

Inverting the Metaphor of Slavery and Freedom in Cicero

Particularly in the wake of Caesar's ascension Cicero appeals regularly to the ideas of freedom and slavery in a civic context. Caesar's dominion imposes on the Romans a kind of joint political slavery, restricting their thoughts and actions. But Cicero uses the metaphor to invert typical understandings of what slavery and freedom mean. Rather than forcing others to serve him, Caesar instead prohibits Romans from serving others, or, more specifically, from having a social environment in which to offer kindness (*beneficia*) to others. This rhetorical inversion ultimately aligns slavery with self-focused behavior and freedom with behavior oriented toward others. In making this inversion Cicero advocates a very particular kind of free citizenship that cannot exist under any form of autocrat, no matter how good or skilled he is.

Cicero's championing of liberty reaches its climax in the tenth *Philippic*, where he decries the lifeless lot of the slave and states unequivocally that death is to be preferred to slavery. In the short window between Caesar's death and his own, Cicero speaks as one freed from the civic slavery of Caesar's rule and apprehensive about further Roman autocracy on the horizon. He juxtaposes other nations' willingness to suffer slavery in order to avoid pain with the Roman's preference for virtue and honor. The comparison revisits one of the prominent themes of Cicero's in his dialogues, namely the priority of virtue and the un-Romanness of those who prefer a pleasure/pain-oriented philosophy, viz. the Epicureans.

Cicero elsewhere approaches the issue from the opposite perspective, exploring what defines the free man. At the most fundamental that characteristic is summarized as *liberalitas*, an ethic to which Cicero devotes much ink in *De Officiis* in particular (e.g.,

Off. 1.14. The term had long since assumed the meaning of “generosity” by the mid 40s (Manning 1985), but in Cicero’s ethical vocabulary it is further integrated into the semantic field that associates freedom with virtue and honor, and slavery with an oversensitivity to pleasure/pain. In that context Cicero presents true liberality as the responsibility of the good person towards others, that is, a lack of selfishness (a trait often associated with Epicureans). So in *Pro Archia* the *studia liberalissima* are associated with working on behalf of others (4), and in *Tusc.* 4 Cicero explores the relationship between the *liberales* and *miser cordia* (4.56).

Cicero’s presentation of these two competing ideas—freedom involving giving to others, slavery involving interest in one’s self—reverses conventional understanding of the way the two relate (see Wirszubski 1960). Generally speaking, it is the slave who serves others while the free person has the time, resources, and opportunity to indulge him/herself. This time, in Latin, is typically associated with *otium*. But Cicero in his assessments of freedom/slavery, as he does elsewhere in his discussions of *otium* (Wirszubski 1954), associates the free person’s time with service to the state and others. Free time devoted to others is the true mark of freedom. Anything standing in the way of that interest to others undermines both the free time and the free man.

Bibliography

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