

Cicero's Commitment to Stoic *Ratio* in *De Natura Deorum* 3.95

In 3.95 of *De Natura Deorum* Cicero states the two conclusions of the dialogue's participants. The first, Velleius' confession that he sides with Cotta, the Academic-Epicurean agreement contra Stoic dogma, is predictable. It derives from his skepticism for the gods' involvement in *minutiae*. Yet Stoics and Epicureans were allied on the notion *deos esse* and on the strength of the argument for that position. If anything, Velleius *should* have sided with Balbus as Cicero does, because Epicureans believe in the gods though not in their benevolent oversight.

The second conclusion is Cicero's profession that he himself sides with Balbus. Cicero's acknowledgement that the discourse of Balbus seemed closer to the *appearance* of the truth is nothing other than his endorsement of Stoic providence. It is Balbus' fourth point from earlier in the dialogue (*deos generi humano consulere*, 2.2) dressed in Academic garb. The language of appearance reveals that *ND* is a true aporetic dialogue: the disputants involved do not reach firm conclusions (Taran (1987) 11 - it is significant that since this groundbreaking article of Taran, little additional light has been offered on this topic). A conclusion is, however, certainly implied, namely that Cicero read the Stoics as holding that *ratio* is simply *natura*. This conclusion, I argue, also pertains to the larger question of Cicero's philosophical allegiance.

Devotion to the reliability of *natura*, a theme expressed in *Fin.* 3, the basis for his rejection of Stoic *officia* in *Fin.* 4, and a predilection reaffirmed in all three books of *ND*, leads Cicero closer to Stoic ethics and theology than perhaps he recognized. To the extent that he endorses *ratio*, it is this version rather than the Academic variety that he follows. Though Cicero's intellectual versatility enables him to showcase the Academic version of *ratio* in *ND* 3,

here in 95 he dislikes its conclusions. Instead, Stoic, *natura*-based *ratio* lets him hold to Roman traditions in ethics and theology. Without these traditions he believed the state would soon collapse.

When Academic *ratio* and *auctoritas maiorum* come into conflict, Cicero chooses the latter. In this he reveals the limits of Greek philosophy's influence over him. Werner Jaeger (1936, 242) expresses this insight in part when he writes: "For the Greek, the discovery of a contradiction between tradition and reason, *nomos* and *phusis*, would itself involve normally a decision in favor of reason. For to him reason represents Nature, the only truth and necessity. Whereas Roman conservatism rejects the uninhibited use of this criterion, because that would require the sacrifice and devaluation of some piece of long-established experience."

Jaeger is correct that Roman conservatism opts for *auctoritas* over *ratio*. But Cicero tries to sidestep that entire conflict by affirming Stoic *natura*, which allows him to embrace a *ratio* very different from that of the Academics while still honoring *mos maiorum*. This proclivity for the Stoic account of the gods comes to the fore despite Cicero's strong rhetorical reasons for following the Academics exclusively. He roundly criticized them for their derivative oratory. Nevertheless, after much deliberation he chose to side with the Stoics in ethics and theology. Thus I cannot agree with Momigliano (1984, 208) when he claims "The inescapable conclusion a reader was bound to draw from the end of *De natura deorum* was that Cicero, with all due precautions (for which cf. 3. 95), intended to be negative."

The final question, and the focus of my presentation, is this: What was the motivation for Cicero's commitment to *natura*? There are two possible answers. The first is that his need to affirm popular religious conviction on the gods' role in the success of the Roman state led him to it. This can be cynically interpreted as self-serving, but does not have to be. It is completely

plausible that he both believed it and saw it as socially valuable. That Cicero was committed to this notion is evident elsewhere in his writings (e.g. *Cat.* 1.33, 2.29, 3.1; 18-22).

The other answer, which seems perhaps more persuasive, is that his belief in the inherent goodness of nature drove him toward the Stoics. Reliance upon *natura*, he says, will get one safely to a belief in the gods. *Natura* and *mos maiorum* together form a sound basis for Roman policy and his own political advancement, for meaningful, virtuous political action within society. This I intend to prove.

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