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AUCTOR PERSONAE MEAE CICERO ON PERSONHOOD AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP



AUCTOR PERSONAE MEAE. CICERÓN SOBRE LA PERSONALIDAD Y LA AUTORÍA PROPIA

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ABSTRACT

In *De Oratore* Cicero modifies the metaphor of the *persona* (theatrical mask), used by some early Stoics to explain their doctrine of indifference, arguing that one must be not the actor but the author (*auctor*) of one's own *persona*. Understanding Cicero's concept of *auctoritas* allows us to reread his famous doctrine of the four *personae* in *De Officiis* as a rejection of Stoic indifference and as suggestion of a new relation between the self and its *personae*. For Cicero, to be an *auctor* in the most profound sense is not to produce but rather to foster and give testimony. Thus, to be author of one's own *persona* is not in the first place to construct and adopt a social role, but to accept and affirm both one's rational human nature and the contingencies of existence in the world.

Keywords: Cicero, Stoicism, Personhood.

RESUMEN

En *De Oratore* Cicerón modifica la metáfora de la *persona* (máscara teatral), empleada por algunos estoicos tempranos para explicar su doctrina de la indiferencia, afirmando que uno no debe ser actor sino el autor (*auctor*) de su propia *persona*. La comprensión del concepto ciceroniano de *auctoritas* posibilita una relectura de su famosa doctrina de las cuatro *personae* en *De Officiis* como un rechazo de la indiferencia estoica y el desarrollo de una nueva relación entre el yo y su *personae*. Según Cicerón, ser *auctor* en su sentido más profundo no consiste en el producir sino en el acto de fomentar y ser testigo. Entonces, ser autor de su propia persona implica no principalmente construir y adoptar un rol social, sino también aceptar y afirmar tanto su propia naturaleza racional humana como las contingencias de la existencia mundanal.

Palabras clave: Cicerón, estoicismo, persona.

Introduction

One of the more curious cases in the history of ideas is that long semantic evolution whereby the word that originally designated a theatrical mask (*prosôpon*, *persona*) came eventually to refer to what is most essential to the human being. In his seminal essay on the development of the concept of the person, Marcel Mauss (273) identified the Roman Stoics as constituting a crucial turning point in this evolution. But in his necessarily general remarks, Mauss did not present any detailed readings of the latin texts themselves, and more importantly, failed to consider the prehistory of the concept of the person in the early Stoics.¹ But if one follows Mauss' suggestion and examines the evidence of the sources, it seems to be Cicero above all who is the turning point in the development of the concept of the person. While for the early Stoics (and still for Epictetus) the *persona* represented all that was external and inessential to the human being —the mask that all men wore but with which they must not identify— Cicero affirms a much closer relation between self and *persona* and even argues, somewhat paradoxically, that one must become the *author* of one's own *persona*.² Cicero, then, adopts the concepts and metaphors of the early Stoics apparently only to subvert them, and in so doing makes a decisive contribution to the conceptual evolution of our idea of the *person*. Given the lack of other middle Stoic texts, it appears to be only through Cicero that we can understand how what was originally nothing more than a mask or actor's role could come to be defined, near the end of antiquity, as "an individual substance of rational nature" (*reperta personae est definitio: naturae rationabilis individua substantia*, Boethius, *Contra Eutychen* iii. 4-5).³

Cicero nowhere presents a thematic discussion of the concept of the *persona* as such, and it is only by analyzing his various employments of the term in both his philosophical and his rhetorical works that a more or less coherent picture begins to emerge. While in some of his rhetorical writings, such as the *Topica* (73. 1), *persona* appears in relatively technical discussions of how to generate confidence in the audience, a consistent and more general use of the term can be discerned across his writings as a whole, and especially between *De Oratore* and *De Officiis* (Guérin 21, 24). The argument of this paper will be that the well-known discussion of the four *personae* in *De Officiis* takes on new significance when read in the light of a passage from the second book of *De Oratore*, where Cicero plays most originally on the originally metaphorical sense of the

1 For general documentation of that influence, see Forschner 40-45.

2 For the differences in Epictetus' and Cicero's conception of the *persona* (*prosôpon*), see Gill 193.

3 All translations from Greek and Latin sources in this essay are my own. For citations I have used the pagination or section and paragraph numbers standard to each author.

persona or mask. In this passage (*De Oratore* ii. 193) Cicero appropriates and reverses the common Stoic metaphor of the actor playing a role (*persona*), best known from Epictetus but apparently first employed by Ariston of Chios to illustrate his doctrine of indifference. While Cicero makes no mention of Ariston in this passage, he frequently and forcefully criticizes his doctrine in *De Finibus* and the implications of his own modification of the *persona* metaphor are perfectly in line with this criticism.⁴ To anticipate the conclusions of this essay, Cicero argues that instead of understanding oneself, following Ariston, as the actor of an assigned *persona*, always maintaining an attitude of indifference, one must become the author (*auctor*) of one's own *persona*. While Cicero does not employ the notion of *auctoritas* in the discussion of the *personae* in *De Officiis*, reading this discussion in light of *De Oratore* allows one to better understand its full significance. The very semantic range of the peculiarly Roman concept of *auctoritas* seems to correspond to the different ways we interact with the four *personae*. To be an *auctor* is, in the first instance, to be a maker or doer. But very often it takes on the more paradoxical meaning of producing an effect without acting at all, or also of being testimony or witness to a thing (Cicero, *Topica* 73.1). Thus, according to Cicero, one chooses and constructs (and so is author of) a "fourth" *persona* by choosing a profession (as orator, philosopher, etc.) but in so doing takes into account and appropriates as one's own the *personae* corresponding to the particularities of one's individual nature as well as external circumstances. Such a reading even allows one to propose an answer to a puzzle that has troubled scholars. For Cicero also calls our universal rational nature a *persona*, and here the mask metaphor appears to be entirely inappropriate. But by correctly authoring our own *persona* in the senses just mentioned, we also foster and, so to speak, give testimony to our first, universal *persona*. Contrary to Ariston, for Cicero it is not in indifference but instead in producing, taking responsibility for, and appropriating one's external *personae* that one realizes one's own rational nature in becoming *auctor personae suae*.

Stoic Origins

Cicero's employment and appropriation of the *persona* metaphor can only be understood in light of the earlier Stoic employment of the same. While the employment of the metaphor of the mask or dramatic character (*prosôpon*) should probably be attributed to the Cynic Bion, it seems to be the Stoic Ariston of Chios who first exploited its full

4 For Cicero's criticism of Ariston, see *De Finibus*, esp. iii. 50 where he argues that the doctrine of indifference renders philosophical wisdom useless for life. See also Ioppolo, "Sententia Explosa."

philosophical potential.⁵ Diogenes Laertius preserves the following summation of Ariston's thought:

he said that the end (*telos*) was to live in a state of indifference to the things between virtue and vice and not to retain any difference at all in these things, being instead equally disposed to them all. For the wise man is like a good actor (*hypokritês*) who, whether he assumes the role (*prosôpon*) of Thersites or that of Agamemnon, acts each one fittingly. (vii. 160)

In this original formulation of what would become in the later tradition the well-known trope of the *theatrum mundi*, Ariston compares the Stoic sage to an actor who may assume any role or *persona* with equal skill and indifference. The *persona* or mask, for Ariston, represents all those external circumstances (including such characteristics as social status, gender, ethnicity, and even character, which are often thought to be constitutive of who we are) that are beyond our control, and which ought therefore to be utterly indifferent to us. Ariston even argued that such things as health and sickness or life and death were to be accepted with the same absolute indifference, thereby denying the orthodox Stoic doctrine of naturally preferred and "dispreferred" indifferents, whereby health, life, and the like could be preferred according to natural inclination as long as they did not interfere with the demands of virtue.⁶ Later, Epictetus would elaborate on Ariston's analogy and make the same point explicitly and with even greater force, enjoining his students to remember that they are but actors playing a role on the stage and that they must not confuse their essential nature with the character or *persona* that they play: "Remember that you are an actor in a drama, whichever one the producer wants.... Your task is to act out well the assigned role (*prosôpon*); it belongs to another to choose the role" (*Enchiridion* 17).⁷ For both Ariston and Epictetus, then, it is the confusion of actor with role, or with one's essential rational nature with the *persona* that one plays, that is the cause of powerlessness and unhappiness. Virtue and the good life consist precisely in the detachment that results from the recognition that those things that we normally take to define who we are (our physical and emotional particularities, our social position or membership in a political or ethnic group) are external and inessential,

5 For the etymology and semantic evolution of the term, as well as of the Latin *persona*, see Nédoncelle; for the connection between Bion and Ariston, cf. Ioppolo, *Aristone di Chio* 194-5; for analysis of the concept of the *persona* in Ariston, see Marrin.

6 For a brief account of the Stoic position on indifferents and Ariston's divergence, see Ioppolo, *Aristone di Chio* 147-151.

7 Without mentioning the *persona*, Cicero makes a similar point at *De Finibus* iii.24, comparing life to a role given to an actor. His more elaborate discussion in *De Officiis* will incorporate this element into what he calls the second and third *personae*.

and therefore ought to be totally indifferent.⁸ Directly contrary to our usage, according to which we identify the *personal* with that which most intimately defines us, the Stoics radically separated our essential rational nature (*to hegemonikon*) from the personal, which stood for all that was inessential to us. It must have been with the Stoics in mind that Simone Weil wrote in her essay “Human Personality” that “[s]o far from its being his person, what is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him” (74).⁹

Cicero on actor and auctor

It is in Cicero, however, that we find perhaps the richest development of the metaphor of actor and *persona*. In the early *De Oratore* (written in 55 BC), he (or rather Marcus Antonius, in whose *persona* he expounds his views)¹⁰ argues that in order to excite in his audience the emotions of anger, pity, or indignation, the orator cannot merely use the appropriate words but must genuinely experience those same emotions himself. Asking how it is possible that the orator should come to feel genuine indignation on behalf of someone with no connection to him, he responds that it is the “nature itself of his speech (*ipsa enim natura orationis eius*), which, while employed to move the minds of others, moves the orator himself more any of those who are listening” to him (*De Oratore* ii. 191). It should cause no surprise that the power of speech can excite sympathy with those unrelated to us (*alienos*) when we are moved even by complete fictions.

What can be more fictitious than verse, than the stage, than drama? And yet in this genre I have often seen how from behind the mask (*ex persona*) the eyes of the man, the actor (*oculi hominis histrionis*), would seem to burn as he spoke those solemn lines.... It seemed to me that it was Telamon [himself, not an actor] who was raging in anger and grief for his son. (*De Oratore* ii. 193)¹¹

Cicero is saying, then, that it is the nature of speech itself that the speaker be led to suffer over things completely alien to him, even over

8 For the tension between individual duties and detachment latent in the *persona* metaphor, see De Lacy 163-4; for an interpretation of how Ariston may have reconciled this tension see Marrin 189-92.

9 Compare also Weil 77: “It is said, quite correctly, that in antiquity there existed no notion of respect for the person. The ancients thought far too clearly to entertain such a confused idea.”

10 Marcus Antonius Orator, the grandfather of Mark Antony, the ally of Julius Caesar and murderer of Cicero. Cf. *ad familiares* vii.32.2, where Cicero speaks of those things *quae sunt a me in secundo libro de oratore per Antoni personam disputata*.

11 Compare Aristotle, *Poetics* 1455a29-31.

pure fictions. It is not uncommon to think of actors as a special kind of liars and dissimulators, and to distinguish between the actor and the role that he assumes—the *persona* or mask that he wears (Plato, *Republic* 393c-d). But here Cicero challenges so clean a distinction between actor and *persona*. When “from behind the mask” the actor’s own eyes burn with passion, this passion, while perhaps not fully authentic, is nevertheless genuine or at least unfeigned. The actor willy-nilly comes to identify with his role or *persona*, and for this reason is all the more convincing in his role, so that the spectator can forget the artifice of the mask and the mediacy of representation and for a moment believe that he is seeing on stage the hero Telamon himself, not an impersonation. Marcus Antonius continues, somewhat in the vein of Plato’s *Ion* (535c), that if the actor must experience genuinely the passions he is representing, then all the more must the poet experience these passions in the process of composition. He then concludes with a striking application of the *persona* metaphor back to himself:

Do not, then, suppose that I myself, who do not want to imitate or represent the old misfortunes and fictitious griefs of heroes in my speaking, nor to be the actor of another’s *persona*, but rather the author of my own (*neque actor essem alienae personae, sed auctor meae*), did without great passion (*magno dolore*) what I did in the peroration of that famous case. (*De Oratore*, ii. 194)

Cicero, then, (in the *persona* of Marcus Antonius) here rejects the comparison between himself and the actor on stage for the analogy of the poet as author of his work. But he does not speak here of himself as the author of poems or even of forensic speeches, but rather of his own *persona*. He is not an actor, but the author of the very *persona* that he adopts and enacts through the practice of oratory.¹²

The conceptual innovation that Cicero is here suggesting can best be seen in the context of the Stoic use of the metaphor of the mask or *persona*. For while he clearly challenges the rigid distinction between actor and mask that the Stoics played upon, it is only against this Stoic background that it is possible to understand the novelty of Cicero’s conception of the authorship of one’s own *persona*. Indeed, it is hard to see how that idea could even be expressed in a Platonic or Aristotelian idiom. While we have already seen how Ariston is the first to suggest the position Cicero is criticizing, the contrast is most easily seen by comparing the admittedly later Epictetus, who develops more explicitly Ariston’s metaphor. While we have already cited the *locus classicus*

12 For a brief discussion of this passage, cf. Guérin 20, who notes that *auctor* here is already being used also in the additional sense of guarantor (*garant*).

of *Enchiridion* 17, it is in the *Dissertationes* that the same contrast is made most explicit. Here Epictetus exhorts his students to recognize the unhappiness of those rich men of affairs who place value in external and indifferent things: “Remember, when you approach one of those men, that you are approaching a tragic figure, not the actor but Oedipus himself” (*Dissertationes* i. 24. 15-18). Epictetus goes on to make clear that it is precisely the failure of the human “actor” to distinguish himself from his *persona* that is the cause of his misfortune: “There will soon come a time when the tragic actors will think that they are themselves their masks (*prosopeia*), buskins, and robes. O human being, you have these things [merely] as material and theme!” (*Dissertationes* i. 24. 41).

The identification of self and *persona*, then, which for Ariston, Epictetus, and presumably also for at least one main strand of Stoic thinking was the fundamental error of the non-wise, in virtue of which they could even be called mad or insane, appears at least for Cicero to be the explicit aim of his rhetorical activity. But Cicero does not reject outright the Stoic distinction between actor (in the last analysis, *to hegemonikon*), and *persona*. What he seems rather to suggest is a modification of the distinction and a certain reconciliation between the interior or “essential” self and the external presentation of the self in society. In keeping with his mention of the poet’s experience of the same passions that he depicts, but also anticipating Epictetus’s distinction between the actor, who merely plays his role, and the director, who determines the nature of the role, Cicero states that he does not wish to be an actor interpreting an alien *persona*, but rather the *auctor* of his own.¹³ In order to understand the full significance of this claim we must turn to the later *De Officiis* (44 BC), where Cicero presents a Stoic account of the four *personae* that all human beings are endowed with.

The Four Personae in De Officiis

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- 13 For a similar distinction from a contemporary of Cicero, cf. Varro, *De Lingua Latina* vi.77, who famously distinguishes between doing (*facere*) and acting (*agere*) with the following example: *Potest enim aliquid facere et non agere, ut poeta facit fabulam et non agit, contra actor agit et non facit*. Here the *agere* of the actor is distinguished from the *facere* of the poet or the ordinary man in that the actor would not consider these actions to be his own. He is not the *author* of his actions. Immediately following, Varro connects *facere* to *facies* (face or outward aspect—the etymology is still widely accepted) since it is the maker who stamps the object with its distinctive form or look. It is hardly a stretch to move from *facies* to *persona*. Xenophon, *Mem.* ii.2.9, makes a similar point, noting that actors are not affected by the abuse and threats they hurl at each other on stage, since they know that they are not meant to cause harm.

Cicero's *De Officiis* (traditionally translated as *On Duties*) is a treatise addressed to his son as being "most appropriate both to your age and to my authority" (*quod et aetati tuae esset aptissimum et auctoritati meae*, i. 4). Here Cicero affirms that no part of philosophy has such a wide application as that concerning duties or appropriate action, "for no part of life ... can be lacking of duty" (*nulla enim vitae pars ... vacare officio potest*, i.4). Following the threefold plan of Panaetius' treatise *On Appropriate Action* (*Peri Tou Kathekontos*), Cicero devotes one book each to the nature of the good itself (the *honestum*), to the useful or expedient (*utilitas*), and to the potential conflict between the two (i. 9). He proceeds to organize the first book around a description of the four cardinal virtues. And it is in his discussion of the fourth virtue, which he calls temperance or moderation, or more generally *decorum* (i. 93), that he introduces the theory of the four *personae*. Cicero argues that "it can more easily be understood than explained what is the difference between *decorum* and *honestum*" (all virtue as such being *honestum*). For whatever is in conformity with *decorum* is *honestum*, and conversely, whatever is *honestum* is also in accord with *decorum* (i. 94). For this reason, the discussion of *decorum* is equally appropriate to all the virtues and the subsequent discussion will take on a general significance for Cicero's understanding of virtue or *honestas* as a whole.

Cicero begins by distinguishing a general *decorum*, appropriate to all the virtues, and which is in agreement with man's superiority to other animals, from a specific *decorum* that falls within the genus of the latter, and which is agreement with human nature in such a way as to manifest itself as moderation in a way befitting a free man or a gentleman (*cum specie quadam liberali*, i. 96). He proceeds to illustrate the meaning of *decorum* more concretely by appealing to the practice of the poets, who "observe what is fitting (*quod deceat*) when what is said and done is worthy of each character" (*quod quaque persona dignum est*, i. 97). The words and deeds of the character must match their type, virtuous or vicious, of high station or low. Thus, the verse "the father himself is his children's tomb" would be inappropriate to Minos or Aeacus, who are exemplars of justice, but appropriate to the wicked Atreus.

Cicero continues: "but the poets will judge what is fitting to each based on the character (*ex persona*); upon us, however, nature itself has imposed a *persona* of great excellence that surpasses all other living beings" (i. 97). While poets are only concerned with what is appropriate to the individual character, good or bad, we must first of all remember that as human beings we all share a common *persona* or character. Cicero explains what he means several pages later by making an initial distinction between two *personae*, one particular and one universal, both assigned to us by nature:

We must understand that we have been invested by nature with two *personae*, as it were, one of which is common insofar as we all share in reason, from which everything noble and fitting (*omne honestum et decorum*) is derived, and from which is acquired the rational method of discovering duty; and another that is assigned to individuals in particular. (i. 107)

Later, Cicero adds a third *persona*, “which is imposed by some chance or circumstance (*casus aliqui aut tempus*); and a fourth, which we assume by our own choice” (*iudicio nostro*, i. 115). This sequence of four *personae*, then, moves from the most general and, so to speak, least up to us, to the most particular and over which we may exercise at least a certain degree of control. Our first *persona* is our common rational nature as human beings, what the Stoics call the spark of divine fire or *to hegemonikon* (the directive faculty); the second consists in the individual physical or character traits that we all possess but which we may share with others. Cicero goes on to explain that it is our duty, while never acting against our common human nature, also to follow our individual nature insofar as it is not depraved (i.110). Thus, the suicide that was fitting for Cato was not so for other opponents of Caesar whose lives were less austere, and what is suitable for the long-suffering Odysseus is not so for the proud Ajax. The third *persona* is that imposed on us by external circumstances, “for [the possession of] kingdoms, command, nobility, public honors, wealth, property, as well as their opposites, since they depend on chance, are governed by circumstances” (i. 112). The fourth refers to the way of life that we may choose for ourselves:

For which *persona* we choose to assume depends on our own will. Thus some dedicate themselves to philosophy, others to civil law, still others to oratory (*eloquentiam*); and in the case of the virtues themselves, one man prefers to excel in one, another in another. (ibid.)¹⁴

While Cicero would acknowledge that one’s ability to choose a *persona* of the fourth category would be greatly limited by the second and third (a slave, or someone with a debilitating illness, could hardly aspire to practice oratory in the Roman forum), he argues that we must all take stock of our individual character and talents, as well as the options left

14 It is tempting to see a parallel between this fourfold account of the *persona* and the so-called four Stoic *genera*, where the first *persona* would correspond to the substance (*hypokeimenon*) human being, the second to the *poion*, or distinguishing characteristic, circumstances to the *pôs ekhon* or temporary state, and assumed social roles, which as such always involve other people, to the *pros ti pôs ekhon*. the temporary state relative to something external. Lévy 137-8 advances such a reading only for the first two *personae*, but as far as I know there is no explicit textual support for this analogy.

open to us by circumstance, and choose from among these the way of life that is most conducive to virtue (i. 117-125).¹⁵

Unfortunately, given the lack of texts from the so-called middle Stoa, and especially the loss of Panaetius' treatise that Cicero follows, we cannot be sure exactly how the metaphor of the actor's mask or *persona*, first used by Ariston, was assimilated into Stoic discourse so as to produce the doctrine of the four *personae* that we have just described in Cicero.¹⁶ But a comparison of the meaning of the metaphor in Ariston and Epictetus with the four *personae* shows how what was originally a radically challenging metaphor has become a moderated piece of technical doctrine, where the original sense of an actor's mask is only vaguely felt. Most notably, while Ariston and Epictetus suggest that our real self is not the mask or *persona* we wear, but rather our pure rational nature (*to hegemonikon*), for Cicero (and presumably also for Panaetius) our rational nature (or at least our participation in that rational nature) is itself a *persona*, and there can be no question of something lying behind it.¹⁷ Here, it seems, we are already very close to Boethius' famous definition of the person as "an individual substance of rational nature" (*naturae rationabilis individua substantia*, iii. 4), and modern philosophical definitions of personhood, according to which it is strictly identified with my identity as an individual.¹⁸ But in the other three of Cicero's four *personae* we still see something of the force of the original metaphor. Again, however, differences can be perceived, especially in the fourth *persona*, where we choose our vocation or way of life. While Ariston and Epictetus stress that we must accept whatever role god or fate assigns us, Cicero affirms that we have a certain liberty to choose our way of life. What is more, while Ariston and Epictetus believe that it is the definition of the Stoic philosopher or wise man to be able to play any role that is given him, Cicero identifies the life of philosophy as only one among many fourth *personae* that we may choose, of apparently equal validity with the study of rhetoric or civil law.¹⁹

15 Cicero's (or Panaetius') account of the interaction of natural teleology and social duties has been compared (by Gill 172-3) to Alistair Macintyre's discussion of the same in *After Virtue*.

16 See again Gill 174-5 for a discussion of the role of Panaetius and other Stoic sources. For the presumed connection between Ariston and Panaetius, see Dyck 270. As Forschner 40 notes, Cicero's *De Officiis* is the oldest surviving philosophical text offering a sustained discussion of the concept of *persona*.

17 This problem is noted by Lévy 129; and, in greater length and with relation to Epictetus, by Mann 2015.

18 For a somewhat different explanation of the "modernity" of Cicero's account of the *persona*, see Gill 195.

19 See Gill 190. Cicero does affirm (*ad Atticum* iv. 18) that he was naturally most predisposed to the contemplative life: *quaeque vita maxime est ad naturam ad eam me refero, ad litteras et studia nostra*.

Auctor and Auctoritas

While the doctrine of the four *personae* in *De Officiis*, then, is clearly related to the *persona* metaphor as found in other Stoic thinkers, its development and tempering seem to render problematic any attempt to extract from it a unitary conception of the *persona*. However, re-reading the text in light of the passage from *De Oratore*, it becomes possible to provide a glimpse of what such a unified interpretation might look like. To recall the passage, Marcus Antonius, the exponent of Cicero's views at this part of the dialogue, had originally compared his rhetorical activity to that of an actor on stage. If an actor wearing an artificial mask can genuinely experience the passions that his words describe, then so much the more would the orator experience the very passions he arouses in his audience, since he does not want to be "the actor of another's *persona*, but the author of my own" (*neque actor essem alienae personae, sed auctor meae*). As we have already seen, here more than anywhere in *De Officiis* Cicero seems to be responding to the full and original force of the actor metaphor as the Stoic Ariston presented it. Cicero here denies the strict separation or non-identity of actor and role that Ariston held up as the ideal of Stoic practice, instead arguing that actors can and must, at least to a certain extent, identify with their roles. But he proceeds to subvert the actor metaphor entirely, or rather leave it behind, arguing that far from acting out the character of another, it is the task of the orator to become author (*auctor*) of his own *persona*. Thinking of the four *personae* of *De Officiis*, we may ask, to which *persona* is Cicero referring when he claims that he wishes to be the author of his own? At first sight, it appears that it could only be the fourth, for it is not at all clear how one could be the author of one's own rational nature, innate character, external circumstances, or inherited social position. In choosing to pursue the practice of rhetoric, to argue criminal cases, to establish a reputation and thereby also a political career (as Cicero himself did with unparalleled success even though he faced the considerable obstacles of having been born to a politically insignificant family from outside of Rome) is to become author of one's own public *persona*. As opposed to Ariston's vision of the Stoic sage, who performs all his duties with an indifference and detachment born of the recognition that his social *persona* is something external and in the last analysis beyond his control, Cicero endorses a strong identification with the *persona* one constructs for oneself. After all, the *persona* of which Cicero is the author is Cicero himself as a public man and eventual Roman senator and consul.²⁰

20 The *persona*, however, that circumstances will force him to abandon, dedicating himself instead to his philosophical writings. Cf. *ad familiares* vii. 33 (written to his friend

While the above is no doubt the immediate meaning of the passage from *De Oratore*, to limit the scope of authorship to the fourth *persona* opens a breach between it and the previous three that would render the whole doctrine of the *personae* both terminologically and conceptually incoherent. For not only would it strip the first three *personae* of their originally metaphorical significance, but by suggesting that one must construct a fourth *persona* without clarifying the relation to the other three, this account would seem to remove any ground for distinguishing *auctor* from *actor*, and one's own *persona* from another's (*alienae*). One would construct one's role only then to play it, and there would be no basis for saying that one creation could be any more "one's own" than another. Any careful reading of *De Officiis* will in fact show that one's fourth *persona* is only to be selected and developed in accord with the previous three, which would seem to radically limit the scope of one's authorship. However, a more adequate understanding of Cicero's meaning can be grasped by analyzing the peculiarly Roman concept of the *auctor* and *auctoritas*.²¹ Etymologically, both terms derive from the verb *augeo*, which generally means to increase (whence 'augment') but originally denoted the act of production itself, causing to grow or spring forth like a plant. Later it came to acquire a more particular sense of "promoting" or "fostering" a thing, so to speak "lending authority" to it (Benveniste 149-150). Thus *auctor* can denote not only the author of a work, but also an authority on a subject or even a witness whose testimony is authoritative (Guérin 20, notes that this sense of *auctor* is already at play in the passage from *De Oratore*). From here it took on a technical meaning within the sphere of Roman law and in particular defined the activity of the Roman Senate, whose *auctoritas* had no binding power in itself but simply "authorized" the magistrates' exercise of their power, whose source was the Roman people.²² Thus Mommsen famously defined the Senate's authority as "less than an order and

Volumnius one year before the composition of *De Officiis*): *mihi enim iudicatum est, si modo hoc Caesar aut patietur aut volet, deponere illam iam personam, in qua me saepe illi ipsi probavi, ac me totum in litteras abdere tecumque et cum ceteris earum studiosis honestissimo otio perfrui*. See also *De Officiis* iii.2-4

- 21 In her well-known essay "What is Authority?" Hannah Arendt 91-2 says of the notion of authority in general (not only in its Roman manifestation) that is "has vanished from the modern world.... [W]e are no longer in a position to know what authority really is".
- 22 Compare Cicero's famous statement in *De Legibus* iii.12.38: *Cum potestas in populo, auctoritas in senatu sit*. Cicero's rival Sallust expresses the same understanding in his *Iugurtha* 31.25 (the tribune C. Memmius is addressing the people, not the Senate): *prodita senatus auctoritas, proditum imperium vestrum est*.

more than a counsel”²³, and this *auctoritas* could remain in effect even when the exercise of its power was thwarted or rendered ineffectual. And Agamben (80), examining the concept in its legal employment, can conclude that *auctoritas* “exhibits its most proper character at the point of its greatest legal inefficacy”.

While these observations on the juridical conception of *auctor* and *auctoritas* do bring us closer to the phenomenon, to understand Cicero’s own use of the concept it is more helpful to consider his non-technical uses of the terms in comparison with some of his contemporaries. The full scope of Cicero’s understanding of the meaning of being an *auctor* can be seen by a contrast between a passage from his *De Natura Deorum* and one from Sallust. In the preface of his *Cataline*, Sallust defends the dignity of the writing of history, even as he admits that it is more glorious to be a doer of deeds or “author of things” than to record in writing the deeds of others: *haudquaquam par gloria sequitur scriptorem et auctorem rerum*, and with a parallel contrast he makes it clear that to be an *auctor rerum* is to act, not to write (*qui fecere et qui facta aliorum scripsere*, 3. 1-2). While Sallust, then, maintains the familiar distinction between word and deed, and grounds *auctoritas* in action, in *De Natura Deorum* (iii. 77), Cicero suggests that the two stand at equal dignity, or perhaps even that philosophical speech is more, so to speak, authoritative, than deed. As part of his refutation of the Stoic doctrine of providence, Gaius Cotta (who speaks from the perspective of the skeptical Academy, Cicero’s favored philosophical school), employs several mythological cases to show how the gifts of the gods are sometimes disastrous to their children, but quickly returns to his central point. For “these things belong to the poets, but we aim to be philosophers, the authors of facts, not of fables” (*nos autem philosophi esse volumus, rerum auctores, non fabularum*, iii. 77). Like Sallust, then, Cicero distinguishes being an *auctor rerum* from a certain kind of writing, but here it is not the writing of history (the deeds of others) but the composition of poetic fables that is used for contrast. The poet is an author of fables, equivalent to the fictions mentioned in *De Oratore* that an actor might later represent on the stage. But unlike the poets, philosophers are not authors of fables but *auctores rerum*, and comparison with Sallust’s understanding of the phrase shows that for Cicero the substitution of *rerum* for *fabularum* is not indifferent to our understanding of what it means to be *auctor*, but radically modifies its usual sense. The philosopher is certainly not a doer of deeds in Sallust’s sense, and Cicero clearly does not mean to say that philosophical activity consists in the construction of “facts”. Here, rather, the idea of

23 Theodor Mommsen as cited in Arendt 122.

authorship must be divorced entirely from the idea of making (*facere*).²⁴ Instead, using rational argument in place of mythological example, the philosopher aims to reveal the nature of things, to allow things to present themselves as they are. The explanations of the philosopher allow the things themselves to be seen as they truly are, such that the philosopher is just as much, or even more, an *auctor*, than the man of action. In a similar passage from his *Academica* (fr. 19) Cicero argues that “it is not appropriate to the wise man to be a producer of words (*vocabulary opificem*) but an investigator of things (*rerum inquisitorem*)”. Combining these two passages, the “authority” that philosophers would exercise over things would consist precisely in their investigation into the nature of things. While Sallust, then, understands the *auctor rerum* straightforwardly to be a doer of deeds, Cicero suggests that to be a true author of things, to have true authority over them, consists above all in philosophical knowledge or contemplation, which would be, so to speak, the most authoritative relation to the world, precisely because it gives testimony to the nature of things.

Without explicit mention of *auctoritas*, this same argument for the subordination of the practical to the theoretical, or that theory is the truest practice, is put in the mouth of Scipio Africanus the Younger at *De Re Publica* i. 27-8. Responding to Laelius, who had denied the practical relevance of the speculations of natural philosophy, and therewith the value of the same, Africanus reports the words of his grandfather Africanus, that “he was never doing more than when he was doing nothing” (*numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret*). Africanus’ very inactivity (in the conventional sense) was in fact the highest form of activity. Africanus makes his argument even more pointed by contrasting Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, with the mathematician Archimedes:

Who can really believe that Dionysius did more (*plus egisse*), when he expended all his efforts to deprive his citizens of their liberty, than his fellow citizen Archimedes, when, though he seemed to be doing nothing (*nihil cum agere videretur*), produced (*effecerit*) that famous model of the heavens of which we were just speaking. (i. 27-8)

The speculative activity of Archimedes, argues Africanus, is not only superior in dignity to the tyrannical deeds of Dionysius, it is *more a deed* than they were.²⁵ In the words of *De Natura Deorum*, then, Archimedes

24 Arendt 122 quotes Pliny the Elder (*Historia Naturalis* 36.118) who distinguishes *auctor* from *artifex*, the “author” or sponsor of the work from its maker.

25 Cicero retells the same anecdote with slightly different emphasis in *De Officiis* iii.1, saying that Africanus was “never less idle than when he was idle, nor less alone than when he was alone (*numquam se minus otiosum quam cum otiosus, nec minus solum quam cum solus esset*). For he was accustomed to think of his affairs even while idle

is more an *auctor rerum* than Dionysius. To be a true *auctor rerum* is to act in a way that does not appear to be active at all. The greatest *auctoritas* resides in him who least appears to possess it.

For Cicero, then, *auctoritas* would appear to be the capacity to produce an effect without directly acting to do so, or in the case of philosophical thinking, paradoxically to be “active” in the highest sense without acting at all in the usual sense. This interpretation seems to be borne out by some more commonplace examples of *auctoritas* in Cicero’s non-philosophical works and other authors. In one of his orations, Cicero records that such was the *auctoritas* of Pompey that the mere report of his appointment as *imperator* to combat the pirates of the eastern Mediterranean was enough to restore confidence in the markets and so reduce the price of grain (*De Imperio Cnaei Pompei* 44). In Caesar, *auctoritas* often refers the reputation that a general, army, or nation has won by their military exploits, such that their mere presence is enough to encourage allies and dismay enemies.²⁶ But perhaps the clearest example of this sense of *auctoritas* can be found in the opening pages of the *De Architectura* of Cicero’s contemporary Vitruvius. Explaining that architectural works are the result both of production (*fabrica*) and theory (*ratiocinatio*), Vitruvius argues that purely manual architects who lack theory, though they can in fact construct buildings, cannot be said to be true authors of their works (*non potuerunt efficere ut haberent pro laboribus auctoritatem*, i. 2). A purely theoretical architect, on the other hand, is the author of no work at all, but only of shadows (*umbram non rem persecuti videntur*). Only the architect who combines theoretical and productive activity can be considered to proceed with authority (*cum auctoritate*). But even if *auctoritas* can only be assigned to the architect when a work has really been produced, it is not in production as such, but in the directive activity of *ratiocinatio*

and to talk to himself in solitude, so that he never had to stop [thinking] or want for the conversation of another (*illum et in otio de negotiis cogitare et in solitudine secum loqui solitum, ut neque cessaret umquam et interdum conloquio alterius non egeret*). Here Africanus devotes even his leisure to thinking about political affairs, which might appear to uphold the superiority of action. Africanus left no written record of his leisure and solitude, which suggests that he was really acting (from *excogitatione*), but the tenor of the passage from *De Re Publica* is quite different, given the comparison with the mathematician and philosopher Archimedes. At iii. 2-4, Cicero compares his own forced leisure unfavorably to that of Africanus, who was able to turn it to the good of the Republic.

26 Cf., e.g., *De bello gallico*, iv. 13, vii. 30, and esp. v. 55, where Idutiomarus is said to have acquired so much *auctoritas* by his resistance against the Romans that the rest of the Gauls sent him legations of their own accord (*ultra*), without him even having to ask. At vii. 59, *opinionem virtutis* (“reputation for valor”) seems to be synonymous with *auctoritas*.

that *auctoritas* is founded.²⁷ There is no authority without a work, but the authorship of the work resides only in its conception.

From these diverse passages, then, something like a general conception of *auctoritas* comes into view. And it is Cicero who, more than any other of his contemporaries, exploits the full potential of this somewhat ambiguous concept. *Auctoritas*, or the relation of the *auctor* to the *res*, can be conceived, as in the case of Sallust, as simple doing, but more often and more specifically it is understood as a certain power or influence (as in the case of Caesar and sometimes in Cicero) that is shown to be most active or effective when the *auctor* does not *do* anything in the ordinary sense. Finally, in Vitruvius and most of all in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, *auctoritas* is grounded above all in speculative or philosophical thinking, such that in Cicero it is the philosopher who can become the true *auctor rerum*. Here *auctoritas*, without being severed entirely from action or deeds (*res gestae*) in the ordinary sense, is meant to explain the paradoxical activity of the inactive, which may also result in external products (such as the buildings of an architect or Archimedes' model of the heavens) but is grounded most essentially in what Vitruvius calls *ratiocinatio*. For Cicero, then, philosophers are *auctores rerum* in the highest sense because they correctly conceive the beings, and thereby "promote and foster" them such that they present themselves as they are, and in such a way that we may act appropriately on the basis of this knowledge.

Self-Authorship

With a more complete understanding of the conceptual and semantic range of *auctoritas* in Cicero, we are now in a better position to understand the meaning of his statement that his aim is not to be the *actor personae alienae*, but rather the *auctor* of his own *persona*. While the actor, like the Stoic sage, performs or acts (*agit*) a role or *persona* with which he must not identify, and the poet (or author in the ordinary sense) makes or composes (*facit*) stories (*fabulae*) and *personae* (which as such are *ficta* or fictions), for Cicero, to be the *auctor* of one's own *persona* is to have nothing to do with fictions at all. His meaning in *De Oratore* must, again, be interpreted in light of the passage we have

27 Aristotle already had much the same point in mind when he argued in the *Politics* (1325b 14-30) that "even in the case of external actions theoretical architects (τοὺς ταῖς διανοίαις ἀρχιτέκτονας) are those who most authoritatively engage in *praxis* (μάλιστα δὲ καὶ πράττειν ... κυρίως)". While Aristotle has no special term to describe the paradoxical activity of the theoretical architect, which blurs the very distinction between *praxis* and *theoria* (he continues in the same passage to argue that the pure *noesis noeseos* of god is also the highest *praxis*), Vitruvius seems to unite these two activities under the common heading of *auctoritas*.

already cited from *De Natura Deorum* (iii. 77): *nos autem philosophi esse volumus, rerum auctores, non fabularum*. To be the author of one's own *persona* is not to produce fables but, so to speak, to authorize facts. Cicero's concept of self-authorship, then, must not be confused with any kind of self-creation or self-fashioning in the poetic sense. In the immediate context of *De Oratore*, as we have seen, Marcus Antonius means that the true orator must without simulation or deception (*simulatione et fallaciis*) experience the same emotions that he wishes to inspire in his audience (ii. 191). Here, to be author of one's own passions is to let the "great force" of one's own discourse (*magna vis earum sententiarum atque eorum locorum, quos agas tractesque dicendo*) arouse those emotions. This is all the easier when it is borne in mind that not only is the orator's genius on trial (*agitur*) but much more importantly his credibility, sense of duty and care or diligence (*fides, officium, diligentia*, ii. 192). It is because "we wish to be considered to be good men" (*si ipsi boni viri volumus haberi*) that we cannot consider the misfortunes even of those most unrelated to us (*alienissimos*) to be really unrelated (ii. 193). The best way to be considered a good man, Cicero argues, is to *be* one by demonstrating one's *fides* and *officium* in the defence even of those to whom we owe no special obligation but only, so to speak, the obligations of humanity. In light of this explanation, to be author of one's own *persona* as a good man is to, by means of one's oratorical powers, make a presentation of oneself, to reveal to the audience the kind of man one is.

When the general thrust of Marcus Antonius' argument is considered in light of the notion of *auctoritas* that we have sketched above, their correspondence becomes apparent. While Sallust's understanding of what it means to be an *auctor rerum* would correspond more or less to the activity of the poet who produces works (*efficit*), Cicero's understanding of the *auctor* in this context has nothing to do with directly producing an effect (which would come dangerously close to the use of *simulatio* or feigned emotion), but comes much closer to the description (cited above) of Africanus in *De Re Publica*, who "was never more active than when he was performing no action at all" (*numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret*, i. 27f). For while the impassioned orator is hardly inactive, his activity is not directed at arousing his own emotion, but precisely for this reason is most effective at doing so. "For the very nature of his discourse, which is undertaken to excite the minds of others, moves the orator himself even more than any of his hearers" (*ipsa enim natura orationis eius, quae suscipitur ad aliorum animos permovendos, oratorem ipsum magis etiam quam quemquam eorum, qui audiunt, permovet*, *De Oratore* ii. 191). The orator establishes his

persona authoritatively precisely because he does not directly fashion or announce it.

The metaphor of the mask or *persona*, we have seen, expresses the heart of the Stoic teaching about duties or appropriate action as well as its doctrine of indifference, formulated most radically by Ariston and later by Epictetus. It is not fortuitous that Cicero, even if he does not mention the *persona* metaphor in connection with his criticism of Ariston's doctrine of indifference in *De Finibus*, should elsewhere modify that same metaphor in accordance with his reservations about Stoic ethics in general. By insisting that one must become, not the actor of a role assigned to one by another (even a divine other), but the author of one's own *persona*, Cicero means, in the first instance, that the orator must construct a *persona* that inspires trust and persuasion in his audience, somewhat in the tradition of Aristotle's account of rhetorical ethos.²⁸ But in light of his discussion of the four *personae* in *De Officiis*, his statement takes on a much broader significance. Most obviously, it aligns with his discussion of the necessity of choosing the fourth *persona*, one's profession or way of life (be it political, scholarly, or philosophical). But a closer examination of the specifically Roman concept of *auctoritas*, especially as Cicero employs it, reveals a more complicated understanding of the relation between self and *persona*—one, however, that is already implicit in, or at least perfectly congruent with, the discussion in *De Officiis*. To be an *auctor*, for Cicero, is not only or even primarily to be a maker of something (an author in the modern sense), but rather to enter into a relation with the thing (*res*) in such a way as to let it “grow” (in the words of Benveniste) or present itself as it is, as the philosopher's explanations make the beings (*res*) manifest to us. Thus the “act” of authorship, the exercise of *auctoritas*, has the paradoxical character of appearing to be no activity at all, but rather is a manifestation of power that does not compel but rather lets the thing be what it is or do what it characteristically does. The contemplative activity of Archimedes, as we saw above, was more “efficacious” than the deeds of the tyrant Dionysius because, through the medium of an astronomical model, he made accessible to other men the knowledge of the nature of the heavens. In the same way, the choosing and fashioning of a way of life in the mould of the fourth *persona* is based upon a previous and more fundamental examination of, and coming to terms with, the *personae* of one's particular nature and circumstances, and even the first *persona* of one's common rational nature. To become the author of one's own *persona*, one must already be *auctor* of one's first three *personae* in the sense of having come to terms with them and

28 Cf. Guérin 2009, 9–13.

letting them manifest themselves in the way appropriate to them. It is not by forcing circumstances but by acknowledging and affirming the limits imposed by them as the parameters for one's life that one may successfully choose a vocation. It is the same in the case of one's particular nature, which must be followed to the extent that it is not prone to vice, that is, not in conflict with one's fundamental dignity and duties as a rational being. This understanding of the interrelation of the four *personae* in terms of *auctoritas* would go some way to resolving the problem, noticed by De Lacy, that the "pluralization of roles [according to the four *personae*]" would seem to destroy the individuality of the moral agent" (170-1).

Last of all, it can even be said that, through the fashioning of a way of life, one finally becomes, for Cicero, *auctor* of one's universal rational *persona* in almost the same sense that the philosopher aims to be an *auctor rerum*. Neither in making nor in passive fatalism does one become *auctor* of one's rational *persona*, but precisely in the dynamic tension between the two: actively striving to find, within the limits prescribed by nature and circumstance, a way to fashion a life that will as much as possible be testimony and witness to one's rational human nature.²⁹ The conception of self-authorship suggested here, then, forces us to revise our initial impression, according to which for Cicero it would only be possible to be author of one's *persona* in the sense of the fourth *persona* outlined in *De Officiis*, as well as our judgment that with the idea of self-authorship Cicero was advocating a relation between the self and *persona* radically opposed to that found in Ariston and Epictetus. While Cicero does clearly reject the radical non-identity of self and *persona* that they advocate, his understanding of what it means to be an *auctor* still implies a limited non-identity. In light of the preceding discussion, it becomes clear that it is precisely in his understanding of how we are to approach this non-identity that Cicero differs from Ariston and Epictetus. While for the radical Stoics this non-identity must be recognized and affirmed to as to lead the sage to a state of indifference, for Cicero it is a question of, so to speak, assuming authority over one's *persona*, of fostering and cultivating it. One becomes *auctor personae suae*, then, not by the poetic fashioning of a social mask to be worn, and still less through the unreflective identification with one's own accidental circumstances, but rather by choosing to accept and affirm them as one's own. For Cicero, to be *auctor personae suae* implies a relation closer than that between actor and role, but not a total identification. It implies the distancing of self-reflexivity but not of self-estrangement. Just as the

29 Lévy 138, advances a more radical reading, according to which "the fourth *persona* coincides with the first," in the sense of actualizing it.

philosopher as *auctor rerum* does not consider himself to be somehow estranged from the objects of his contemplation but rather recognizes his affinity with them as parts of the order of nature, to become *auctor personae suae* would be to recognize one's own individual nature and talents and foster them, recognizing them, in their contingency, precisely as one's own and in fact constitutive of oneself as an embodied human being.³⁰ To be *auctor personae meae* is to assume responsibility for myself; to recognize and affirm myself, in contrast to the Stoics, in the contingent and "external" facts of my worldly and social existence. While for the Stoics such as Ariston and Epictetus the *persona* represented the unique role imposed on each individual and which must be accepted but never identified with, Cicero recognizes the need for the human being, through philosophical reflection and practical deliberation, to choose a role in keeping with the circumstances and assume it as his own. The *persona*, for Cicero, is the external that we must interiorize and so make our own. The essence and task of the human being is neither to be a *persona* nor affirm one's non-identity with the external *persona*, but to become its author, the author of oneself.

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30 Guérin 2009, 21, makes a similar point: "La notion de *persona* représente une fois encore le point de rencontre entre un donné de départ et l'usage qu'il est possible d'en faire".

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