

THERE are many questions in philosophy to which no satisfactory answer has yet been given. But the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all. Yet an answer to this question could shed the clearest light upon the nature of our own minds and also give us the essential guidance which we need in our religion. So various and so contradictory are the opinions of the most learned men on this matter as to persuade one of the truth of the saying that philosophy is the child of ignorance; and that the philosophers of the Academy have been wise in withholding their consent from any proposition that has not been proved. There is nothing worse than a hasty judgement, and nothing could be more unworthy of the dignity and integrity of a philosopher than uncritically to adopt a false opinion or to maintain as certain some theory which has not been fully explored and understood.

As to our own question, most philosophers have affirmed the existence of the gods: and indeed such an assertion is plausible and one to which we are all naturally inclined. Protagoras however professed himself in doubt on the matter, and Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene did not believe them to exist at all. But even among those who assert that gods exist there is such variety and conflict of opinions that it would be tedious to list them all. There are many different theories about the shapes in which the gods appear, about their homes and habitations, about the manner of their life, and all of these theories are the subject of constant dispute among philosophers. But the crux and centre of the argument is the question whether the gods do nothing, care for nothing, and take their ease detached from all concern with the care

and government of the world: or whether on the contrary all things have been created and formed by them from the dawn of time, and will be ruled and governed by them to all eternity.

So at the very outset of our inquiry we are faced with fundamental differences of opinion. Unless these differences can be resolved, mankind will continue to live in the grossest error and in ignorance of what they most require to know.

There are and always have been some philosophers who believe that the gods have no concern whatever with the affairs of men. But if this belief is true, what becomes of piety, of reverence and of religion? All the tributes of purity and chastity which men offer to the divinity of the gods are meaningless if the gods are unaware of them and if in their immortal existence they are oblivious of the human race. If the gods cannot help us, and would not if they could, but care nothing about us, and do not even notice what we do: if in short these immortal beings exert no influence whatever on human affairs, then why should we revere them, honour them or pray to them? [Piety like any other virtue cannot long endure in the guise of a mere convention and pretence. When piety goes, religion and sanctity go with it. And when these are gone, there is anarchy and complete confusion in our way of life. Indeed I do not know whether, if our reverence for the gods were lost, we should not also see the end of good faith, of human brotherhood, and even of justice itself, which is the keystone of all the virtues.]

There are however other philosophers, great and noble ones at that, who believe that the whole universe is administered and governed by the mind and purpose of the gods: and who believe also that the gods are concerned to make provision for the life of man. The fruits of the earth and all that it bears, the times and the seasons, the changing aspects of the sky, by which everything to which the earth gives birth

is grown and ripened; all these they regard as the gifts of the immortal gods to man. They have piled up a mass of evidence to support this view, which we shall later examine. It almost goes to prove that the gods have actually created all such things for the benefit of man. But against this view Carneades has developed many counter-arguments such as would stimulate anybody with an active mind to a desire to look into the truth of the matter for himself. There is no subject on which there is so much difference of opinion among both the learned and the ignorant. [But in this medley of conflicting opinions, one thing is certain. Though it is possible that they are all of them false, it is impossible that more than one of them is true.]

As to my own position, I think I shall be able to satisfy honest critics and to rebut malicious slanders. Those who slander me may then be sorry for their abuse and the critics may have the pleasure of learning something new. We ought to do our best to enlighten and convince those who criticize us in a friendly way, while rebutting sharply those who slander us with malice.

I see that there has been a great deal of talk about the several philosophical works which I have recently published within a short period. Some have wondered how I have acquired this sudden enthusiasm for philosophy, while others have been curious to know what conclusions I have reached on the problems I have tackled. I have felt too that many have been surprised that I have shown myself most inclined towards a philosophy which seems to them to put out the light and plunge everything into darkness, and have unexpectedly taken up the cudgels on behalf of an abandoned and long-neglected school of thought.

I have not become a philosopher overnight. I have been much interested and engaged in philosophical studies from my earliest years. And I was often most the philosopher when I seemed least interested in philosophy. Witness my speeches,

which are full of philosophical aphorisms, and my friendship with men of learning, who were never absent from our house, as well as those eminent philosophers Diodotus, Philo, Antiochus and Posidonius, who have been my tutors in this subject. If all philosophical maxims must be exemplified in our daily lives, then I believe that both in public and in private I have always acted reasonably and in accordance with my philosophical beliefs.

If anyone asks what motive has brought me so late in the day to put pen to paper on these matters, then there is nothing which I can more easily explain.* In the first place, I was at leisure with nothing else to do. The state of the nation was such that the government had of necessity been confided to the care and wisdom of a single man. I therefore thought it in the national interest that I should seek to interest our people in philosophy, as it seemed to me a matter of some importance for the dignity and good name of our nation that a subject of such weight and value should have its place in Latin literature. I am the less inclined to regret this attempt, when I see how many others I have stimulated not only to read but also to write about these matters. A number of people who were familiar with Greek culture could not previously communicate what they had learnt to their fellow-citizens because they did not feel able to express in Latin what they had studied in Greek. But in this field we now seem to have made such progress that in vocabulary at least we are on equal terms.

I was also moved to these studies by my own sickness of mind and heart, crushed and shaken as I was by the great misfortune which I had to bear.† So I betook myself to this cure, not knowing what better remedy could be found. And

*For comment on the three reasons given by Cicero, see Introduction, pp. 17-20.

†The 'great misfortune' to which Cicero refers was the death of his daughter Tullia in 45. (See Introduction, p. 19.)

the best way in which I could make use of it was not merely to read the works of others but to devote myself to an attempt to explain all the problems of philosophy. We can best understand each branch and division of it, if we try to deal in writing with all the questions which arise. There is a wonderful continuity and progression in all things, so that the one is bound up with the other, and all are linked one with another in a single chain.

Those who ask for my own opinion on every question merely show excessive curiosity. In a discussion of this kind our interest should be centred not on the weight of the authority but on the weight of the argument. Indeed the authority of those who set out to teach is often an impediment to those who wish to learn. They cease to use their own judgement and regard as gospel whatever is put forward by their chosen teacher. For this reason I have never been able to approve what we are told about the Pythagoreans. It is said that if they made any assertion in discussion, and were asked the reason for it, they would always reply: 'The master said it', the master being Pythagoras himself. Here we see an absolute prejudgement of the issue, so that authority prevails without any argument at all.

In my own four books on the Academic philosophy, I think I have given a sufficient answer to those who wonder why I follow this school of thought. I have not just come to the defence of an abandoned and neglected theory. When men die it does not mean that their opinions are also dead, although they may now lack the living light which their first discoverers could shed upon them. The Academic method of philosophy (which is critical of everything and affirms nothing) was introduced by Socrates, revived by Arcesilas and reinforced by Carneades. It has survived in full vigour to our own day, although I understand that in Greece itself it is now something of an orphan child. But this I ascribe not to any

defect in the Academy but to the stupidity of the public. If it is valuable to follow out a single line of argument, how much more valuable must it be to follow out all of them? This is what the Academy seeks to do, since its object is to discover the truth, stating the arguments both for and against all philosophic theories. This is a long and difficult task, and I do not flatter myself that I have fully accomplished it: but I can say that I have tried.

We who philosophize by this method are not just chasing shadows. I have dealt more fully and more generally with this point elsewhere,* but as some persons persist in their unteachable stupidity, I have to keep on ramming it home. We of the Academy are not people who will accept *nothing* as true. But we do hold that every true perception has in it an admixture of falsehood so similar to the truth that we have no certain criterion of judgement and assent.† It follows that we can attain only to a number of probable truths, which although they cannot be proved as certainties, yet may appear so clear and convincing that a wise man may well adopt them as a rule of life.

To absolve myself of any prejudice, I shall first set out the views of the philosophers on the nature of the gods. On this question the whole world must sit in judgement and decide for themselves which of these views is true. I should be ready to admit the philosophy of the Academy to be a shameless fraud, if everyone were in agreement or if anyone could say for certain what was the truth. So I may well take my cue from the comedy of *The Young Companions*,‡ and say 'O ye

*In the *Academica*.

†The Academic theory of knowledge recognized only 'reasonable probabilities', whereas the theory of the Stoics postulated an instinctive criterion of certainty which compelled assent to any true perception. See Introduction, p. 43 and p. 49.)

‡ *The Young Companions* was a Latin version by Caecilius Statius of a Greek comedy by Menander.

gods, I beg you, all you young men and fellow citizens, I call on you, I beseech you, I pray and implore you' – and not about some trifling matter, such as the complaint of the young man in the play that things have come to a pretty pass when 'a courtesan refuses the presents of a friend who loves her'.

No, I am asking everyone to come into court, weigh up the evidence, and return their verdict as to what we are to say about religion, piety, sanctity, ritual, faith, the taking of oaths; about our temples, our shrines, our solemn sacrifices, even about the auspices over which I myself preside.* All these things depend upon the question of the existence and nature of the immortal gods. Surely even those who believe that they have attained certainty in these matters must feel some doubts when they see how widely wise men have differed about so crucial a question.

I have seen this often but especially when I took part recently in a closely reasoned and rigorous discussion about the divinity of the gods at the house of my friend Gaius Cotta. I had gone to call on him during the Latin Festival at his own request and invitation, and found him sitting in the hall in discussion with the senator Gaius Velleius, who was at that time considered by the Epicureans to be their greatest Roman representative. Quintus Lucilius Balbus was also there, who was such an expert in the Stoic philosophy that he was compared with the leading Greek exponents of that school.

When Cotta saw me, he said, 'You have come just at the right time. I am involved in an argument with Velleius here on a most important subject which will interest a person like yourself, who has made a study of philosophy.'

'As you say,' I replied, 'I do seem to have come at the right time. I see that we have present three authorities from three

*Cicero had been elected a member of the College of Augurs in 53. (See Introduction, p. 14.)

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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
A Note on the Translation	64
THE NATURE OF THE GODS	
Book I	67
Book II	121
Book III	191
Appendix I: Fragments	237
Appendix II: Imaginary Continuation of the Dialogue	239
List of Books	253
Glossary	257
Index	267