

ACADEMIC SCEPTICISMS IN CICERO'S *DE NATURA DEORUM*

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Abstract: In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero presents a debate between an Epicurean, a Stoic and an Academic Skeptic on the nature of the gods. It is striking how Cicero's position, who is a self-proclaimed academic skeptic, differs from Cotta's, the character who represents academic skepticism in the dialogue. What does this fact say about the nature of scepticism? Our interpretation is that this plurality of skepticism which stands out in the text is a facet of Academic freedom, since, for Cicero, Academic skepticism is first and foremost about being free to think for yourself and making up your own mind, instead of having to follow a specific doctrine and its fixed set of ideas and rules.

Keywords: Skepticism, Academic, Cicero, Academic freedom, nature of the gods.

Resumo: Em *De Natura Deorum*, Cícero apresenta o debate entre um epicurista, um estóico e um cético acerca da natureza dos deuses. Chama atenção no texto que a posição de Cícero, que é um autodeclarado cético acadêmico, difere significativamente da posição de Cotta, o personagem que representa o ceticismo acadêmico no diálogo. Nossa interpretação é que essa pluralidade é uma manifestação da liberdade acadêmica. Para Cícero, o ceticismo acadêmico é, acima de tudo, a liberdade para pensar por si mesmo e sustentar as opiniões que julgar mais prováveis, em vez de seguir uma doutrina específica e ser obrigado a sustentar e seguir seu conjunto de ideias e regras fixas.

Palavras-chave: Ceticismo, Acadêmico, Cícero, liberdade acadêmica, natureza dos deuses.

1 Introduction

The philosophical interest in the Roman orator, statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 BC) has increased considerably in recent decades, and my focus of attention is the special relevance of this author to the skeptical tradition. In addition to his work being one of the main textual sources of ancient skepticism, there is intense debate in the specialized literature about the nature of Ciceronian skepticism.

I have argued (Skvirski 2019), based mostly on the *Academica*, that Cicero's skepticism is deeply concerned with Academic freedom (well known in the modern period as *libertas philosophandi*), which basically means having the freedom to think for oneself, and therefore also the freedom of not having to adhere to any specific philosophical doctrine and uphold its fixed beliefs. In such a way, the dialectical method of arguing both for and against (and then finding the most probable

¹ This paper is the outcome of postdoctoral research carried out at UFRRJ, under the supervision of Professor Rodrigo Pinto do Brito.

opinion) is for the Academic an exercise in freedom of thinking (freedom to think and to not hold *dogmata*). Cicero's Academic skepticism is not very interested in *epoche*, or *retentio assentionis* (Cicero's direct translation of *epoche* in *Academica*, 59), but rather, as stated above, in being free to think and being free from dogmatism, from the obligation to follow a school of thought and never doubting its principles. Cicero also describes such freedom in the *Academica* as the freedom to doubt.

I now turn to Ciceronian skepticism in light of *De Natura Deorum*. What we find may be seen as a facet of Academic freedom, manifested as the freedom to be yourself. Having the freedom to think for themselves, Academics do not have to believe in the same things. Academics do not have to appear similar to each other, since they are eclectic both in method and in holding opinions. Academic skepticism allows you to be yourself because it values first and foremost the freedom to weigh one doctrine against another and then hold whatever opinion you find to be the most probable, or most likely to be true. The fact that Cicero presents his own skepticism and Cotta's as quite different ways of thinking forces us to picture Academic skepticism as much more flexible and open than what we are used to doing when putting together a system of philosophy. By reading this text with these points in mind, skepticism emerges as a living philosophy, a way of life, rather than a mere concept or doctrine.

2

Many difficulties have been pointed out in the task of comprehending Cicero's philosophical stance and Academic affiliation. Tobias Reinhardt (2022) maps out four different levels to be taken into account in comprehending Cicero's own philosophy, for there are Cicero the man, the author, the narrator, and the character. As one would expect, interpretations vary substantially. Malcolm Schofield (1986), in his influential paper centered on *de Divinatione*, argues that Cicero's scepticism derives from his literary choices in writing the philosophical encyclopedia of 46-44 BC. J. P. F. Wynne (2014), following this lead, focuses on the academic character Cotta. A central contemporary debate revolves around the question if Cicero's academic scepticism is mitigated or radical (see Brittain, 2006, 2015).

In this paper I will try to pursue a different approach: What can be grasped from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* about the nature of scepticism? Focusing on the overall impression caused by the text, I hope the way it deals with the question of the nature of the gods will shed light on the type of scepticism contained therein. This approach is backdropped by the understanding of the wide varieties of scepticism (or rather scepticisms) available in the history of ideas. A sceptical tradition is only conceivable if it can harbor Pyrrhonism and the Middle Academy, but also John Buridan, Francisco Sanches, David Hume and Wittgenstein. Also, Cicero himself depicts Academic freedom as the possibility of thinking differently, or of having the freedom to change your mind (Skvirsky 2019). Therefore, the attempt to comprehend scepticism as it is showcased in *De Natura Deorum*, instead of trying the grander task of pinning down Cicero's general philosophical stance seems to be reasonably justified.

3

Let us begin with a brief description of the structure of the text. *De Natura Deorum* is divided into three parts. Book 1 begins with some preliminary remarks or preface (1-14), then transitions (15-17) to the setting of the dialogue and introduction of the characters. These are the very first lines of the text:

There are a number of branches of philosophy that have not as yet been by any means adequately explored; but the inquiry into the nature of the gods, which is both highly interesting in relation to the theory of the soul, and fundamentally important for the regulation of religion, is one of special difficulty and obscurity, as you, Brutus, are well aware (I, 1).

Cicero is in a conversation with Brutus about the nature of the gods, and then, later on in the preface, recalls the debate on the same topic that occurred at the house of his friend Gaius Cotta, during the Latin Festival, and which struck him with “special force” (I, 15). Cotta was with Gaius Velleius, a member of the Senate and a prominent Epicurean, and Quintus Lucilius Balbus, an “accomplished student of Stoicism”. Upon Cicero’s arrival, he is told that they are debating the nature of the gods. Velleius says that Cotta has gained an ally with Cicero’s arrival since, in Velleius’s words, “both are disciples of Philo, and have learned from him to know nothing” (I, 17). Cicero responds that he will be simply a listener, an *impartial and unprejudiced* listener, “under no sort of bond or obligation to uphold some fixed opinion”. Velleius’s exposition of Epicureanism follows (18-56), and then Cotta’s reply, which wraps up Book 1 (57-124). Book 2 is entirely devoted to Balbus’s exposition of Stoicism, and Book 3 to Cotta’s reply to Balbus. A detailed analysis of Cotta’s argumentation against Velleius and Balbus would be too lengthy for this paper. Therefore, I will address Cicero’s preface, Cotta’s introductory remarks in books 1 and 3, before his rebuttal of Velleius’s Epicureanism and Balbus’s Stoicism, and the conclusion of the book.

4 *Dissensio*

Cicero’s preface is quite interesting and, even though it is short, there is a lot going on in it. There is a presentation of the question, its difficulties and why it matters (1-5, 13-14), a thorough explanation of his lifelong interest in philosophy and defense of his recent impetus in writing philosophy in Latin (6-10), and a brief description of Academic philosophy (11-12).

The point that Cicero insists on the most throughout the preface is the disagreement and diversity of opinions on the nature of the gods. As seen above, Cicero begins the text by stating how important the inquiry into the nature of the gods is for the regulation of religion, and at the same time one of “special difficulty and obscurity”. This leads to a shift of the Greek *thauma*, given the statement that the diversity of opinions on the topic provides a strong case that “philosophy has its origin and starting-point in ignorance, and that the Academics were well-advised in ‘withholding assent’ from beliefs that are uncertain” (I, 1). For nothing is more unbecoming of a philosopher than the temerity of holding an opinion that is false, or of defending, without any doubt, an opinion not based on adequate examination and knowledge. Since we don’t have knowledge about the gods, we philosophize about their nature; if we did have knowledge, we would not philosophize, nor would there be such diversity of opinions. If this is the case, then the Academics are prudent in withholding assent. From the start, Cicero presents Academic philosophy as the most reasonable, at least in difficult and obscure matters, about which there is nothing but ignorance. Hence the diversity of opinions, even among eminent scholars, which means the Academics are well-advised in suspending judgment:

Obscurity - > Ignorance - > Diversity of opinions - > Withholding assent

Surprisingly, Cicero goes on to state that most “thinkers have affirmed that the gods exist, and this is the most probable view and the one to which we are all led by nature’s guidance”. Nature’s guidance leads us to think that there are gods, so most people agree they exist, and therefore Cicero simply affirms that it is the most *probable* opinion. Only Protagoras, Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene would have disagreed that there are gods. Here the following scheme can be set up:

Nature’s guidance - > majority of opinions - > probable view

So, the existence of the gods is no obscure matter. In a single blow, Cicero dissipates diversity of opinion and suspension of judgment, at least regarding the existence of the gods. It is interesting here to compare with the way Sextus Empiricus (*PH* III; *M* 9) handles the issue. *Epoche* encompasses both the nature and existence of the Gods. The Pyrrhonian sceptic follows the religious practices of his community (is pious) based on the “normal rules of life” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 11), which is a practical criterion or standard of guidance, not due to philosophical investigation or on the basis of rational argument.

As the title of the book – *De Natura Deorum* – indicates, the issue is really about the nature of the gods, not their existence, and it is here that the “upholders of divine existence differ and disagree so widely”. The greatest disagreement of all, and the actual point of dispute is the issue

whether the gods are entirely idle and inactive, taking no part at all in the direction and government of the world, or whether on the contrary all things both were created and ordered by them in the beginning and are controlled and kept in motion by them throughout eternity (I, 2).

So the inquiry is essentially about divine providence, set up as a quarrel between epicureans and stoics. For the Epicureans, gods are made of more subtle atoms and have no interest in human affairs, if they do exist; while for the Stoics god has created and controls everything. So far, we have learned something about Academic scepticism: it can vary according to how difficult and obscure the inquiry is. Divine providence is very obscure, hence all the disagreement and variety of opinions. In such case, the Academic is well-advised in suspending judgment.² In inquiries that are very difficult and obscure, withholding assent is a matter of prudence. Divine providence, it turns out, is an extremely important issue for Cicero. If the gods don’t care about us at all, one way or another, “how can piety, reverence or religion exist?” (I,3).

² For more on the different kinds of Academic behavior in the face of difficulties, see Skvirsky (2019).

And when these are gone, life becomes soon a welter of disorder and confusion; and in all probability the disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues (I, 4).

Religion is basic for civic virtue. Without it, the political consequences are disastrous. As if complete social chaos wasn't enough, the inquiry into the nature of the gods also bears personal relevance for Cicero. Near the end of the preface, Cicero states that the topic will be tried like a case in a courtroom. "This is a topic on which it seems proper to summon all the world to sit in judgment [...]" (I, 13)

...to attend the court, try the case, and deliver their verdict as to what opinions we are to hold about religion, piety and holiness, about ritual, about honor and loyalty to oaths, about temples, shrines and solemn sacrifices, and about the very auspices over which I myself preside [Cicero was elected a member of the college of Augurs in 53BC (Rackham)]; for all these matters ultimately depend on the nature of the gods (I, 14).

So, what people believe matters. And Cicero's interest in the nature of the gods is not only philosophical, but also social. He is worried about the terrible consequences that denying divine providence could have for piety and religion, politics and the social order. Cicero cares about maintaining social union, and wants to avoid disorder and confusion. This is one sense in which we can understand that, for him while in exile "to expound philosophy to my fellow-countrymen was actually my duty in the interests of the commonwealth" (I, 7). Ideas matter, and wrong ideas about important topics can deteriorate the social fabric and possibly even bring down a state. In this way, we learn that an Academic can care deeply about social values that uphold the good functioning of society. After the long quotation above follows Cicero's conclusion to the preface, just before going into the context and characters of the dialogue.

Surely such wide variety of opinion among men of the greatest learning on a matter of the highest moment must affect even those who think that they possess certain knowledge with a feeling of doubt (I, 14).

Here Cicero returns to the trope of *dissensio*, the diversity of opinion, but with a different outcome. Such wide diversity of opinions can lead to doubt (*addubitare*) even those who think they are certain of their opinion. It is interesting to see this use of doubt, considered as a product of wide diversity of opinion. Cicero does not elaborate on this at this point. Even though we can surely conceive of instances of that being the case, it does not seem very clear why the simple fact of *dissensio*, without really looking into the different opinions or weighing their arguments should lead dogmatic philosophers (those who think that they possess certain knowledge) to entertain doubts about their own opinion.

To sum up, the following information can be gathered about what it means to be an Academic sceptic from Cicero's presentation of the diversity of opinion about the nature of the gods in the preface. The sceptic:

- a) Holds the opinion that gods exist as a probable view;

- b) Is prudent to withhold assent in very difficult and obscure topics, such as the nature of the gods (divine providence), thus avoiding temerity;
- c) Cares deeply about social values and is concerned about politics;
- d) Thinks that wide disagreement may lead dogmatic philosophers to doubt.

5 Academic method and position

Let us now turn to Cicero's direct description of Academic scepticism in the preface (I, 11-12). The "philosophical method" of the Academy, which was "originated by Socrates, revived by Arcesilas, and reinforced by Carneades" consists in "a purely negative dialectic which refrains from pronouncing any positive judgment". Here we learn that the Academic method (*ratio*) is not about affirming positive statements, but consists in arguing against all schools of philosophy (*contra omnia disserendi*). Cicero expands upon this by stating that the Academic's "principle is to discover the truth by the method of arguing both for and against all the schools" (*contra omnes philosophos et pro omnibus dicere*). And this demands of the Academic mastery of all systems of philosophy, which is an *extensive and arduous undertaking* (I, 11). In short, the Academic method consists in searching for truth by arguing on both sides of a question. However, truth cannot be found by any infallible mark.

Our position is not that we hold that nothing is true, but that we assert that all true sensations are associated with false ones so closely resembling them that they contain no infallible mark to guide our judgement and assent. From this followed the corollary, that many sensations are probable, that is, though not amounting to a full perception they are yet possessed of a certain distinctness and clearness, and so can serve to direct the conduct of the wise man (I, 12).

Academics do not deny that truth exists, but that our judgment and assent can grasp it infallibly, given that truth and falsehood resemble one another so closely that they cannot be infallibly distinguished from each other. In such absence of truth, *probabilia* is the "standard of guidance" of the Academic, since "it would be impossible for the adherents of this method to dispense altogether with any standard of guidance (I, 12)". According to these two paragraphs, what does Academic philosophy look like?

Academic sceptics practice a purely negative dialectic, or argumentation for and against all schools, and refrain from positive statements (opinions that are held to be true), thus considering their own opinions as only probable views. The sceptic:

- a) Thinks that truth exists;
- b) Thinks that truth and falsehood are indistinguishable by any infallible mark;
- c) Thinks that many sensations (or "appearances", *videatur*) are probable;
- d) Follows probability as a standard of guidance;
- e) Practices the negative dialectic method of arguing for and against all schools;
- f) Has extensive knowledge about all philosophical schools, acquired through arduous study.

6 Cotta vs. Velleius (Book 1)

After such a serious and detailed preface, so careful in outlining both the importance of the issue and method of inquiry, the fact that the narration turns immediately to mockery is quite striking.

Velleius, with the confidence peculiar to his sect, dreading nothing so much as to seem to doubt of anything, began as if he had just then descended from the council of the Gods, and Epicurus's intervals of worlds (I, 18).

Velleius seems to be presented by the narrator as a champion of dogmatism: overconfident, arrogant and rash. He shows no doubt at all, as if he had direct knowledge of the gods themselves. Before even beginning his speech, Velleius and Epicureanism are the object of scorn and ridicule.

This of course stands in sharp contrast to the preface, or at least sheds new light to it. Certainly mocking a school of philosophy prior to listening to its case does not sound like “a purely negative dialectic which refrains from pronouncing any positive judgment” at all. We are only a few pages in and have already found a conflict between Cicero the writer of the preface and Cicero the narrator of the dialogue. Let us leave it aside for now. At any rate, we learn that Academic sceptics can be scornful and rude.

At the end of his speech, Velleius hints at being eager to hear what Cotta has to say, to which Cotta replies:

Unless you had stated a case, you certainly would have had no chance of hearing anything from me. I Always find it much easier to think of arguments to prove a thing false than to prove it true. This often happens to me, and did so just now while I was listening to you. Ask me what I think that the divine nature is like, and very probably I shall make no reply; but inquire whether I believe that it resembles the description of it which you have just given, and I shall say that nothing seems to me less likely (I, 57).

This definitely sounds like a version of a “negative dialectic” and the refraining from positive judgment by holding opinions as *probabilia*. Then, after praising Velleius's talents, Cotta laments that they should be wasted with such “trivial, not to say so stupid set of doctrines” (I, 59), and goes on:

Not that I propose at the moment to contribute something better of my own. As I said just now, in almost all subjects, but especially in natural philosophy, I am more ready to say what is not true than what is. Inquire of me as to the being and nature of god, and I shall follow the example of Simonides, who having the same question put to him by the great Hiero, requested a day's grace for consideration ; next day, when Hiero repeated the question, he asked for two days, and so went on several times multiplying the number of days by two ; and when Hiero in surprise asked why he did so, he replied, 'Because the longer I deliberate the more obscure the matter seems to me' (I, 60).

Negative dialectics reinstated. Cotta here seems to subscribe to the obscurity scheme we have sketched out above (page 3), and withhold assent in difficult and obscure matters. Like Simonides, with more deliberation, only more obscurity ensues, and no opinion can be formed. But there are surprises in store for us.

I, who am a high priest, and who hold it to be a duty most solemnly to maintain the rights and doctrines of the established religion, should be glad to be convinced of this fundamental tenet of the divine existence, not as an article of faith merely but as an ascertained fact (*persuadere mihi non opinione solum sed etiam ad veritatem plane velim*). For many disturbing reflections occur to my mind, which sometimes make me think that there are no gods at all. But mark how generously I deal with you. I will not attack those tenets which are shared by your school with all other philosophers—for example the one in question, since almost all men, and I myself no less than any other, believe that the gods exist, and this accordingly I do not challenge. At the same time I doubt the adequacy of the argument which you adduce to prove it. (I, 61).

It is at this point that we learn that Cotta is not only an Academic philosopher, but also a high priest, a *pontifex*, who wishes he could be convinced of the existence of the gods not on the basis of religious belief, but as “an ascertained fact”. Let us try to reconstruct his reasoning. Cotta:

- a) Believes the gods exist;
- b) Sometimes, through reflection, doubts their existence;
- c) Wishes their existence could be proven to be a reality;
- d) Finds Velleius’s arguments for the existence of the gods to be inadequate.

Even though there may be a considerable amount of irony in Cotta’s wishing that the existence of the gods could be proven as a fact, it does serve a purpose for the comprehension of his position. Cotta does not seem to be saying he believes in gods as a probable view, but that he believes in them based on religious faith (and of the same type seem to be the doubts that sometimes trouble him). Therefore, Cotta would be glad if he could find some proof of the gods’ existence beyond religious faith. In other words: Cotta wishes there were real, rigorous scientific knowledge about the gods. However, he will not find it, not here in Velleius’s speech advocating Epicureanism, nor in Balbus’s defence of Stoic theology.

7 Cotta vs. Balbus (Book 3)

Book 2 ends with Lucilius Balbus’s provocative suggestions to “reflect that you are a leading citizen and a pontiff” and “take advantage of the liberty enjoyed by your school of arguing both pro and contra to choose to espouse my side”, since “the habit of arguing in support of atheism, whether it be done from conviction or in pretence, is a wicked and an impious practice” (II, 168). Cotta’s reply stresses that his belief in the existence of the gods is based on the authority of tradition, it is inherited from the forefathers:

I am considerably influenced by your authority, Balbus, and by the plea that you put forward at the conclusion of your discourse, when you exhorted me to remember that I am both a Cotta and a pontiff. This no doubt meant that I ought to uphold the beliefs about the immortal gods which have come down to us from our ancestors, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion. For my part I always shall uphold them

and always have done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal gods which I have inherited from our forefathers. But on any question of religion I am guided by the high pontiffs, Titus Coruncanius, Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, not by Zeno or Cleanthes or Chrysippus; and I have Gaius Laelius, who was both an augur and a philosopher, to whose discourse upon religion, in his famous oration, I would rather listen than to any leader of the Stoics. [...] There, Balbus, is the opinion of a Cotta and a pontiff; now oblige me by letting me know yours. You are a philosopher, and I ought to receive from you a proof of your religion, whereas I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof (III, 5-6).

Cotta's defence of traditional Roman religion is quite clear: popular religion, grounded on tradition, is intertwined with the foundations of the state and its success, and it is safeguarded against rational argument (*no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal gods which I have inherited from our forefathers*). Cotta goes on to make a similar point he had previously made Against Velleius:

...although I for my part cannot be persuaded to surrender my belief that the gods exist, nevertheless you teach me no reason why this belief, of which I am convinced on the authority of our forefathers, should be true (III, 7).

Cotta believes in the existence of the gods based on the authority of the forefathers (*auctoritate maiorum*), if it were left to rational argument, the Stoics would leave him unconvinced. As seen in the end of the long quote above (III, 6), from philosophy a proof (*ratione*) is demanded for its religious views (or its theology), whereas from tradition no proof is required. There is a clearcut distinction between traditional religion, handed down from the forefathers, and religious views defended by a school of philosophy. Cotta does not need to "take the side" of Stoicism against Epicureanism, he actually does not need philosophy at all in order to have religious beliefs. And, in fact neither school of philosophy satisfies. The arguments of the Epicureans are downright inadequate, whilst the Stoics' argumentation is unconvincing.

Cotta insists on the force of tradition by questioning why Balbus offered so many arguments to support the existence of the gods after having said that their existence is "manifest and universally accepted" (III, 8). According to Cotta:

For my part a single argument would have sufficed, namely that it has been handed down to us by our forefathers. But you despise authority, and fight your battles with the weapon of reason. Give permission therefore for my reason to join issue with yours (III, 10).

Reason, sided with philosophy, is pitted against the authority of tradition. Cotta supports tradition as the only "argument" necessary for upholding the existence of the gods. Using reason to ground religion is problematic and should be avoided. However, if reason is introduced with this aim, he is ready to put his own to work and provide opposing arguments, thus making dogmatic reason combat itself in a field of battle.

You adduce all these arguments to prove that the gods exist, and by arguing you render doubtful a matter which in my opinion admits of no doubt at all (III, 10).

Weak arguments to support the existence of the gods actually do a disservice to religion, for they only render doubtful that which, based on tradition, admits of no doubt at all. Only then Cotta begins his rebuttal of Stoic theology. Once again, Cotta's position seems clear: the weapons of reason are inadequate for grounding religion; only tradition does the job. Cotta's Academic scepticism may be summed up as follows. Cotta:

- a) Respects the authority of tradition, and
- b) Grounds religious practice and belief on tradition,
- c) Thinks that philosophical arguments are inept in proving the existence and nature of the gods, and therefore
- d) Uses reason dialectically against dogmatic philosophers.

8 Cicero's conclusion of *De Natura Deorum*

At the end of book 3, after Cotta's speech, Balbus says he would like the opportunity to counter Cotta's arguments some other day.

For I have to fight against you on behalf of our altars and hearths, of the temples and shrines of the gods, and of the citywalls, which you as pontiffs declare to be sacred and are more careful to hedge the city round with religious ceremonies than even with fortifications; and my conscience forbids me to abandon their cause so long as I yet can breathe (III, 94).

Balbus is just as keen on defending religious practice as Cotta, the difference lying on the way he attempts to do so. Cotta replies that his only desire was to discuss the doctrines, not to pronounce judgment upon them, adding that he is confident that Balbus could easily defeat him. Here Cotta seems to be reinforcing the fact that he only combated the Stoic's reasoning about the nature of the gods, but is not committed to those arguments, for it is not his goal to weaken religion, but to show that it is best grounded on tradition than by the "weapons of reason".

After the prefatory remarks in Book 1, Cicero does not participate at all, breaking silence only at the very end of the text:

Here the conversation ended, and we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta's discourse to be the truer, while I felt that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth.

Apparently, Velleius has been converted to Academic philosophy, and Cicero takes the side of Stoicism. It is interesting that Academic freedom allows him to do so (see Skvirsky, 2019). As Cicero put forth in the preface (I, 17), he would be an impartial and unprejudiced listener, being "under no sort of bond or obligation to uphold some fixed opinion". Also, his claim that diversity of opinion in obscure matters may lead dogmatic philosophers to doubt their views is reinforced by Velleius's conversion. It also adds a further step, for if diversity of opinion did lead Velleius to doubt his own view, then it was this doubt that led him to a conversion or change of heart. This is the common view of doubt as vacillation, as a motor for weakening and eventually changing a given dogma.

Diversity of opinions - > Doubt - > Change in dogma

It is notorious that in Cicero's preface and through Cotta's voice very different accounts of scepticism are put forth. Commentators since at least Pease (1913) have offered several possible explanations for this fact. As striking as it may be for us, perhaps this discrepancy could also be seen as somewhat expected, after all, agreement in philosophy is a rare finding. But, perhaps more importantly, Cicero's take on skepticism welcomes diversity and change. As it is apparent many of his works, and especially in the *Academica*, Cicero is keen on the freedom of the Academics, who can think for themselves (through arguing pro and con and looking for probability), in contrast to the dogmatist, who are obliged to follow fixed doctrines and opinions (see Skvirsky 2019). Also, such plurality can be a quite refreshing view of scepticism. If we bear in mind the modern, instrumental uses of scepticism as a methodological device in the search for certainty, the paradigmatic (but not only) example being Descartes's method of doubt, then "the sceptic" is simply a nameless, faceless character set up to be refuted. That *de Natura Deorum* offers (at least) two different Academic sceptics in the persons of Cicero and Cotta is in itself a relevant and interesting fact, for it portrays scepticism as a living philosophy, which can be as diverse as its adherents.

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