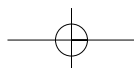
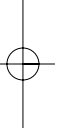
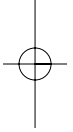
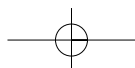
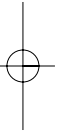
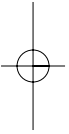
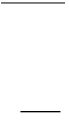
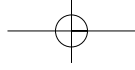


I

THE PHILOSOPHICAL  
TREATMENT  
OF RELIGION

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# Introduction

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Philosophy of religion is part of philosophy, not religion, and it would not exist were it not for the fact that philosophy is distinct from religion and has assumed the role of critic of all major human practices, including the practice of religion. These conditions never existed in the East, where philosophies and religions are not separated as they are in the Western world. Philosophy and religion are divided in Western culture because of the Greeks. Unlike the great Asian religions, the Greek religion did not attempt to answer ultimate questions about the nature of the universe. Its function was primarily that of giving people traditions and rituals that enabled them to propitiate the gods and to have continuity with their past and future. Whatever was ultimately responsible for the existence of the world and its ultimate fate, it was not the gods, and Greek religion was silent on the ultimate issues. It was the philosophers who explored such questions as these: Where did the universe come from and how is it put together? Is there any other world besides the world of our experience? What is the relation between human beings and nature? What happens to us after we die? Can we control our fate? What is the origin of good and evil?

It is customary to say that the method used by the Greek philosophers was reason, but that cannot be quite right because everybody reasons, whether or not they are philosophers. What was different about the Greek philosophers was that they used reason in a disciplined and focused

manner, eschewing convention when necessary, and treating reason as subservient to no authority but its own. Actually, that is probably not entirely true either, but it is close enough. So our first point about the history of the development of philosophy of religion is that philosophy of religion only makes sense if philosophy and religion are distinct, and they are distinct in Western culture because of the Greeks. Philosophy of religion is part of philosophy. It is not part of religion, not even the intellectual component of the practice of a religion.

The next question is how philosophy of religion became distinguished from other branches of philosophy, the way it is today. For much of the history of Western philosophy, philosophy of religion was just philosophy; it was not a sub-field. All of the major philosophers until the nineteenth century discussed some of the topics in this anthology, and some discussed all of them. If asked what they were doing, they would not say they were doing philosophy of religion. For example, Plato did not take himself to be writing philosophy of religion in the *Phaedo* where we get the first extended set of arguments in Western philosophy for life after death. Aristotle did not think he was doing philosophy of religion in his argument for an Unmoved Mover or in his argument that the universe did not have a beginning. Medieval philosophers did not distinguish philosophy of religion from other parts of philosophy either. The distinction they

thought important was something else – the difference between revealed theology and what they called natural theology, which was philosophy. So they were not concerned with distinguishing philosophy of religion from other parts of philosophy, but rather to distinguish philosophy from theology, which presupposes revelation.

So when was philosophy of religion invented? Probably not until after the Enlightenment, when skepticism about the truth of religious beliefs became prevalent among philosophers who no longer gave theistic answers to questions in metaphysics or ethics. It was commonly thought that David Hume and Immanuel Kant had demolished the traditional arguments for the existence of God in the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century many philosophical theists abandoned the rationalist approach to religion and attempted pragmatic or anti-rationalist defenses of religion instead. The work of philosophers who continued to ask questions that pertained to theism and to explore theistic responses to ordinary philosophical questions was put into a sub-field called philosophy of religion.

If this historical hypothesis is accurate, many of the philosophers included in this anthology

would not recognize the title of the book as applying to their own work. Nonetheless, they would all recognize the questions and most of the methods used to answer them. To illustrate the philosophical method of addressing these issues, we are beginning the book with a selection from Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*. This book is rarely anthologized, but it is a gem. Cicero's dialogue raises a number of issues that will be discussed in the readings in this anthology, and it illustrates the dialectical clash so prized by philosophers. The dialogue covers a range of views on the nature of the gods and whether and how they relate to human beings, particularly the issue of whether there is a providential god (Stoic view), or whether the gods ignore human affairs (Epicurean view). It includes arguments for the existence of the gods (*consensus gentium* and teleological arguments), fatalism, and the connection between religion and morality, and it mentions the modern argument that diversity of religions tends to lead to skepticism. The excerpt we have included here therefore illustrates both the antiquity of the range of questions included in this anthology and some of the methodological constraints practiced in Western philosophy.



## 1

# The Nature of the Gods, Book 1

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*Cicero*

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) was an important Roman philosopher, statesman, and orator. In the *The Nature of the Gods* Cicero narrates a dialogue between an Academic Skeptic named Gaius Cotta, an Epicurean named Gaius Vellius, and a Stoic named Quintus Lucilius Balbus. In addition to its wit and entertaining style, the dialogue provides insight into the theological views of many of the prominent philosophers and philosophical schools in the ancient world. It also illustrates the fact that most of the philosophical questions examined in this anthology have a long history with roots in the ancient world.

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There are many issues in philosophy which to this day have by no means been adequately resolved. But there is one enquiry, Brutus,<sup>1</sup> which is particularly difficult and obscure, as you are well aware. This concerns the nature of the gods, the noblest of studies for the human mind to grasp, and one vital for the regulation of religious observance. On this question, the pronouncements of highly learned men are so varied and so much at odds with each other that inevitably they strongly suggest that the explanation is human ignorance, and that the Academics have been wise to withhold assent on matters of such uncertainty; for what can be more degrading

than rash judgement, and what can be so rash and unworthy of the serious and sustained attention of a philosopher, as either to hold a false opinion or to defend without hesitation propositions inadequately examined and grasped?

Take our subject as an example. Most philosophers have stated that gods exist, the most likely view to which almost all of us are led by nature's guidance. But Protagoras<sup>2</sup> expressed his doubts about it, and Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus<sup>3</sup> of Cyrene believed that gods do not exist at all. As for those who have claimed that they do exist, their views are so varied and at loggerheads with each other that to list their opinions would be an

Cicero, "Book 1" from *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), extracts from pp. 3–46 plus notes. © 1997, 1998 by P. G. Walsh. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.



endless task. Many views are presented about the forms that gods take, where they are to be found and reside, and their manner of life; and there is total disagreement and conflict among philosophers concerning them. There is particularly wide disagreement on the most important element in the case: are the gods inactive and idle, absenting themselves totally from the supervision and government of the universe, or is the opposite true, that they created and established all things from the beginning, and that they continue to control the world and keep it in motion eternally? Unless a judgement is made between these views, we must inevitably labour under grievous misapprehension, in ignorance of the supreme issues. For there are and have been philosophers<sup>4</sup> who maintain that the gods exercise absolutely no supervision over human affairs. If their opinion is true, how can we show devotion to the gods, or have a sense of the holy or of religious obligation? All such chaste and scrupulous acknowledgement of the divine power is pointless unless the gods take notice of it, and unless the immortal gods make some acknowledgement to the human race. But if the gods have neither the power nor the desire to help us, if they have no interest whatever and they pay no attention to our activities, if there is nothing which can percolate from them to affect our human lives, what reason have we for addressing any acts of worship or honours or prayers to the immortal gods? If such activities are a mere façade of feigned pretence, they can contain no true devotion, nor indeed any other virtue, and without devotion to the gods all sense of the holy and of religious obligation is also lost. Once these disappear, our lives become fraught with disturbance and great chaos. It is conceivable that, if reverence for the gods is removed, trust and the social bond between men and the uniquely pre-eminent virtue of justice will disappear.

But there are other philosophers of high and notable stature who hold that the entire universe is ordered and governed by the intelligence and reason of the gods. They go further, and claim that the gods take counsel and forethought for our lives as men. They believe that harvests and all that the earth bears, the atmospheric changes, the alternation of the seasons, the variations in weather, by which all the produce of the earth ripens and matures, are bestowed by the gods on the human race. They adduce many features (and these will

be mentioned in the present work) such as seem to have been fashioned, so to speak, by the immortal gods for human use. In opposition to these thinkers, Carneades\* mounted so many arguments against them as to stimulate even the lowest intelligence with a desire to probe the truth. Indeed, there is no topic on which not merely the unlearned but even educated people disagree so much, and since their beliefs range so widely and are so much at odds with each other, two possibilities exist: it may be that none of them is true, or at any rate no more than one of them can be.

In my discussion of this question, I can both appease my well-disposed critics and refute malicious backbiters,<sup>5</sup> forcing the second group to regret their censure, and the first to have the pleasure of being instructed; for those who offer friendly admonition need to be enlightened, while those who make hostile attacks need to be refuted.

[. . .]

My request instead is that all should attend, investigate, and pass judgement on the views we are to hold on religion, divine observance, holiness, and religious ceremonial; on good faith and oath-taking; on temples and shrines and solemn sacrifices, as well as on the very auspices over which I myself preside.<sup>6</sup> For each and every one of these things relates to the issue of the immortal gods, and certainly the widespread disagreement on this important matter amongst highly learned men must occasion doubts in the minds of those who believe that they have attained a measure of certainty concerning it.

My thoughts have often turned to this controversy, but never more so than when we held a most rigorous and careful discussion<sup>7</sup> on the immortal gods at the home of my friend Gaius Cotta. At his request and invitation we gathered there during the Latin festival. When I arrived, I found him sitting in an alcove arguing with the senator Gaius Velleius, whom Epicureans regarded as their leading light among Romans at that time. Also present was Quintus Lucilius Balbus,<sup>8</sup> whose studies among the Stoics were so advanced that he bore comparison with the outstanding Greeks of the school.

When Cotta caught sight of me, he said: 'Your arrival is timely, for I am just getting involved in

an argument with Velleius on an important topic. In view of your interests, you will not be reluctant to join us.’

[...]

We were discussing the nature of the gods, a question which as always I find extremely opaque; so I was sounding out Velleius on the views of Epicurus. So, Velleius, if it is not too much trouble, recapitulate your initial remarks.’

‘I’ll do that’, he replied. ‘Mind you, his arrival is a reinforcement for you rather than for me, since both of you’ (this he added with a grin) ‘have been taught by the same teacher Philo to know nothing.’<sup>9</sup>

Then I interposed. ‘That teaching I leave to Cotta to explain; please don’t think that I’m here as his second; I shall listen impartially and without prejudice. No compulsion binds me to defend any particular view willy-nilly.’

Then Velleius, with the breezy confidence<sup>10</sup> customary with Epicureans, and fearing nothing so much as to give the impression of doubt about anything, spoke as if he had just come down from attending the gods’ assembly up in the Epicurean *intermundia*.<sup>11</sup>

‘What you are going to hear are no airy-fairy, fanciful opinions, like the craftsman-god in Plato’s *Timaieus*<sup>12</sup> who constructs the world, or the prophetic old lady whom the Stoics call Pronoia, and whom in Latin we can term Providentia. I am not going to speak of the universe itself as a round, blazing, revolving deity endowed with mind and feelings. These are the prodigies and wonders of philosophers who prefer dreaming to reasoning. I ask you, what sort of mental vision enabled your teacher Plato to envisage the construction of so massive a work, the assembling and building of the universe by the god in the way which he describes? What was his technique of building? What were his tools and levers and scaffolding?<sup>13</sup> Who were his helpers in so vast an enterprise? How could the elements of air and fire, water and earth knuckle under and obey the will of the architect? How did those solids of five shapes<sup>14</sup> from which all other things were fashioned originate, and conveniently station themselves to strike the mind and to produce sensations?<sup>15</sup> It would be a tedious business to recount all the particulars which appear as castles in the air

rather than as genuine discoveries; what takes the palm is that though he represented the world as not merely born but virtually manufactured, he claimed that it would be eternal.

[...]

‘The question I put to both of you is this: why did these world-builders suddenly emerge after lying asleep for countless generations? For the non-existence of the universe does not necessarily imply absence of periods of time; by “periods of time” I do not mean those fixed by the yearly courses of the stars numbered in days and nights, for I grant that such eras would not have come into being without the circular movement of the universe. What I do mean is eternity, so to say, from the boundless past; one cannot measure it by any definite period of time, but one can understand what it must have been in extent,<sup>16</sup> for one cannot even envisage that there may have been a time when no time existed.

‘So what I am asking, Balbus, is this: why did your Pronoia remain idle throughout that boundless length of time? Was she avoiding hard work? But hard work does not impinge upon a god, and in any case there was no such labour, for all the elements of sky, stars, lands, and seas obeyed the divine will. Why should the god have sought, like some aedile, to adorn the world with decorative figures and illuminations? If his motive was to improve his own living-quarters, then presumably he had earlier been dwelling for an infinite time in darkness, enclosed, so to say, in a windowless hovel. And what happened next? Do we assume that he took pleasure in the varied adornment which we behold in the heavens and on earth? What pleasure can a god take in such things? And if he did derive such pleasure, he could not have foregone it for so long.

[...]

‘As for those who have maintained that the world itself possesses life and wisdom, they have totally failed to see into what shape the nature of intelligent mind could be installed.<sup>17</sup> I shall treat this matter myself in a moment; for the present I shall merely express surprise at the slow-wittedness of those who would have it that a living creature endowed with both immortality and

blessedness is spherical in shape, merely because Plato maintains that no shape is more beautiful than the sphere. In my view, the cylinder, the cube, the cone, the pyramid are more beautiful. And what sort of life is assigned to this rotund god? Why, to be spun round at speed the like of which cannot even be imagined; I cannot envisage mental stability or a life of happiness resident in that! If an experience were to manifest itself as troublesome even in the slightest degree in our own bodies, it should surely be regarded as troublesome also in the god; now clearly the earth as a constituent part of the universe is also a part of your god, yet we observe that massive tracts of the earth cannot be populated and cultivated, because some of them are scorched by the impact of the sun, and others are in the hard grip of snow and frost owing to the sun's prolonged departure. So if the universe is god, since these lands are a part of the universe, we are to posit that some of god's limbs are ablaze, while others are frozen stiff!

[. . .]

'If anyone were to contemplate the thoughtless and random nature of all these claims, he would be bound to revere Epicurus, and to consign him to the company of those very gods who are the focus of our enquiry. He was the only person to realize first, that gods exist because nature herself has imprinted the conception of them in the minds of all – for what nation or category of men does not have some anticipation of gods, without being indoctrinated? Epicurus terms this *prolepsis*,<sup>18</sup> in other words the conception of an object previously grasped by the mind, without which nothing can be understood, investigated, or discussed. We have come to appreciate the force and usefulness of this reasoning as a result of the divine treatise of Epicurus<sup>19</sup> entitled *Rule and Judgement*.

'So you see that the foundations of this enquiry have been impressively laid: this belief of ours is not based on any prescription, custom, or law, but it abides as the strong, unanimous conviction of the whole world. We must therefore come to the realization that gods must exist because we have an implanted, or rather an innate, awareness of them. Now when all people naturally agree on something, that belief must be true; so we are to acknowledge that gods exist. Since this is agreed

by virtually everyone – not just philosophers, but also the unlearned – we further acknowledge that we possess what I earlier called an "anticipation" or prior notion of gods (we must use neologisms for new concepts, just as Epicurus himself adopted *prolepsis* in a sense which no previous philosopher had employed).

'As I was saying, then, we have this prior notion causing us to believe that the gods are blessed and immortal; for just as nature has bestowed on us the concept of the gods themselves, so also she has etched the notion on our minds to make us believe that they are eternal and blessed. If this is the case, the dictum expounded by Epicurus is true: "What is blessed and immortal neither is troubled itself, nor causes trouble to its neighbour; thus it is gripped by neither anger nor partiality, for all such attitudes are a mark of weakness."

'If our aim was merely to worship the gods devotedly and to free ourselves from superstition, we would need to say nothing more; the pre-eminent nature of the gods would be venerated by the devotion of mankind because it is both eternal and truly blessed, for reverence is rightly accorded to all that is supreme. Moreover, all fear of the gods would have been excised, through our awareness that anger and partiality are remote from the gods' blessed and immortal nature. Once these misapprehensions are banished, no fears of the gods loom over us.

'But our minds seek to strengthen these convictions by investigating the shape, the manner of life, the mental activity, and the mode of operation of the god.

'So far as the divine appearance is concerned, we are prompted partly by nature, and instructed partly by reason. Each one of us from every nation has a natural conviction that the gods have no other than human shape, for what other appearance do they present to us at any of our waking or sleeping hours? But we need not base our entire judgement on such primary concepts,<sup>20</sup> for reason itself pronounces the same judgement. It seems fitting that the most outstanding nature, in virtue of its blessedness and its immortality, should also be the most beautiful; and what arrangement of limbs, what fashioning of features, what shape or appearance can be more beautiful than the human form? You Stoics, Lucilius (I call you to witness rather than my friend Cotta here,



whose views differ according to the moment),<sup>21</sup> when depicting the divine skill and workmanship, frequently point out how everything in the human form is designed not merely with utility in mind, but also for beauty. So if the human shape is superior to the beauty of all living creatures, and god is a living creature, he certainly possesses that shape which is the most beautiful of all. Since it is certain that the gods are the most blessed of creatures, and no one can be blessed without possessing virtue, and virtue cannot exist without reason, and reason can subsist only in the human form, we must accordingly acknowledge that the gods have human shape. Yet this form of theirs is not corporeal but quasi-corporeal,<sup>22</sup> containing not blood, but quasi-blood.

'Epicurus' researches were too penetrating, and his explanations too subtle, to be grasped by any Tom, Dick, or Harry, but I rely on the intelligence of my audience here in offering this explanation, which is more succinct than the theme demands. By virtue of his mental outlook and practical handling of things hidden and deeply buried, Epicurus teaches that the vital nature of the gods is such that it is first perceptible not to the senses, but to the mind,<sup>23</sup> and not in substance or in measurable identity, like the things which he calls solid bodies because they are substantial. Rather, an infinite appearance of very similar images formed out of innumerable atoms arises, and flows towards the gods. Our minds focus and latch on to these images with the greatest sensations of pleasure; thus they obtain an understanding of what a blessed and eternal being is.

'The significance of the infinity just mentioned is supremely important, and repays close and careful scrutiny. We must grasp that its nature is such that there is an exact balance in all creation – what Epicurus calls *isonomia*<sup>24</sup> or equal distribution. What follows from this principle is that if there is a specific quantity of mortal creatures, the tally of immortals is no fewer; and again, if the destructive elements in the world are countless, the forces of conservation must likewise be infinite.

'Another enquiry, Balbus, which you Stoics often make, concerns the nature of the gods' life, how they spend their days.<sup>25</sup> Well, their life is such that nothing imaginable is more blessed, more abounding in all good things. The god is wholly inactive; he has no round of tasks to perform, and

no structures to set up. He takes pleasure in his own wisdom and virtue,<sup>26</sup> utterly certain that he will be perennially surrounded by the greatest and most abiding pleasures.

[...]

Cotta at once responded with his customary bonhomie.<sup>27</sup> 'But if you had not had something to say, Velleius, you could certainly not have heard anything from me, for usually my mind more readily apprehends the reasons for the falsehood of a statement rather than its truth. This has often struck me before, as it did just now as I was listening to you. If you were to ask me my view of the nature of the gods, I should perhaps have nothing to reply; but if you were to enquire whether I think their nature is such as you have just outlined, I would say that nothing seems to me less likely.

[...]

During my time in Athens, I often attended Zeno's lectures.\* Yet in listening to you just now, I experienced the same reaction as I often had when listening to him; I felt irritated that so talented an individual, if you will forgive my saying so, had become associated with such trivial, not to say stupid, doctrines.

[...]

'In this investigation of the nature of the gods, the primary issue is whether they exist or not. You say that it is difficult to deny it. I agree, if the question is posed in public, but it is quite easy in this type of conversation conducted between friends. So though I am a *pontifex* myself,<sup>28</sup> and though I believe that our ritual and our state-observances should be most religiously maintained, I should certainly like to be persuaded of the fundamental issue that gods exist, not merely as an expression of opinion but as a statement of truth; for many troubling considerations occur to me which sometimes lead me to think that they do not exist at all.

'But note how generously I intend to deal with you. Beliefs like this one, which you share with other philosophers, I shall not tackle, for virtually all philosophers – and I include myself

particularly – like the idea that gods exist. So I do not dispute the fact, but the argument you adduce I do not consider to be sufficiently strong. You advanced, as a sufficiently compelling proof for us to acknowledge the existence of gods, that persons of all communities and nations believe it to be so.<sup>29</sup> But this argument is not merely unsubstantial in itself, but also untrue. To begin with, what is the source of your knowledge of the beliefs of nations? My own opinion is that many races are so monstrously barbarous that they entertain no suspicion that gods exist.

[. . .]

‘I grant you that gods exist; so now inform me of their provenance, location, and the nature of their bodies, minds, and lives. These are the answers I am keen to have. To explain all of them, you exploit the dominion and the free movement of atoms. From them you fashion and create everything on earth, as the saying goes. But in the first place, atoms do not exist; for there is nothing [so small that it cannot be divided; moreover, assuming that atoms exist, they cannot be impelled through the void, assuming that you mean by void that]<sup>30</sup> which contains no body; so there can be no void, and nothing which is indivisible.

‘These arguments with which I make free are the cryptic utterances of the natural philosophers. Whether they are true or not I do not know, but they seem more probable than yours.<sup>31</sup> The reprehensible theories which you mouth emanate from Democritus – perhaps also from his predecessor Leucippus: that there are tiny bodies, some smooth, some rough, some round, some oblong, some curved and hook-shaped, and that heaven and earth have been formed from these not under the compulsion of any natural law, but by some sort of accidental collision.<sup>32</sup> You, Velleius, have carried this theory through to our own day; one could dislodge you from your whole life’s course sooner than from the authority which you cite, for you decided on becoming an Epicurean before you acquainted yourself with these tenets, and so you had either to take aboard these outrageous doctrines, or to abandon your claim to the philosophy which you had embraced.

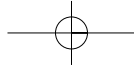
‘For what would induce you to stop being an Epicurean? “Absolutely nothing”, you reply

“would make me forsake the rationale of the happy life and the truth.” So is this creed of yours the truth? I do not challenge you on your claim to the happy life, for in your eyes even a god does not attain it unless he lives a life of torpid idleness. But where is this truth you claim? I suppose it lies in all those countless worlds of yours, which come into being and fade away at the drop of a hat! Or does it lie in the indivisible particles which without the direction of nature or reason<sup>33</sup> can fashion such notable structures? But I am forgetting the forbearing attitude which I had begun to show to you a moment ago, and I am challenging too many of your tenets. So I shall let pass your claim that all things are composed of atoms. But what relevance has this when the subject of our investigation is the nature of the gods?

‘Granted, then, that the gods are composed of atoms, it follows that they are not eternal,<sup>34</sup> for what is formed from atoms came into being at some time. Now if an atomic compound comes into being, gods did not exist earlier, and if gods have a beginning, they must also die – as you argued a moment ago yourself in the case of Plato’s universe. So where are this much-vaunted blessedness and this eternity of yours, the two criteria which you demand for divinity, to be found? In trying to establish them, you take refuge in a thicket of philosophical jargon, in your statement that a god does not have a body but a quasi-body, and does not have blood but quasi-blood.

‘This is a frequent practice of your school. When you try to avoid censure for proposing an unlikely theory, you advance a thesis so utterly impossible that you would have been better to concede the matter in dispute than to offer such shameless resistance. For example,<sup>35</sup> Epicurus realized that if atoms were borne downwards by their own weight, free will would be out of the question, because the movement of the atoms would be fixed and inevitable. So he devised a means of avoiding such determinism (this idea had doubtless not occurred to Democritus); he stated that when the atom was borne directly downward by the force of gravity, it swerved<sup>36</sup> ever so slightly. This explanation is tawdrier than his inability to defend his thesis<sup>37</sup> would have been.

‘He does the same thing in confronting the logicians.<sup>38</sup> Their traditional teaching is that in all disjunctive propositions of the “either true or



not” type, one or other of the two standpoints is true. But Epicurus was afraid that if he granted the validity of the statement “Epicurus will be alive tomorrow, or he will not”, one or other conclusion would be necessary; so he denied that the entire category of “either true or not” was necessary; what can possibly be more asinine than that? Arcesilaus used to hammer away at Zeno,<sup>39</sup> for while he himself labelled all senseimpressions fallacious, Zeno claimed that some were false, but not all. But Epicurus feared that if one single sensation appeared false, none of them would be true, so he stated that all senseimpressions registered the truth. In none of these doctrines was he too clever; while seeking to ward off the lighter punch, he ran into one heavier.

‘He does the same thing in discussing the nature of the gods; in seeking to avoid the charge that they are an accretion of atoms, with the inevitable consequence of their destruction and dispersal, he claims that they do not have bodies, but “quasi-bodies”, and not blood, but “quasi-blood”. It seems remarkable that one augur can look another in the eye without grinning,<sup>40</sup> but it is more remarkable still how you Epicureans can restrain your laughter when in each other’s company. “Not bodies, but quasi-bodies”; I could grasp the meaning of this if they were made of wax or earthenware, but what a “quasi-body” or “quasi-blood” is in the case of a god, I cannot imagine. Nor can you, Velleius, but you are unwilling to admit it.

‘You Epicureans repeat these doctrines like parrots, as though they have been dictated to you. Epicurus dreamt them up when half-asleep, for as we note from his writings, he boasted that he never had a teacher. Even if he had not proclaimed this, I myself could readily have believed it of him. He reminds me of the owner of a badly constructed house who boasts of not having employed an architect.

[...]

Explain to me, please, the outline and shape of these shadowy gods of yours. You have a number of arguments to advance here, in the attempt of your school to demonstrate that gods have human shape. First, you claim that we have an inbuilt, preconceived notion in our minds, so that when we think of “god”, the human form is

what presents itself to us. Second, since the gods’ nature excels all things, its shape must likewise be the most beautiful, and no shape is more beautiful than the human. Third, you adduce the argument that in no other shape can a mind have a home.<sup>41</sup>

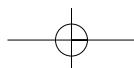
‘So first you must analyse the nature of each of these claims. It seems to me that you Epicureans arrogate as your rightful possession an assumption which is wholly improbable.

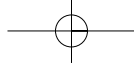
‘To begin with, was anyone ever so blind in his survey of realities as not to see that these human shapes have been ascribed to the gods for one of two possible reasons? Either some strategy of philosophers<sup>42</sup> sought to divert more easily the minds of the unsophisticated from debased living towards observance of the gods; or superstition ensured that statues were furnished for men to worship in the belief that they were addressing the gods themselves. Poets, painters, sculptors have nurtured these attitudes, because it was not easy to preserve the impression that gods were active and creative if they were represented by non-human shapes.

‘There was also a belief of yours perhaps reinforcing this, that to a human person nothing seems more beautiful than another human being. But you as a natural philosopher must see how nature plays the role of a seductive brothel-madam, a procuress recommending her wares. You surely cannot imagine that there is a single beast on land or sea which does not take delight above all in one of its own species? If this were not the case, why should a bull not seek to couple with a mare, or a horse with a cow? Do you perhaps suppose that an eagle or lion or dolphin prefers any other shape to its own? So it is hardly surprising that nature has similarly prevailed on humans to believe that nothing is more beautiful than a human being. [It is likely that this is why the gods have been thought to resemble men.]

[...]

‘And tell me this: are we also to assume that the gods bear the names which we allot to them? Yet they have as many names as there are human languages. Wherever you go, your name remains Velleius, but unlike you, Vulcan does not bear the same name in Italy, France, and Spain. Then again, even our pontifical registers do not contain





numerous names, whereas the number of gods is beyond counting. So are there anonymous gods? You are forced to make such an admission, for since they are look-alikes, what point is there in a plurality of names? How splendid it would be, Velleius, if you were to admit ignorance of what you do not know, rather than puking and feeling disgust with yourself for uttering such balderdash! You cannot genuinely believe that a god is in my likeness or yours: of course not.

[. . .]

‘Let us assume, then, the non-existence of the courses of the sun, moon, and planets,<sup>43</sup> since nothing can exist except what we have touched or seen. But you have not had sight of God himself, have you, so why believe in his existence? On this basis we must dispense with everything brought to our notice by history or science; it leads to the conclusion that folks in the hinterland do not believe in the existence of the sea. What downright narrow-mindedness this is! It is like imagining that you were born on Seriphus<sup>44</sup> and had never left the island, where you were used to seeing small creatures like hares and foxes – and refusing to believe in lions and panthers when they were described to you. As for the elephant, if anyone told you about it, you would believe that you were the butt of a joke!

‘To press this argument still further, can any statement be more childish than the claim that the types of beasts found in the Indian Ocean or in India<sup>45</sup> do not exist? Yet even the most diligent of researchers cannot gather information about all the many animals which dwell on land and sea, in marshes and rivers. So are we to claim that they do not exist because we have never set eyes on them?

[. . .]

‘As for this Epicurean account of yours, it is utter eyewash, hardly worthy of the old women who spin yarns by candlelight. You simply do not realize how much you let yourselves in for if you extract from us the admission that men and gods are identical in shape. You will have to allot to a god all the physical cares and concerns that we ascribe to a man – walking and running, reclining and bending, sitting down and grasping things, and to crown all, even chatting and declaiming.

As for your thesis that deities are both male and female, you realize the significance of that! I for my part never cease to wonder how your famous founder came to hold those beliefs.

‘But your interminable cry is that we must cleave fast to the doctrine of the divine blessedness and immortality. But what prevents a god being happy even if he is not endowed with two legs? Why cannot this blessedness, however you like to term it – whether we are to use the word *beatitas* or alternatively *beatitudo*,<sup>46</sup> both quite hard on the ears, but we have to soften words by use – be applied to the sun up yonder, or to this world of ours, or to some eternal Mind possessed of no bodily shape or limbs? Your only response is: “I never saw a happy sun or a happy world.” So have you ever set eyes on a world other than this? You will say you have not. Why, then, had you the temerity to maintain the existence not merely of thousand upon thousand, but of worlds beyond counting? You reply: “Reason has taught us this.” So in your search for the nature that is truly outstanding, blessed, and eternal, which alone possesses the attributes of divinity, will reason not also instruct you that just as divine nature surpasses us in immortality, so too it surpasses us in mental excellence – and not only in mental but also in physical excellence? So why are we peers of the gods physically, when we fall behind them in all other respects? One would have thought that human beings attained closer likeness to the gods in virtue than in appearance.<sup>47</sup>

[. . .]

“God”, says Epicurus, “has no concerns.” Like boy-favourites, he clearly likes nothing better than the idle life. But even those boys in their idleness seek enjoyment by playing some physical sport; do we want God to be so idle and sluggish as to make us fear that he cannot be happy if he bestirs himself? That maxim of his not merely deprives the gods of the movements and action appropriate to divinity, but also makes humans lazy, the assumption being that even God cannot be happy if he is doing something.

[. . .]

‘So my first question is: where does that God of yours dwell? Second, what makes him move

from his position, if he ever does? Next, since living creatures have a native tendency to seek what is suited to their nature, what is it that God seeks? For what purpose does he exercise the thrust of his mind and reason? Finally, what form do his blessedness and eternity take? Touching on any of these issues probes a sensitive spot, for reasoning without a solid premiss cannot attain a proper conclusion.

[...]

‘But Epicurus, in refusing to allow the gods to accord help and favour to men, has wholly uprooted religion from human hearts; for though he states that the divine nature is best and most outstanding of all, he further says that God manifests no favour, and thus he removes what is chiefly characteristic of the best and most outstanding nature. For what better or more outstanding quality is there than the kindness which confers benefits? When your school envisages a God lacking this quality, the message you preach is that no one, divine or human, is dear to God, that no one is held in love and affection by him. The conclusion is that not only is the human race of no concern to the gods, but the gods themselves are of no concern to each other.

‘How much better is the attitude of the Stoics,<sup>48</sup> whom you censure! They maintain that the friendship of the wise extends even to the wise men with whom they are not acquainted; for nothing is more lovable than virtue, and the person who has acquired it will be held in our affection no matter where he lives. But what harm you Epicureans do by regarding kindness and goodwill as weaknesses! Leaving aside the gods’ impact and nature, do you suggest even that humans would not have shown beneficence and affability if it had not been for their weakness? Does no natural affection exist between persons who are good? The very word *amor* (love), from which the word *amicitia* (friendship) derives, carries an affectionate sound. But if we exploit that friendship for our own advantage, and not in the interests of the person we love, it will cease to be friendship,<sup>49</sup> and become a kind of trafficking in the benefits it offers. We show regard for meadows and fields and herds of cattle, because profits are derived from them, but affection and friendship between human beings are

spontaneous; how much more, then, is the friendship shown by the gods, for they lack nothing, and they both show mutual affection and have the interests of mankind at heart. If this were not so, what point would there be in our revering and imploring the gods, or in priests presiding over sacrifices, and augurs over the auspices, or in petitioning and making vows to the immortal gods?

‘You object that Epicurus too wrote a book on reverence. The man makes sport with us, though he is not so much a wit as one undisciplined with the pen. How can there be reverence if the gods take no thought for human affairs? How can a nature be invested with life, yet remain wholly insensitive?

‘So undoubtedly closer to the truth is the claim made in the fifth book of his *Nature of the Gods* by Posidonius,<sup>50</sup> whose friendship we all share: that Epicurus does not believe in any gods, and that the statements which he made affirming the immortal gods were made to avert popular odium. He could not have been such an idiot as to fashion God on the lines of a poor human, even if merely in broad outline and not in substantial appearance, yet endowed with all the human limbs but without the slightest use of them, an emaciated, transparent being conferring no gifts or kindness on anyone, and in short discharging no duties and performing no actions.

‘First, such a nature cannot exist. In his awareness of this, Epicurus in actuality discards the gods, while paying lip-service to them. Second, should such a god actually exist, prompted by no favour or affection for mankind, I bid him farewell. There is no point in my urging him “Be gracious”, for he can be gracious to no one, since all favour and affection, as you Epicureans state, is a mark of weakness.’

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Brutus*: this is the Marcus Iunius Brutus who planned the assassination of Julius Caesar in March 44. He was a considerable intellectual; as a former pupil of Antiochus, he claimed allegiance, like Cicero himself, to the Academic school. Cicero’s close friendship with him is attested by their voluminous correspondence, only a fraction of which has survived, and by Cicero’s dedication to him of *De finibus* and *Tusculans*.

- 2 *Protagoras*: our knowledge of him comes chiefly from the dialogue of Plato bearing his name. Two of his statements have gained him immortality. Eusebius (*Praep. Evang.* 14.3.7) has preserved one sentence of his from his treatise *On the gods*: 'So far as gods are concerned, I cannot know whether they exist or not, nor what they are like in appearance; for many factors impede our knowledge – obscurity and the shortness of life.' Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e, attributes to him the statement that 'Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not' – a statement which excludes any appeal to divine revelation about the gods' existence.
- 3 *Diagoras . . . Theodorus*: Diagoras, a lyric poet of the late fifth century, was said to have lost his faith in the existence of gods when a man who broke his oath remained unpunished by them. See further 3.84, and L. Woodbury, *Phoenix* (1965), 178 ff. Theodorus of Cyrene was an adherent of the Cyrenaic school in the late fourth and early third centuries, and a pupil of Aristippus (on whom, see 3.77 nn.). For Theodorus, see Diogenes Laertius 2.98 ff.
- 4 *there are and have been philosophers*, etc.: Cicero now briefly visualizes the difficulties which the Epicurean theology raises for Roman religious practice, and indirectly for the coherence of Roman society. This observation is a challenge to contemporary Epicureans, who include Cicero's friend Atticus and other acquaintances mentioned in his correspondence (*Fam.* 15.19).
- 5 *Carneades*: the President of the New or Third Academy from a date before 155 to 137–136 is the philosopher who exercises greatest influence on Cicero, as is clear from *De finibus, Tusculans*, and above all *Academica*. See Introduction, p. xxxvi.
- 6 *well-disposed critics . . . malicious backbiters*: when he settled to compose this treatise, Cicero had already published *Hortensius, Academica, De finibus*, and *Tusculans*. He here reflects on the reactions aroused by them.
- 7 *auspices over which I myself preside*: Cicero had held the office of augur since 53 bc.
- 8 *a most rigorous and careful discussion*: the dialogue is imaginary. In a letter to Varro (*Fam.* 9.8), Cicero warns his friend that he will find himself involved in the *Academica* in a conversation which never took place! The dramatic date of this dialogue is 76 bc, when Cicero was still a relatively unknown figure, during the *Feriae Latinae*, a movable feast, which the consuls arranged between April and July. The depiction of time and place is in imitation of Plato's practice in his dialogues.
- 9 *taught . . . to know nothing*: a humorous allusion to the scepticism of the Academics.
- 10 *with the breezy confidence*, etc.: this scathing presentation of Velleius is an index to Cicero's aversion from the pontificating tendencies of the Epicureans, and more fundamentally from their ethical tenets.
- 11 *the Epicurean intermundia*: the Epicurean doctrine that the gods inhabit the *intermundia*, or empty spaces between the worlds.
- 12 *the craftsman-god in Plato's Timaeus*: Cicero himself translated this dialogue; the celebrated myth in it (89d–92e) recounts how the *demiourgos* created an orderly universe out of existing matter.
- 13 *tools and levers and scaffolding*: Cicero makes Velleius take Plato's creation-myth literally, ignoring the preliminary comment at *Timaeus* 28c: 'To find the maker and father of the universe is a hard task, and when you have found him, it is impossible to speak of him before all the people.' Such poetic myths make an easy target when interpreted literally; hence these knockabout jokes from Velleius. For Plato's discussion of the four elements, see *Timaeus* 32c and following.
- 14 *those solids of five shapes*: according to Pythagorean theory adopted by Plato, the four elements are represented by geometrical shapes; earth by particles in the shape of a cube, fire by a triangular pyramid, air by an octahedron, and water by an ikosahedron (twenty-sided). These are selected as the only possible regular rectilinear solids (all the faces being identical in size and shape) which can be enclosed in a sphere with all their corners touching the surface; see I. M. Crombie, *An Explanation of Plato's Doctrines* (London, 1962), ii.197 ff.
- 15 *to strike the mind and to produce sensations*: the theory of perception outlined in the *Timaeus* posits a cone of light formed between the object seen and the eye. Particles from the object impinge on the eye, which transmits the shock to the mind.
- 16 *what it must have been in extent*: Velleius argues that we can comprehend the notion of eternity before creation by thinking of it as spatial extension back from the moment of creation.
- 17 *they . . . failed to see into what shape . . . intelligent mind could be installed*: both Plato and the Stoics posit a sentient world endowed with mind. The *Timaeus* myth describes how the world obtains its soul, and for the Stoics the soul of the universe is identical with Pronoia. Epicureans argue that since reason is embraced within the human form alone, intelligent mind can pass only into that form, which the gods share with men.
- 18 *Epicurus terms this prolepsis*: in § 44 Cicero claimed to have coined the Latin word *anticipatio*

- to render this Greek concept. Thereby he distorts (whether intentionally or not is disputed) the true sense of *prolepsis*. Epicureans argue that following the repeated impact of images on the senses or the mind, we grasp a general conception of an object (as in this case of the gods); this is what *prolepsis* implies. Cicero's rendering appears to interpret it as previous knowledge of objects before their images have impacted on the senses, in other words a knowledge which predates sense-experience.
- 19 *the divine treatise of Epicurus*: this work, *Rule and Judgement*, which discussed the Epicurean theory of knowledge, has not survived. We are dependent upon Epicurus' *Principal Doctrines* and his *Letter to Herodotus* for reconstruction of the theory.
- 20 *primary concepts*: the evidences afforded by nature before reviewed by the reason.
- 21 *whose views differ according to the moment*: a jocular criticism of the Academics' doctrine of probability, by which judgements may vary according to circumstances.
- 22 *not corporeal, but quasi-corporeal, etc.*: the Epicureans believed that the gods, like everything else, are atomic compounds, but they are composed of atoms so fine that they differ in kind from the atoms which constitute the human frame.
- 23 *perceptible not to the senses, but to the mind*: unlike mundane objects which give off images composed of atoms which strike the senses, the images of gods are so fine that they bypass the senses and impinge directly on the mind.
- 24 *an exact balance . . . isonomia*: no attempt is made by Velleius to defend this doctrine, perhaps because it was such a familiar feature in Presocratics like Heraclitus and Empedocles. For the views expressed here, see Rist, *Epicurus*, 144 ff. Cicero introduces the doctrine here to indicate that in Epicureanism the gods are infinite in number.
- 25 It is surprising that in this account of the life of the Epicurean gods, no mention is made of their locale. It is strange, too, that Velleius refers to 'god' in the singular, perhaps to contrast the leisurely existence of the individual Epicurean deity with the ceaseless activity of the Stoic god next described.
- 26 *He takes pleasure in his own wisdom and virtue*: this is the Aristotelian view of god absorbed in his own excellence.
- 27 *with his customary bonhomie*: Cicero contrasts Velleius' bellicose demeanour (§ 18) with Cotta's greater urbanity. Cotta then takes the characteristic Academic stance by promising a Socratic scrutiny of Epicurean falsehood rather than a positive exposition of his own.
- 28 *though I am a pontifex, etc.*: of the four main colleges of priests at Rome, the sixteen *pontifices* took precedence over the augurs, the *decemviri sacrorum* (the college was increased to fifteen by 51 BC) who supervised the Sibylline books, and the *epulones*, who organized religious feasts. Cotta was elected *pontifex* soon after his return to Rome in 82 BC; tenure of this priesthood reflected his high stature in the state.
- 29 *persons of all communities . . . believe it to be so*: see § 43. The argument for the existence of gods *ex consensu gentium* was widely maintained in antiquity; where atheism is noted, it is usually ascribed to uneducated barbarians as here, or to ignoramuses; Plato, *Laws* 886a, remarks that there are many young atheists, but no old ones.
- 30 The supplement in brackets, or similar formulation, is added by editors. But possibly the addition is unnecessary, and Cotta, imitating Velleius, is arguing by syllogism: 'There is nothing which lacks a body; everywhere is occupied by bodies; therefore there can be no void.'
- 31 *the cryptic utterances of the natural philosophers . . . seem more probable*: like a true Academic, Cotta claims only probability and not truth. By 'natural philosophers' he means Aristotle, who in *Physics* 4.6 ff. argues that void does not exist, and in *Physics* 6.1 that matter is infinitely divisible.
- 32 *by some sort of accidental collision*: Cotta is wrong to attribute this view to the Greek atomists; in fact in § 69 he absolves Democritus of this doctrine. The notion of accidental swerve (*clinamen*) was introduced by Epicurus to support his ethical teaching; it allowed him to combat the Stoic doctrine of necessity.
- 33 *without the direction of nature or reason*: Cotta here exploits Stoic cosmological theory, for these terms are often used for the Stoic *pneuma*.
- 34 *it follows that they are not eternal*: this argument, that only simple and not composite substances can be eternal, is a familiar feature in earlier philosophy. The Epicureans argued that in the purer region of the *intermundia*, the finer atoms of which the gods are allegedly composed are not liable to separate; but the argument is frail.
- 35 Cotta now presents three alleged instances of absurd Epicurean tenets; the swerve of the atoms, the denial of the disjunctive proposition, and the infallibility of the senses.
- 36 *it swerved*: the theory of the swerve (*clinamen*) of the atoms is Epicurus' attempt to correct the thesis of Democritus that the heavier atoms overtake the lighter in their downward path, resulting in an impact which initiates movement in all directions. Since all atoms of whatever weight descend at the same rate (see Cicero, *Fin.* 1.19, Diogenes Laertius 10.61), a different explanation is necessary to defend the doctrine of free will against Stoic determinism.

- 37 *inability to defend his thesis*: that is, the thesis that the atoms latch on to each other to create material objects.
- 38 *confronting the logicians*: ancient philosophers combined logic and dialectic as the first branch of philosophy, the science of reasoning, which embraces also epistemology. In the science of logic, the disjunctive proposition is what is often nowadays called ‘the law of the excluded middle’; given two conflicting propositions, one or other must be true. The Epicureans adopted Aristotle’s solution (*De interpretatione* 9), that necessity is present only if the two prepositions are combined; if taken separately, the statements ‘Epicurus will be alive tomorrow/Epicurus will not be alive tomorrow’ are not necessary. Again Epicurus is concerned here to combat the notion of Stoic necessity.
- 39 *Arcesilaus used to hammer away at Zeno*: Arcesilaus, founder of the Second Academy, here attacks not the Epicurean Zeno but the founder of the Stoics of the same name, who argued that sense-perceptions give us certain knowledge in some things, but that in others we must suspend judgement. Epicurus claimed that all sense-perceptions are reliable, but that our judgement of them may be distorted, a view inherited from Aristotle (*De anima* 3.3).
- 40 *one augur can look another in the eye without grinning*: the author of this *mot* was the elder Cato (*Cicero, Div.* 2.51). Augurs were able to suspend public business when it suited them, by claiming unpropitious signs from heaven, while simultaneously regarding these religious practices, inherited from the Etruscans, with some contempt. Cicero recounts the *mot* with relish as an augur himself.
- 41 The arguments here are a resumé of Velleius’ statements in on pp. 00, 00.
- 42 *some strategy of philosophers*: the allusion may be to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b.
- 43 *the non-existence of the courses of sun, moon, and planets*: (the Latin does not have ‘the courses of’, but such an addition is demanded by the sense.) The argument is directed at the Epicurean epistemology, by which certain knowledge is attainable only through the senses.
- 44 *imagining that you were born on Seriphus*: this tiny island in the Cyclades was proverbial for its backwardness. See the famous story of Themistocles and the Seriphian at Plato, *Rep.* 329e–330a, repeated by Cato in Cicero’s *De senectute* 8.
- 45 *beasts found in the Indian Ocean or in India*: literally ‘in the Red Sea and in India’. Both Greeks and Romans apply the term Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and to the Persian Gulf, as well as to the Red Sea. The additional mention of India here suggests that the Indian Ocean is in Cotta’s mind; the ‘beasts’ are presumably whales, monsters of the deep comparable in size with elephants on land.
- 46 *beatitas or . . . beatitudo*: Roman pioneers in philosophy had sometimes to coin neologisms to express Greek concepts. Cicero here wonders how to render Greek *eudaimonia*, for which earlier he used *beata vita*. Of the two neologisms launched here, *beatitudo* catches on, but *beatitas* fades out.
- 47 *in virtue than in appearance*: Cotta uses Stoic arguments to rebut the Epicurean claims, whereas at 3.38 he roundly rejects the Stoic notion, that God has need of the cardinal virtues.
- 48 *the attitude of the Stoics*: this praise of Stoicism for its superior doctrine of friendship is disingenuous, for Epicureans laid great store by friendship at the human level (cf. *Principal Doctrines* 27: ‘Of the things which wisdom acquires for the blessedness of life as a whole, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship’). At the level of divine benevolence, Cotta could have argued that the Stoic divinity was more helpful to the human race, but not in any personal sense.
- 49 *it will cease to be friendship*: Aristotle (*NE* 1155b) recognizes three levels of friendship: utility, pleasure, and goodness; Cotta here rejects the first, and espouses the Stoics’ belief that ‘friendship exists only between the virtuous’ (Diogenes Laertius 7.124). Cicero develops the theme of friendship at greater length in his *De amicitia*.
- 50 *Posidonius*: See § 6 n. The Stoic philosopher and historian (c.135–c.50 BC) had studied under Panaetius at Athens, and later settled at Rhodes, where Cicero encountered him in 78. When Cotta claims acquaintance with him for himself and for Velleius and Balbus, he perhaps recalls the occasion of the visit of Posidonius to Rome in 87. (Cicero may have forgotten that Cotta was in exile at that time.) The work of Posidonius on the gods mentioned here must have been an important source for Cicero’s discussion in the two following books, but surprisingly it is cited only once (2.88).