

## Cicero: Beyond the Pleasure Principle

This paper begins a fundamental re-examination the relation between rationality and enjoyment as understood in the traditional confrontation between rhetoric and philosophy in Cicero. His simultaneous advocacy of classical rationality and continued emphasis on the importance of performativity and enjoyment in language—on *ratio* as a desire (*cupiditas*) and force (*vis*) in the real—situates him at the crossroads of reason and the unconscious. This paper looks at the problem of enjoyment (*jouissance*) as central to understanding the *differend* between rhetoric and philosophy (Janan 1994; Žižek 2004). I distinguish “pleasure” from “enjoyment,” with pleasure always being balanced by the constraints of the reality principle. *Jouissance*, however, is a drive that leads beyond the utilitarian calculus of balancing pleasure against unpleasure, seeking a form of radical experience that can be both sublime and destructive, an experience that calls into question the trusted verities of the reality principle (Freud 1961).

There has never been a major psychoanalytic treatment of Cicero, and while we must beware of crude attempts to psychoanalyze a long-dead author, Freud’s hermeneutic model can provide genuinely new insights into Cicero’s investment in concepts of enjoyment, desire, the sublime, and the abject as well as into how these concepts undergird his understanding of rational and philosophical appeals to his audience. The conflict between rhetoric and philosophy dates back to at least the fifth century BCE. It has often understood itself as conflict between a discourse that speaks to desire and a discourse that speaks to truth. Cicero is situated squarely at this nexus. This paper will concentrate on two texts, *De Oratore* and the *Philippics*.

*De Oratore* provides an introduction to key problems in Cicero’s thought, with special emphasis on his contention that the orator should be a master of philosophy, but the philosopher

need not be an orator. Key topics include: the insistence of the material in language, the body in oratory, rhetoric and performativity, desire, and enjoyment. Emphasis will be placed on two areas. First, I will examine how Cicero develops a notion of advocacy that sees the ideal orator always speaking for the truth, regardless of the side of the question for which he is arguing. This is neither simple sophistry nor a refusal of referential truth in the name of Academic *epoche*. The orator must have a complete knowledge of the facts and a mastery of the forms of argumentation, but he must also have a passion that moves his audience, which while comparable to that aroused by the skilled actor is also genuine. This passion is, in fact, what moves the audience, not through rational calculation, but through a kind of self-transformation that serves as an index of truth. Second, the whole of the *De Oratore* is positioned as a response to Plato's *Gorgias*, in which Crassus and Antonius seek to demonstrate both through dialectic and extended speeches that if philosophy triumphs over rhetoric in Plato's dialogue, it is because Socrates is the better orator, because the appeal of rationality in the end rests too on enjoyment (Atkins 2020; Steel 2013).

In *Philippics 2*, theory is put into practice (Wooten 1983). Cicero launches a searing attack on Marc Antony (Corbeill 1996). In Cicero's defense of the republic as a sublime object, he attacks Antony as an obscene figure of enjoyment beyond any law. The speeches are replete with images of violence, sexual abuse, drunken excess, blood, and vomit (Edwards 1986). In what Cicero had to know was potentially a deadly assault on one of the most powerful people in Rome, the combination of the abject with the sublime positions Cicero as a figure, much like *Antigone* in Lacan's reading, whose ethical and political desire has gone beyond the pleasure principle and embraces death as preferable to subjection (Kristeva 1980; Lacan 1986; Leonard 2003). His truth is inseparable from our enjoyment.

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