

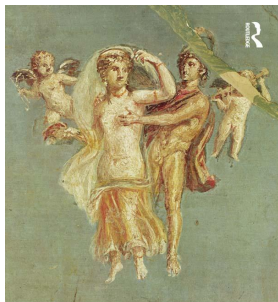
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 05 Dec 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Ancient Philosophy of Religion

Graham Oppy, N. N. Trakakis

Cicero

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch8>

Margaret Graver

Published online on: 31 Jul 2013

How to cite :- Margaret Graver. 31 Jul 2013, *Cicero from: Ancient Philosophy of Religion* Routledge
Accessed on: 05 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch8>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

8

CICERO

Margaret Graver

The philosophical works of Cicero (106–43 BCE) give evidence of a lively interest in what we now call the philosophy of religion, or philosophical theology. That broad realm of study addresses questions of the same kind as are commonly associated with religious thought, in particular the following:

- the nature of the divine; whether any divine beings exist;
- whether the universe is divinely created; whether events are in any sense controlled or directed by the divine;
- whether future events are already fully determined by divine will; whether human beings have any means of discerning and/or influencing god's intentions;
- the nature of the human soul; its prenatal or post-mortem existence; whether there are divinely appointed rewards or punishments; whether human nature is inherently pleasing to the divine;
- the source of religious stirring in individuals and of religious teachings and practices in human cultures.

All of these are addressed by Cicero, most extensively in his treatises *On the Nature of the Gods*, *On Divination* and *On Fate*, but also in the *Tusculan Disputations* and the earlier works *On the Republic* and *On the Laws*. In these writings he makes it his task not only to seek the truth of these difficult matters, but also to record as many as possible of the conflicting theological positions held by earlier philosophers and by his contemporaries in Rome. He is thus a key figure in the transmission of ancient Mediterranean thought.

In addition, Cicero works out a strategy for the systematic examination of theological subjects from the standpoint of reason. In his works, especially the later works, he assumes that it is possible to enquire into the foundations of religious belief whether or not one is antecedently committed to the truth of such beliefs. This, of course, is the primary point of difference between the philosophy

of religion and religious thought itself: whereas the latter may accept non-rational justifications for belief (revelation, authority, ancestral custom) and has some degree of tolerance for mystery and internal contradiction, philosophical theology admits only properly rational grounds and insists on tight standards of internal consistency and coherence. This basic distinction is already recognized and articulated by Cicero himself, and subsequent versions of it within the Western tradition have been much influenced by his treatises. In his work the emphasis falls not on theological doctrines themselves but on the challenging and testing of religious claims by sceptical argumentation. Only rarely does he admit to inclining toward a positive doctrine, and while he claims to hold some personal religious beliefs, he denies that these are what is at issue in his theological writings. His is a carefully crafted plausibilism, borrowed from Greek philosophers of the last period of the sceptical Academy. He will not present any position as simply true, for all are faced with forcible objections that remain unanswered; nonetheless he holds that a good sceptic will sometimes accept a position as plausible if it is better grounded than any alternative.

The modified sceptical stance is conditioned as much by the political and intellectual culture in which Cicero worked as by his personal inclinations. Rome's statesmen and civic leaders were expected to maintain, at least publicly, a respectful adherence to the religious practices of earlier centuries, practices considered to have been instrumental in producing and preserving the Roman state. Priesthoods were state offices: Cicero, like many others of his rank, was charged with the public performance of such sacerdotal functions as large-animal sacrifice, augury (divination from bird-signs), and haruspicy (divination from entrails). At the same time, the behaviour of public figures was also subject to the scrutiny of a sophisticated and frequently cynical elite. Among members of Cicero's own class, there was no general expectation that an educated person would give unqualified endorsement to the traditions of polytheism. More fashionable, as well as more satisfying to the intellect, were the major Hellenistic philosophies, of which the most important were Epicureanism and Stoicism, each offering its own theological system. Yet even here a professed adherence to any one set of beliefs could be turned to political advantage by one's opponents: Epicureans could be branded as pleasure-seekers and intellectually thin; Stoics as rigidly committed to impossible ideals. In order to support his role as a public intellectual, Cicero therefore finds it advantageous to display a thorough knowledge of the doctrines of multiple Hellenistic thinkers, while maintaining a critical distance from all of them.¹

1. On Cicero's intellectual climate, see further Rawson (1985); Beard (1986); Griffin (1989, 1995); on possible political implications, see Momigliano (1984).

THE CELESTIAL MACHINERY OF *ON THE REPUBLIC*

A certain reserve in the handling of religious topics can be traced even in the treatise *On the Republic*, although in this relatively early work (composed in the late 50s BCE) the explicitly sceptical stance is not yet in evidence.² Inspired in part by Platonic devices – the Myth of Er in book 10 of Plato’s *Republic* and the Myth of Judgement in *Phaedo* 66b–67d – Cicero arranges his treatise in such a way as to surround his extended discussion of systems of government with intimations of the divine. Thus the dramatic theodicy of the Dream of Scipio passage in book 6 is anticipated already in the opening sequence in the imperfectly preserved book 1. As the extant portion of the text begins, the participants in the dialogue are discussing a peculiar celestial phenomenon (the ‘doubled sun’ or parheliion) and proceed to descriptions of an orrery, or working model of the celestial orbits. These discussions are suggestive of the precise regularity of the cosmos and, by implication, of the truth of divination, for the doubled sun is easily interpreted as a portent of the impending death of the principal speaker, Scipio.

Religious elements are present, too, in Scipio’s theory of government, which praises monarchic rule on grounds that there is a single ruler in the heavens. Yet the same passage also introduces questions about the foundation of such beliefs, and Cicero is careful never to let his argument rely on them exclusively.

Perhaps it was for the sake of expediency that public leaders instituted the custom of believing that there is a single king in heaven, who “by his nod,” as Homer says, turns all Olympus, and who is counted both king and father of all. Still it is a very authoritative view, and extensively, indeed universally, attested, that all nations agree – through the pronouncements of their leaders, to be sure – that there is nothing better than a king, since they hold that all the gods are ruled by the power of one. But if we have learned to regard these as make-believe, the delusions of the ignorant, then let us heed those who are, as it were, shared teachers of the educated. (*On the Republic* 1.56)³

This is hardly an unequivocal endorsement of religious tradition. Its strongest point is the agreement of all nations, but even that does not rule out legitimate doubt. Scipio therefore proceeds to bolster his argument by reasoning of quite a different kind: first by an appeal to teleological strains in Greek philosophy and then, following a gap in the transmitted text, by an analogy with psychic harmony in the individual. It is noteworthy, too, that when a later passage mentions the

2. MacKendrick (1989) is a standard reference for the dating of the treatises. The differences between the works of the 50s and those of the mid-40s do not amount to a change of philosophical affiliation; see Görler (1995), responding primarily to Glucker (1988, 1992).

3. All translations are my own.

supposed divine parentage and eventual apotheosis of Romulus, founder of the Roman state, the speaker is careful to mark these as matters of legend, indicative of Romulus' personal and political success rather than of the truth of the reports (*On the Republic* 2.4, 2.17–20).

The most daring segment of the treatise as concerns its theological content is the vaunted Dream of Scipio in book 6. To be sure, material couched as dream-narrative can hardly be counted as assertion. Still, there can be no doubt that the dream's dramatic exposition and lofty manner of expression are meant to leave a lasting impression on the reader. Scipio is taken up into an unspecified heavenly realm where he converses with his deceased father and adoptive grandfather, like himself statesmen and military leaders. From this vantage point he is able to view the empyrean sphere, called "the highest god" (*On the Republic* 6.17), together with the lesser spheres that bear the sun, moon and five visible planets, and to hear the celestial harmonies produced by the sound of their rotation. Far below he sees our own diminutive planet, the centre of the universe yet silent and, since situated below the moon's orbit, subject to death and decay. Only the human soul, being a fragment of the fiery substance of the stars, can ever escape the sublunary realm, and that only if it devotes itself to public service. Those who indulge themselves in pleasure, disregarding "the laws of gods and men", instead tumble about the earth for many generations (*On the Republic* 6.29).

Platonic and Stoic ideas here mingle freely. The image of the body as prison-house of course derives from Plato's *Phaedo*, as does the emphasis on rewards and punishments, and the "self-mover" argument for the soul's immortality is imitated word for word from *Phaedrus* 245c–46a. But the mention of divine fire and the divinized celestial spheres recall Stoic thought, and it is hard to escape the impression that Cicero means to commend both those prestigious philosophical predecessors without quite offering allegiance to either.

HUMAN NATURE AND CONSENSUS OMNIUM JUSTIFICATION

Also in *On the Republic*, and with even greater emphasis in the largely contemporary *On Laws*, Cicero subscribes to a definitive position on the goodness of human nature. The fact that some people are willing to act in the interests of others, or even to devote their entire lives to public service, is to be explained by certain innate tendencies in all human beings, called the "promptings of nature" in *On the Republic* 1.3 and the "seeds" or "sparks" of virtue in other works (*On the Republic* 1.3, 1.41; *On Laws* 1.33; *On Ends* 5.18 5.43; *Tusculan Disputations* 3.2). The claim has close affinities with Stoic thought, from which Cicero seems to have derived it, although without explicit attribution. There is in the human race no inborn inclination toward vice: we are primed, as it were, to develop toward virtue as we mature. It is therefore not the fault of nature, or of any divine ordinance, that we frequently lapse into injustice and other vices. Responsibility

for evil rests always with flawed human institutions and with the individual perpetrators.

The account of this doctrine in *On Laws* 1 gives the seeds of virtue an intellectualist interpretation that again has antecedents in Stoic empiricism. What we have at birth are only “inchoate conceptions” (*On Laws* 1.30, 1.26–7); these are promising in themselves, but require extensive development before they can qualify as moral notions. That they sometimes yield to moral error is explained by the pernicious influences of culture, or by epistemic confusions that interfere with our intellectual development on an individual basis. Yet despite the undeniable fact of corruption, the innate conceptions have sufficient staying power to give rise to the various civic virtues, to religious scruples and ultimately to codes of law (*On the Republic* 1.2; *On Laws* 1.16–19, 1.24–5; *Tusculan Disputations* 1.40–42).⁴

The notion that human nature is initially oriented toward the good is of broad significance in Cicero’s thought. Not only does it preserve intuitions concerning the benevolence of the natural order, but it also plays a role in his philosophical method, as the theoretical basis for arguments based on the *consensus omnium*, the shared opinion of all nations and peoples. If a particular belief is held all over the world, independently of transmission, then we have grounds for assuming that it arises from some innate inclination of the human mind. Thus if it is upheld that every innate inclination of the human mind is towards the good, such universal beliefs have at least a *prima facie* claim to acceptance by philosophers. The argument can fail if the belief in question is not in fact universal, or if the concepts involved are subtle enough that most of humankind would be likely to get them wrong. Still, the untutored opinion of many peoples is always to be taken into consideration, and may provide the best available support for some theological claims.

PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Cicero’s most extensive discussion of the capacities of the human soul is to be found in the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations*, written in 45 BCE. In this work, as in others of the mid-40s, Cicero adopts a formally sceptical stance in the manner of his Academic teacher Philo of Larissa: certain knowledge is unattainable, and the task of the philosopher is merely to discover what view appears under scrutiny to be the most plausible (*probabile*) or most nearly resembling the truth (*verisimile*). Argumentation is put forward by a single embedded speaker who, although unnamed, is said explicitly to represent the author himself. The objective is to combat the fear of death, by which is meant not superstitious terrors occasioned by traditional tales of an afterlife in Hades (for “who is so witless as

4. For the Stoic background see Scott (1995: 157–220); Jackson-McCabe (2004); Inwood (2005: 271–301); see also Graver (2007: 149–71).

to believe that?" [*Tusculan Disputations* 1.11]), but more existential worries about not-being or the death of the self. Against these Cicero, like Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, asserts that even if it could be shown that the soul dies with the body, there is no evil in such a death, since no subject remains to incur the evil. If, on the other hand, the soul survives death, it survives to blessedness.

That it does survive has been the view of all peoples, prompted by "nature"; that is, by human nature (1.29). A universal tendency to believe in an afterlife is evidenced in burial customs and in the concern people show during life for future generations and their own posthumous reputations. The instinctive conception is, however, quite limited: it enables us to recognize the soul's existence and capacity for movement, but does not extend to any subtle understanding of its capacities or of the kind of immortality it has. Thus Cicero particularly admires the acumen with which Plato has constructed a proof of immortality based on those very intuitions: again, the self-mover argument from the *Phaedrus*. And in the main he is content "to err along with Plato" (1.39); that is, to opine that the soul is immortal but not to assert immortality as fact.

He is even less inclined toward dogmatic pronouncement when it comes to the further question of the soul's nature and composition. Here he is willing to entertain a range of possibilities: that the soul is a number (although he finds this obscure) or that it is composed of Aristotle's 'fifth essence' or that it is 'fiery breath' as the Stoics say. Only two views are definitively rejected on the basis of inherent absurdity, both positions that render post-mortem survival impossible; these are the atomist position of Democritus and Epicurus and the harmony theory of Dicaearchus and Aristoxenus. On any of the others it may be that soul survives the death of the body and travels upward to the heavenly regions, to dwell in contemplation. Thus Cicero "finds no reason why Plato's view should not be true" (1.49). Accordingly he endorses the Platonic view, but does so in the manner of the Academic sceptic.

THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF DIVINITY

For sustained philosophical investigation of the existence and nature of divinity we turn to the treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*, also written in 45 BCE. Unlike the *Tusculan Disputations*, but like the treatise *On Divination* and others of this period, *On the Nature of the Gods* follows a paired-speech format: first Gaius Velleius presents the arguments for Epicurean theology and is answered by Aurelius Cotta, then Lucilius Balbus does the same for the Stoics and Cotta again responds. Throughout it is Cotta who exemplifies the destructive endeavour of the Academic sceptic, working like a defence lawyer to dismantle the positive proofs that others have advanced. The author's personal point of view is represented only by a silent *persona*, the youthful Marcus Cicero, who in the end forms a judgement of what he has heard.

The Epicurean speaker Velleius is represented as overconfident: a brash dogmatist who launches readily into polemic. His position is one with which Cicero has little sympathy: that the gods are “quasi-corporeal” and of human form, and that they neither made the world nor take any active interest in it. Nonetheless his speech holds some methodological interest, for he frequently rests his assertions on an appeal to universal preconceptions, a strategy strikingly similar to that which Cicero himself sometimes employs (see Schofield 1980; Jackson-McCabe 2004). His speech therefore serves not only to demonstrate the utility of *consensus omnium* arguments in criticizing certain philosophical views, but also to expose the limitations of such arguments.

Thus in criticizing the theological positions of the Presocratic philosophers Velleius regularly insists that no view is viable that does not accord with our intuitions that a divine being must be sentient, eternal, of beautiful shape, indestructible and happy. The view of Thales, that god is water, fails because it does not make god sentient; that of Empedocles, that the four elements are divine, fails because it does not make god eternal, and so on. Criticizing Plato’s incorporealist view, Velleius complains that the position is simply incomprehensible. “For”, he says, “an incorporeal being would necessarily lack sensation, foresight, and pleasure, all of which we include in the concept of divinity” (*On the Nature of the Gods* 1.30). Similarly, in assessing Stoic views of god as ether (i.e. the upper air) or as the regularity in nature, his objection is that such views do not accord with what we think god is: a living being who meets us in prayer (1.36–8).

Cotta’s critique of the Epicurean position goes directly to this issue of the sufficiency of the appeal to preconceptions. The argument, says Cotta, carries little weight in itself (it is *levis*; 1.62); his principal objection to it, however, is that it is not in fact true that all people believe in the gods’ existence. Many races are so barbarous as to have no religion, and some philosophers have denied the existence of gods also, as do perpetrators of sacrilege implicitly by their actions. Nor can universal preconceptions support the claim that gods have the human form, since some nations picture gods in animal form. And even if all people did favour an anthropomorphic conception, alternative explanations are available for this, in the influence of culture and in the preference of each species for its own form. In this at least Cotta’s scepticism mirrors Cicero’s own: the anthropomorphic stories are “entirely fictitious, hardly worth the old wives’ lamp-light” (*ibid.*). And he speaks for Cicero also in his contempt for Epicurus’ efforts to explain the gods’ physical nature and activities in terms of the movement of atoms. As an argument against determinism Epicurus’ posited “atomic swerve” is outlandish, not even philosophically respectable; similarly, the supposition that divinities possess “quasi-bodies” fails to supply a satisfactory explanation for their continued existence. A theological system cannot be maintained if not grounded in cogent argumentation; that of Epicurus is “quite incomprehensible” (1.76).

Meanwhile Cotta makes no effort to refute a claim that is of central importance to Epicurus: that the gods are not to be feared precisely because they exercise

no causal influence on our world or any other. Already in the preface to the entire treatise Cicero identifies this detachment claim as the principal target of his work, for if it is allowed to stand, all religious observance is meaningless and the very basis of human society and all just behaviour gravely threatened (1.2–4). But Cotta, who questions the gods' very existence, cannot argue against it: only Lucilius Balbus, the Stoic spokesman of book 2, can offer any substantive response. Balbus' position is accordingly taken very seriously and is developed at great length, with all the rhetorical and stylistic elaboration Cicero's exceptional talents can supply. Not only is he allowed to build a coherent argument for the existence and providential concern of the Stoic deity – in essence, an argument from intelligent design – but he is allowed to illustrate that argument with large numbers of examples from the orderly arrangement of the universe, the characteristics of plants and animals, the workings of the human body and, finally, the achievements of human reason. In so far as the reader finds these examples persuasive, Velleius has been answered and Cicero's stated purpose achieved.

This optimistic view of the matter is then tested against the arguments that Cotta advances, respectfully but firmly, on behalf of the sceptical Academy. His attack is related in content to that of Velleius in book 1, but goes far beyond it in argumentative power.⁵ Portions of it are attributed to Carneades, the brilliant Academic scholar of the preceding century. Whether derived from Academic sources or devised by Cicero himself, the arguments are clearly ones that Cicero regards as having considerable philosophical merit. They may not be unanswerable, but they are ones to which answers must be found if religious belief is to have adequate foundation.

Cotta first seeks to show that no satisfactory demonstration has been given of the existence of god. The *consensus omnium* argument he again rejects as weak: the Stoics otherwise place little reliance on the judgement of the many, and they cannot both appeal to popular notions and seek to revise those notions by replacing the state gods with heavenly bodies or forces of nature. A favourite Stoic argument, that the universe must be sentient because it is the best of all things, rests on equivocation, and as for their supposed proof derived from the regular movements of the stars, there are many things, from tides to malarial fevers, that occur with impressive regularity and yet cannot be regarded as divine. Finally, Chrysippus is not entitled to infer from the beauty of the universe that it must have been built by divine beings. This would indeed be a reasonable inference if one were to concede that the universe was built in the way that a house is built. But Cotta does not concede this. He suggests instead that it might have been "formed by nature" (*On the Nature of the Gods* 3.26). He means, presumably (for his promised explanation has been lost in transmission), that the operation of various universal principles, such as gravitational forces or natural selection, could

5. For the 'unholy alliance' between Epicureans and Sceptics, see Long (1990: 281).

provide a suitable causal history for the regularities we observe in nature without recourse to divine agency.

Cotta argues further that the very notion of god is incoherent. The Stoic view requires that the god should be a living being, but a living being is of necessity changeable, with a capacity for sensation and for pleasure and pain, and these capacities entail susceptibility to destruction. Hence god cannot be both living and eternal. Another argument derives from god's virtue: to possess any virtue is necessarily to be able to choose between goods and evils, so that if god cannot partake of evils, he cannot be virtuous either. Yet the Stoics wish to say that god is just.

The sceptic's most devastating arguments, however, are those directed against the doctrine that Stoicism shares with traditional religion: that some benevolent deity is actively engaged in promoting human welfare. Although the relevant portion of book 3 survives only in fragments, it is reported by Lactantius that Cicero here formulated what is sometimes known as the 'problem of pain': if god is unable to rid us of the evils we suffer, he is not all-powerful; if he is able and still does not, he is not concerned for our welfare. Extant portions of the text argue, further, that the gift of reason cannot be considered an instance of divine benevolence. If the gods did give us our reason, they also gave us malice and wickedness, for vice is dependent on the cognitive abilities characteristic of human beings. Finally Cotta reasons that the many observed instances of good conduct going unrewarded, and of wickedness unpunished, demonstrate either god's inability or his unwillingness to execute justice in human affairs. It is with reluctance that Cotta makes this argument, since it threatens to undermine the public's motivation for good behaviour. But the fact is that the observed lack of connection between a person's character and his or her fortunes tends strongly to refute the Stoics' claims in favour of divine providence.

Given the tenor of Cotta's arguments, it is hardly surprising that the Epicurean Velleius, who has already expressed enthusiasm for his case against providentialism, declares in the end that the Academic's arguments appear to him "truer" than those of the Stoic Balbus. More remarkable, perhaps, is that Cicero at the same time represents himself as having been more nearly convinced by the Stoic position than by the refutation: it is "more inclined toward a semblance of truth" than that of Cotta.⁶ To understand why Cicero sides against his own Academy, it is essential to remember what was noted above: that the stated aim of the treatise includes establishing that the gods are indeed concerned with human affairs. In declaring the Stoic view to be more persuasive than its refutation, Cicero indicates that providentialism remains more satisfactory than the alternative. He can say this without abandoning his usual philosophical stance, for Carneadean plausibilism permits him to accept what appears to be plausible or like truth

6. This disputed passage has been well treated by Taran (1987) and DeFilippo (2000).

(*verisimile*). Moreover, this qualified judgement in favour of Balbus is to his advantage as a politician and public figure. By it he is able to associate himself with the civic-minded religiosity of the Stoics while also acknowledging the doubts that an educated Roman might have concerning specific Stoic doctrines. He can claim to have accomplished the self-appointed task of combating impiety and its attendant malefactions, without appearing in the invidious light of the dogmatist.

For although the content of Cicero's position is at the end of the day that of the Stoic Balbus, his stance in regard to that content remains that of the Academic Cotta. Of great importance for his public profession is the repeated insistence of Cotta that he does in fact believe in the gods and in their providential concern for the Roman people. He believes as a priest, on the authority of his forebears, and he experiences that belief as a deep inner conviction; it "cannot be shaken out of my mind" (*On the Nature of the Gods* 3.7). But belief on that basis is quite different from the conclusions expected from philosophy: "You have heard, Balbus, what Cotta believes as a priest; now give me to understand what you believe. For I ought to believe our ancestors even if no reason is supplied for belief; from you, though, I should get some rational basis for religion, since you are a philosopher" (3.6). This is not the fideism of later ages. Cotta regards it as possible that the intellectual basis he demands for his belief might at some time be supplied, if not by Balbus then by some other philosopher, and that fully rational conviction seems to him preferable to what he now has.⁷ That investigation is left for Cicero's readers to pursue on their own; in the meantime the acceptance of ancestral authority remains the fallback position.

DIVINATION AND FATE

More than once in *On the Nature of the Gods* Cicero alludes, through his characters, to an additional department of the philosophy of religion that, although closely related to the subject matter of that work, requires separate treatment. This is divination, or the reading of future events or divine intentions from signs and portents in the present, an important element in both Greek and Roman religious practice. This was to be the topic of Cicero's next composition, the two-book *On Divination*, circulated after the death of Caesar in 44 BCE.

The dramatic date of the work is just at the time of writing, and the speakers are the author himself and the author's younger brother Quintus. The latter has read the recently circulated *On the Nature of the Gods* and is in agreement with its

7. Unlike DeFilippo (2000), I am not inclined to assimilate Cotta's position to that of the more radical Pyrrhonian sceptics. This is consistent with their being considerable overlap between his arguments and those used by Sextus Empiricus in *Against the Professors* 9.138–81 (Long 1990).

conclusion favouring the Stoics, but seeks to offer a further defence of the Stoic position on divination. The role of sceptical questioner is now taken by Cicero himself, in a speech remarkable for its intensity and for the sheer number of its counter-proofs. The mildly favourable remarks on Stoic divination in *On Laws* 2.32–3 appear now to have been forgotten; the dreams and portents Cicero himself had related in his poems on Marius and on his own consulship are dismissed as poetic licence, although Quintus is permitted to quote liberally from them (Schofield 1986: 63; and see Beard 1986). Whatever his earlier position may have been, Cicero now has no hesitation in representing himself as an amused, even contemptuous, unbeliever in every form of divination practised in Rome.

In the course of the work Cicero argues not only against any pseudo-scientific theory of divination based on the notion of cosmic sympathy, but also against the principal argument advanced by Quintus on behalf of the Stoics: that the gods' benevolent concern for humankind guarantees that they have the will to communicate their intentions in a way we can understand, and their omnipotence guarantees that they have the ability (cf. Denyer 1985). Concerning the first, he does not dispute the possibility that all events in nature may be interconnected, but denies that there can be such a connection as would enable a soothsayer to predict the future of an army from the feeding behaviour of a chicken. Where the connections are obvious, as between the phases of the moon and the tides, there is nothing remarkable in the prediction; other supposed predictions are by chance or are mere fictions. Concerning the argument from the gods' benevolence – a point he seems to have conceded in the earlier work, and, as Schofield (1986) notes, the key to the Stoic position – he questions whether it is to our advantage to know the future: would Caesar have been happier in life if he had known that he was to die by assassination?

Cicero's most telling arguments, however, are those that he derives from Carneades, having to do with divine foreknowledge. In order for the gods to deliver signs of future events, they themselves must have knowledge of those events, and this requires that the relevant future-tense propositions must already be true in the present. This amounts to saying that the occurrence of the predicted events must be immutably fixed by fate. But if they are so fated, then we cannot take any action to avoid them, and divination is of no practical use. Conversely, if our actions do change the course of events, then the predictions turn out to have been untrue, so that no divination has occurred after all.

In order to give full scope to the well-developed Hellenistic discussions concerning modal logic, rich in implications for human responsibility, Cicero also composed a further theological treatise, *On Fate*.⁸ The short segment of that work that survives makes clear, at least, the extent of his interest in the topic and

8. Text and commentary in Cicero (1991). The issues are discussed in a major work by Bobzien (1998).

something of the arguments he employed. He resists the fatalism of Chrysippus and other Stoics, claiming that if one reasons from the supposed fact of divination that fate is in control of events, then there is no role for will or for self-improvement, and our actions are not in our own power to control. But neither does he grant that Epicurus makes any headway with his appeal to sheer indeterminacy (the atomic ‘swerve’). Instead, he draws a distinction between various kinds of causes. While all propositions, including those about the future, must be either true or false, the truth of them can be known only for those which result from ‘natural’ causes, that is, from those which operate “by their own force”, as ‘Scipio will die’ is necessitated by his being human. Otherwise the truth-value is unknown even to Apollo, the chief oracular deity.

How exactly this constitutes a solution remains unclear, however, and in any case it is likely that Cicero advanced no definitive solution himself. Like Carneades, to whom he credits much of his argumentation, he may be seeking only to dismantle the dogmatists’ claims. In this light it is noteworthy that he asks:

If there were no term “fate,” no entity of fate, no power of fate, and if perchance all or most events came about by mere accident, would things come out any differently than they do now? What does one achieve, then, by pushing for fate, since everything can be explained without reference to fate, in terms of nature or chance? (On Fate 1.6)

As Cotta in *On the Nature of the Gods* offered an explanation in terms of ‘nature’ as a viable alternative to explanations that appeal to divine purposes, so Cicero himself here offers ‘nature’ and ‘chance’ as alternative explanatory strategies capable of accounting for the phenomena we observe. He is not thereby committed to either strategy, but he may perhaps force a rejection of determinism and its unsavoury consequences.⁹

FURTHER READING

- Cicero 1991. On Fate. In *Cicero, “On Fate”, and Boethius, “The Consolation of Philosophy”*, R. Sharples (ed.). Warminster: Aris & Phillips.
- Cicero 1997. *The Nature of the Gods*, P. Walsh (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MacKendrick, P. 1989. *The Philosophical Books of Cicero*. London: Duckworth.
- Schofield, M. 1980. “Preconception, Argument, and God”. In *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat & J. Barnes (eds), 283–308. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

9. I wish to thank the participants in a symposium on Cicero’s Practical Philosophy held at Notre Dame University in October 2006 for improving my understanding of several issues relevant to this chapter.

- Schofield, M. 1986. "Cicero For and Against Divination". *Journal of Roman Studies* 76: 47–65.
- Taran, L. 1987. "Cicero's Attitude Towards Stoicism and Skepticism in the *De Natura Deorum*".
 In *Florilegium Columbianum: Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, K.-L. Selig & R. Somerville (eds), 1–22. New York: Italica Press.

On COSMOLOGY see also Chs 6, 14, 17; Vol. 2, Chs 4, 10, 16. On DIVINATION see also Chs 3, 7.
 On DIVINITY see also Chs 18, 19, 20; Vol. 2, Chs 6, 8. On IMMORTALITY see also Vol. 2, Ch. 5;
 Vol. 4, Chs 2, 6, 16. On INTELLIGENT DESIGN see also Ch. 4; Vol. 3, Ch. 23; Vol. 4, Chs 11, 12.

This page intentionally left blank