

# Reviews

**Cicero, *On Life and Death*, transl. John Davie, ed. Miriam T. Griffin, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 2017, ISBN: 978-0-19-964414-8, 260 pages.**

*On Life and Death* comprises some of Marcus Tullius Cicero's most popular philosophical writings, in the translation of John Davie and edited by Miriam T. Griffin. Published in February 2017, the volume is part of the Oxford World's Classics collection. In what its curators are concerned, John Davie is a Lecturer in Classics at Oxford University and has been previously involved in a number of translations from both Greek and Latin, while Miriam T. Griffin is Emeritus Fellow at the same university and author of a number of books on classical subjects.

The book comprises three of Cicero's philosophical treatises (*Tusculan Disputations*, *On Old Age*, and *On Friendship*), each preceded by a synopsis, and two letters (one from Cicero to Gaius Matius and the other from Gaius Matius to Cicero). The choice of the treatises is meant to offer a balanced structure, half concerned with death and half concerned with life. The *Tusculan Disputations* and *On Old Age* focus on death and its approach whereas *On Friendship* and the letters to and from Gaius Matius concentrate on friendship as an expression of life. There is a logical progress in the positioning of the different pieces within the book, starting from death and progressing to old age, then to friendship in theory and ending with an example of friendship in practice.

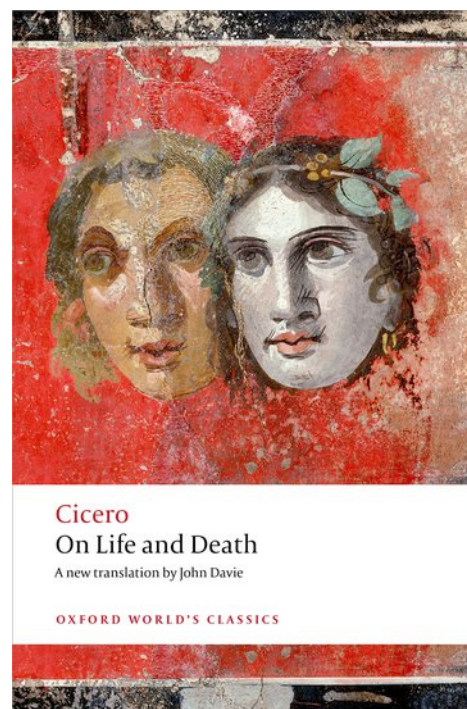
Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* have death as the main subject, having been composed after Tullia's death. Death is discussed in the first book with the purpose of proving that it is not something negative, but quite the contrary, as it either cancels all sensation or gives access to a more complex and purer form of existence. The mortality or immortality of the soul are debated, and, while Cicero inclines for the latter, he does not give a certain answer (in the spirit of the New Academy), but offers arguments why neither of these represents something bad. Pain is reflected upon in the second book, in a similar manner as death is in the first. Distress is the subject of the third book and emotions the subject of the fourth. However, the third and fourth books of the *Tusculan Disputations* have only their prefaces translated and a synopsis provided in the edition in question, the translation of the main body of their text not having been included. The fifth book presents a discussion on virtue as the only and sufficient way towards a happy life.

*On Old Age* puts into light the potential shortcomings of old age (approach of death, loss of past strength and abilities, diminishing of one's role in public life, loss of pleasure) and combats each of them, providing the overall idea that through virtue old age can be at least as pleasant and beneficial to others as youth, but in its specific manner and by its specific means.

In *On Friendship* there arises the definition and characterization of true friendship, which, according to Cicero, can only occur between good (virtuous) men. Friendship needs to be characterized by truthfulness, even in situations when it may imply correcting a friend's faults through criticism.

**Oana-Corina Filip**

Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
oana\_corina13@yahoo.com



DOI: 10.14795/j.v4i3.271

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN-L 2360 – 266X

As a result, friendship becomes constructive and maintains virtue in friends.

The letters to and from Gaius Matius may be considered an illustration of Cicero's concept of friendship. They discuss whether Matius' support of Caesar and later of Octavian was moral and, if not, whether that may affect his friendship with Cicero. A significant point is remarked by Matius, who writes to Cicero that he had not reached that level of philosophy as to not support a friend, if that friend had decayed (referring to Caesar). His point highlights the difference between philosophical precepts in theory and their application in everyday life.

Even though *On Life and Death* creates an image of symmetry and logical evolution through the choice of the translated pieces, it does not offer an exhaustive perspective on Cicero's works on the named topics. His *Consolation* written after Tullia's death and a full translation of his letters to his friends would have perhaps given a more complete tackling of the subjects. Moreover, when concentrating strictly on the chosen works, there remains the question of why the third and fourth books of the *Tusculan Disputations* were not translated, as they would have not interfered with either the subject or the structure of the volume. Their absence may leave the reader with the impression of an incomplete understanding of the treatise. This gap is also signaled only in the "Note on the Text" section, without any further textual mark in the body of the text itself, which may cause confusion if the note is not borne in mind.

In what the translation is concerned, it is both very loyal to the Latin text and very fluent at the same time. It creates the impression of a text written in its mother tongue and provides a natural, enjoyable read, which facilitates the text's understanding and the reader's immersion in the cultural context. This characteristic makes the volume both a useful instrument for researches and an accessible text for those who want to become familiar with ancient philosophy.

The introduction and notes on the text provide valuable aids for the reader, setting up the context from the start and providing sufficient, but not excessive information. They introduce the reader progressively to Cicero, then to his work, then to the specific context of the texts at hand. The only shortcoming of the notes is the fact that they are not individually numbered, but numbered by the fragments to which they refer, thus making their potential quotation less specific.

All in all, *On Life and Death* provides a fresh, flowing translation of some of Cicero's most popular philosophical pieces. Moreover, it offers a new approach, based on the topic, not on chronology, which can be very useful for researchers in the field of philosophy when conducting targeted investigation. The volume is not perfect in terms of structure, but its faults are minimal and are overcome by the quality of the translation and of its supporting apparatus.