanations for why late Republican authors were so fascinated by their own past. While disillusionment with the present political crisis may have played a role, Roman antiquarianism on closer examination turns out to be far less nostalgic and conservative than often depicted; furthermore, efforts to codify traditional knowledge were often guided not so much by abstract ideals of reason (*ratio*)—as some of the current narratives of late Republican intellectual history would have it—as by the recognition and embrace of the shared habits and usages (*consuetudo*) that had shaped Roman practices over the centuries.

Thus, Cicero in book 2 of his *De re publica* describes the establishment of the Roman mixed constitution as a long and not always straightforward process, which involved a multitude of individual actors. Similarly, in his *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* Varro depicts Roman religion as a work in progress, in which cults and particular manners of worship are established, and occasionally again fall into disuse, at different points in time. Concerned specifically with the civic religion of his own community, Varro admits that current cult practices are not necessarily in agreement with philosophically informed ideas about the divine, but considers it his own task to trace the messy reality of the grown customs of his “old people” rather than impose a more rational system.

Similar attitudes are found in late Republican discussions of the Latin language. While *Latinitas* (the use of correct Latin) is considered an ideal and much debated in works of the period, authors like Cicero and Varro not only admit that linguistic *consuetudo* condones many verbal forms that are not strictly speaking correct, but even openly accept such usages, whether for aesthetic reasons or simply because individual speakers, however learned, are bound by the common speech of the *populus*. Even more rationally inclined

linguistic thinkers, such as Julius Caesar, go only so far in promoting the use of morphologically analogical forms; even though the Latin language becomes more standardized during our period, there was never an attempt to systematize it from the top down.

Chapter 6 finally moves from *urbs* to *orbis*, considering late Republican attempts at “coopting the cosmos,” that is, situating Rome or individual Romans within the universe as a whole and connecting them to the sphere of the divine. Roman civic religion was predicated on the assumption that the gods favored the *res publica* and its endeavors, and its ritual practices were designed to maintain that favor. By the mid-first century, however, this religious system had become subject to various strains and innovations, as political strife led to increasingly partisan and obstructive uses of its rituals, and powerful individuals furthermore began to seek and claim divine support outside the parameters of the state religion. At the same time, the spread of scientific and philosophical ideas led to new ways of understanding the workings of the universe, affecting the ways in which learned Romans viewed the role of the gods, the question of fate and its predictability, and the status of human beings, both in life and after death.

After an introductory section, the chapter discusses the words and deeds of three prominent Roman senators with particular interests and expertise in these topics. I first turn to Nigidius Figulus, a firm anti-Caesarian, whose learned endeavors go considerably beyond the genteel studies of a Cicero and Varro. Labeled a “Pythagorean and sorcerer” by Jerome, Nigidius wrote about grammar, but also about natural history, astronomy and astrology, and numerous forms of divination. Strikingly, he is credited with having been active as a diviner himself, using child mediums in one of our sources and casting horoscopes in others. His astrological interventions as well as his publication of an Etruscan calendar of thunder omens point to a strongly political aspect of Nigidius’s prediction making: apparently, the senator used his esoteric knowledge to warn against the rise of a sole ruler, prophecies that, as it happens, turned out to be only too correct.

I next consider the man whose ascent to power Nigidius tried to prevent both on the battlefield and in his divinatory practice. Arguably, Julius Caesar’s greatest achievement is his reform of the Roman calendar, which for the first time brought the civic year into lasting agreement with the changes of the seasons and the risings and settings of the constellations. A powerful symbol of both Rome’s embeddedness in the cosmos and Caesar’s own control over time, the new calendar presents the only good example of the “rationalization” narrative of late Republican intellectual history; unsurprisingly, it was resented by those of a more Republican persuasion as an imposition of despotic power.

Caesar’s most spectacular cooption of the cosmos was, of course, his own apotheosis. In the years of his dictatorship, consecutive decrees of the senate

increasingly approximated Caesar to a god, with actual introduction into the state cult apparently voted in shortly before the Ides of March 44. After his death, Caesar was associated with the comet that appeared at his funeral games and—at the initiative of Octavian/Augustus—finally received a proper temple and lasting place in the Roman pantheon. Whether Caesar himself had been actively planning on becoming a god can no longer be determined; his immediate contemporaries, at any rate, appear to have been less alarmed at the dictator’s alleged divinity than at his increasingly monarchic demeanor.

It is fitting for a book so dependent on Ciceronian evidence to conclude with yet another discussion of Cicero himself. The master orator was highly adept at claiming divine support for himself, most notably concerning his actions during the Catilinarian conspiracy, when—as Cicero discusses at length in the third *Catilinarian* and in his poem about his consulship—numerous dire portents warned of danger, and his own countermeasures were obviously approved by the gods. In his philosophical work, however, the Skeptic Cicero calls into question the existence of communication from gods to humans, going so far as to debunk in hilarious fashion the very portents of his consulship when discussing divination in *De diuinatione*. Generally, it seems as if Cicero would like to believe in an ordered cosmos where gods care for humans, the soul is immortal, and virtuous statesmen receive a celestial afterlife—but, owing to his Skepticism, cannot quite assent to such propositions. The one thing that he remains certain about, however, is the primacy of virtue: in the absence of clear divine favor, human beings still are able, and required, to do the morally right thing, following what Cicero terms the “auspices of virtue.”

The book ends with a brief conclusion, which summarizes its results and stresses once more the interconnectedness of knowledge production and political activity among the late Republican Roman senatorial class. While the period’s turbulent political events certainly acted as a catalyst for developments in the intellectual sphere—and occasionally vice versa—the perhaps most striking aspect of mid-first-century senatorial *studia* is their “Republican” nature. The Republican political process was driven by individual actors with their own agendas, who cooperated with or opposed one another in ever-shifting alliances, all the while keeping up their base assumption of mutual *amicitia* and weathering disagreements with the help of aristocratic politeness. Similarly, the scholarly efforts of these same men present a diverse nexus of intensely sociable practices, characterized by both intellectual independence and competitive engagement with one’s peers. When the political system collapsed and was replaced by a monarchy, the cultural landscape likewise underwent a momentous shift, as the senators’ loss of political power went hand in hand with the emperors’ increasingly top-down shaping of the intellectual sphere. The unique Roman Republic of Letters did not survive the fall of the actual Republic.

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