LEARNED AND WISE:
COTTA THE SCEPTIC IN CICERO'S
ON THE NATURE OF THE GODS

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SOME more radical sorts of ancient sceptic claimed to live, or to try to live, without beliefs. That invited and invites psychological questions. For example: even if you could live without beliefs, or could try to, what could it *be like* to live that way?

Cicero wrote dialogues. Dialogues allow their author to add a dimension to writing about philosophy. A character, if he wishes, can give an argument in expository prose. But the author of a dialogue, by putting this character in a drama, can also suggest for him a 'psychology'. In *On the Nature of the Gods* Cicero presented a sceptical character, Cotta, who reports his inner life.[1] I shall show that by doing so Cicero exhibits one answer (not necessarily *his* answer) to the psychological question above. Cotta is a well-trained pupil of the sceptical Academy. It seems that he at least *tries* to live without forming dogmatic beliefs. Cicero shows us what it was like to be Cotta.

[1] 'Cotta' in *DND* is a fictionalization of a flesh-and-blood man, C. Aurelius Cotta (*RE* 'Aurelius' 96). Cicero knew the real Cotta and admired him as an orator (see testimonia in H. Malcovati, *Oratorum Romanorum fragmenta*, 4th edn. (Turin, 1976), 286–91). 'Cotta' also appears as the 'narrator' of *De oratore*. During that story (set in 91 BC) the young 'Cotta' resolves to cultivate the Academy but only for oratory's sake (3. 145). Atticus and Cicero seem to have thought Cotta a plausible candidate for Cicero's role in the *Academica* (*Ad Att.* 13. 19. 3–4=326 SB), thus later in his life Cotta must somehow have been eligible for depiction as a sceptic. So it is possible to invent a biography at least for the Cotta of Cicero's imagination, where he went in search of Academic training in oratory and thus fetched up a sceptic. See also R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, vol. ii (Paris, 1994), s.n. 'Cotta'. How far and in what particulars 'Cotta' in *DND* resembles the real man is hard to say. In this article I discuss the character in *DND* and I assume that we can get everything we need to know about him from *DND* itself.

Treating Cotta this way[2] uses a resource sometimes untapped in
the study of Cicero's philosophical dialogues. In the last century
and more, two other sorts of approach to the dialogues have been
common among historians of philosophy, both of which are worth-
while. One is research into sources.[3] Another is to treat the dia-
logues as a sort of encyclopaedia of Hellenistic philosophy.[4] Neither
of these approaches necessarily requires close attention to Cicero's
dramaturgy or characterization. But I find that it bears fruit *also*
to notice that Cicero shapes his dramas as coherent works of art,
where the speakers have consistent characters. Especially in Sec-
tion 2, I shall show that Cicero indeed took care to make Cotta a
character with a coherent set of attitudes across his various appear-
ances in *DND*.[5]

[2] For another and insightful treatment of Cotta's scepticism, with which I dis-
agree as specified below (nn. 9, 29, 30), see J. G. DeFilippo, 'Cicero vs. Cotta in *De
natura deorum*' ['Cicero'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2000), 169–87.

[3] For examples of this approach to *DND* in particular see R. Hirzel, *Un-
tersuchungen zu Cicero's philosophischen Schriften*, i. *De natura deorum* (Leipzig,
1877); L. Reinhardt, *Die Quellen von Cicero's Schrift De deorum natura* (Breslau,
1888); A. S. Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum libri tres: Liber primus*
[*Natura*] (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), 36–51; A. J. Kleywegt, *Ciceros Arbeitsweise
im zweiten und dritten Buch der Schrift De natura deorum* (Groningen, 1961). My
methods here are incompatible with a *crude* version of the single-source hypothesis,
whereby Cicero simply assembled a cosmetic dialogue frame around what are no
more than translations of single sources with Roman examples put in place of Greek.
My view is that Cicero shapes his characters and their speeches very much more
than that. But my method *is* compatible with a more sophisticated version even of
the hypothesis that Cicero relied heavily on one or a few sources (perhaps along
with his memory) for the technical arguments of a given speech. This version would
allow Cicero a large role in shaping the material. Indeed, any view of *DND* must
be open to *some* source criticism given the evidence (e.g. the well-known likeness
DND 1. 25–41 bears to part of Philodemus, *On Piety*: see D. Obbink, *Philodemus
On Piety: Part 1* (Oxford, 1996), 96–8).

[4] The emblems of this sort of approach are collections like *SVF* or LS, but it is
very widespread in scholarship on Hellenistic philosophy. It is not threatened by
my views about Cicero's characters. I think that to assemble an encyclopaedia was
not Cicero's primary purpose in the philosophica of 45–44 BC. But there is evidence
that he gave some thought to making them usable as such—for example, he seems
to have tried to cover the whole range of philosophy in something like a coherent
syllabus (see *Div.* 2. 1–4). So I would be surprised if Cicero knowingly gave a char-
acter anything less than a fair representation of another philosopher's argument. I
have never found an example of his doing so. It may nevertheless be the case that
an understanding of a particular character's purposes may allow us *better* to use that
character's speech as a source.

[5] I am not alone in this sort of approach to the dialogues. Most notable is M.
Schofield, 'Ciceronian Dialogue' ['Ciceronian'], in S. Goldhill (ed.), *The End of Dia-
logue in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), 63–84, with whom I align myself in nn. 19,
21, and 23 below. Another strong caution against overlooking the personality of

DND is about theology and religion, and Cotta is a *pontifex*, a member of the leading college of priests at Rome. The tension between his lack of theological beliefs and his authority in the religious life of the city is not lost on his opponents. So Cotta comments on how his scepticism comports with his priesthood. That god and religion are thus in question adds relevance to Cotta's remarks, since in modern times radical scepticism has so often been used to think about natural theology or fideism, as is shown by Richard Popkin's well-known survey.[6]

My analysis of Cotta will be as follows. I contend that of the various sorts of Academic sceptic Cicero describes, Cotta follows Clitomachus' interpretation of Carneades. That is to say, he avoids beliefs like those of a dogmatist, which the dogmatist takes to be *true*. Instead he has 'views' (*sententiae*) which he does not take to be true but rather *like the truth* or *persuasive*. Thus to somebody with dogmatist assumptions, what it is like to be Cotta seems surprisingly normal in many ways (he navigates the world using his views) but strange in some (he reports only psychological histories for his views, never epistemic justifications). Nevertheless, I argue, Cotta harbours hope of discovering the truth one day and can be affected if a view seems to be true or false. In this way he is an Academic radical sceptic worth contrasting with the Pyrrhonist.

1. Cotta and epistemology

Let us first review some answers to the question of the sceptic's views which have helped to structure recent scholarly discussion. The sceptic aims to avoid dogmatic beliefs. The challenge comes back: but how *can* you live without beliefs? One answer to the challenge is that sceptics *do* have beliefs or views of some other sort. Here, in the abstract, are two versions of that reply to the question I might give if I were a sceptic, phrased so as to be easily applicable to Cicero's writing:

(RR) I refrain from the sort of belief that a dogmatist holds—for
        example, from taking beliefs to be *true*. But I believe in some

a Ciceronian character, Cato in *De finibus* book 3, is B. Inwood, 'How Unified is Stoicism Anyway?', in R. Kamtekar (ed.), *Virtue and Happiness: Essays in Honour of Julia Annas* (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl.; Oxford, 2012), 223–44.

[6] R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003).

    other way—for example, I take my beliefs to be *plausible* or
    truth-like.

(MR) Like the dogmatist, I take my beliefs to be *true*. But unlike
      the dogmatist, I reserve the caveat that *any of them might be
      false*.

The *mitigated reply* (MR) says that my scepticism is not so radical:
like the dogmatist, I take it to be true that things are this way or
that. But if I pursue the *radical reply* (RR) my difference from the
dogmatist is that I do not take my beliefs to be true.

   There is more to be said about the strength of RR as a reply to
the question of the possibility, or practicality, of life without be-
liefs. For RR might turn defence into attack. Suppose that I have
not only taken nothing to be true or that I not only think that I
never should. Suppose I also *do not care* about truth. I get along
fine without it, while the hunt for truth seems to cause trouble to
the hunters. Then I might say that the *dogmatist* seems wrong to
think the pursuit of truth is at the heart of philosophy. Her truth-
seeking epistemology is the deviant position and a rod for her own
back. I shall call this the 'insulating' reading of RR, since it means
that the sceptic's views are 'insulated' from dogmatic debates.[7] For
even if such a sceptic should find an argument for the truth of some
proposition persuasive, he need not be tempted to assent to it, since
to him care for the truth seems to be folly. In Section 2 I shall ask
whether Cotta's views are thus insulated.

   Let us now apply this survey of interpretative options to the con-
text of Cicero's dialogues. In his preface to *DND* Cicero writes: 'to
those who are amazed that I follow this school above all others [i.e.
the sceptical Academy], sufficient reply appears in my four Aca-
demic volumes' (1. 11). The 'four Academic volumes' are his final
version of what we call the *Academica*. With this remark Cicero li-

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[7] M. Burnyeat, 'The Sceptic in his Place and Time', in id. and M. Frede (eds.),
The Original Sceptics: A Controversy [*Original*] (Indianapolis, 1997), 92–126,
coined the term 'insulation' (92). By 'insulation' he means the notion that our
beliefs in philosophy do not or should not affect our beliefs in ordinary life, and
vice versa. Burnyeat's goal is to show that ancient philosophers, sceptics included,
never thought of themselves as insulated. M. Frede, 'The Sceptic's Two Kinds of
Assent' ['Assent'], in Burnyeat and Frede (eds.), *Original*, 127–51, argues implicitly
for a species of insulation. He 'see[s] no reason why a classical [i.e. radical] sceptic
should accept the global contrast between appearance and reality' (150). The
radical questions the very 'framework of notions and assumptions within which the
dogmatic moves', of impressions, assents, truth, and so forth (151). So in that way
the radical's views are insulated from *dogmatic* philosophy.

censes us to read the debates of *Acad.* as the epistemological context for *DND*. In *Acad.* Cicero dramatized a schema by which to classify the notable Greek epistemologies of his own and preceding centuries. The schema distinguishes sceptics by the senses in which they think we may and ought not to have beliefs. So I shall first try to place Cotta in that schema.

In Cicero's schema, the dogmatist epistemology on view stems from the Academics' sparring partners, the Stoics. In Stoic psychology rational animals like ourselves have sensory or imagined *impressions* with (roughly speaking) propositional content. Our impressions are thereby *true or false*. We may give or withhold *assent* to their truth. Some true impressions are *cognitive*. The details of the Stoic view about cognitive impressions are controversial. But what matters for our purposes is this: the Stoics thought that a Sage could *always tell that a cognitive impression is true and that it cannot be false*. To the Sage, a merely true but not cognitive impression might seem true but she can always tell that it might be false. So a Sage, in her wisdom, would take to be true only cognitive impressions (*Acad.* 1. 40–2; 2. 18, 57–8, 77, 112).

At least for the reason that it was the Stoics against whom they generally argued in these matters, the Academics' arguments accept the bare architecture of the Stoic picture. They talk as though candidate beliefs are impressions and as though to form a belief is (in some way) to assent to an impression. Most Academics then gave a General Argument as follows. Any supposedly cognitive impression is in fact indistinguishable from some other, false, impression. So not even the Sage can tell the supposedly cognitive impression from its indistinguishable false twin. Thus any allegedly cognitive impression might be false, so far as even the Sage can tell. If this were so it would follow for the Stoics that no supposedly cognitive impression warrants the Sage's assent. In other words, it would follow that there are *no* Stoic cognitive impressions. The Stoics' rule is that the Sage will not assent to impressions which are not cognitive. So by the Stoics' own rule the Sage should never assent. Hence the Academic claims that *on the Stoic view*, one should form no beliefs about the truth (*Acad.* 2. 40–2, 67–8, 83).

It is at this point that the Stoic might wonder: is this an argument aimed only at me? Or is the Academic in fact open to the odd-looking view that we should form no beliefs about truth? Do we not need (the Stoic thinks) beliefs to live? Since (according to the

Stoa) to form a belief is to take something to be true, are not the beliefs we need in their very nature about truth? So here the Stoic might lodge the psychological challenge that a human being cannot live without such beliefs. Cicero presents us with three Academic answers to this sort of challenge.[8] Two are assimilable respectively to RR and MR and were interpretations of how far the Academic master Carneades endorsed the premisses in the General Argument (*Acad*. 2. 78). The third I will return to briefly later.[9] The problem is how the Academic is to live when in the General Argument he claimed *pace* the Stoic that (Premiss 1) *any impression might, as far as anyone could tell, be false*. The point at issue is whether the Academic is (as the Stoic is) committed to Premiss 2, that *one ought not take to be true impressions which might, as far as anyone could tell, be false*.

> *Clitomachus* thought that Carneades approved Premiss 2. So he developed a scepticism according to which we ought to take no impression to be true. Instead he said that he took impressions to be *plausible* or *like the truth* rather than true. This is a version

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[8] For Clitomachus' view see *Acad*. 2. 65–6, 78, 98–9, 102–5; for the Mitigated view *Acad*. 2. 59, 78, 148. Of these disputes I accept the reconstruction of C. Brittain, *Philo of Larissa* [*Philo*] (Oxford, 2001), Introduction, ch. 2 and ch. 3, summarized also at C. Brittain, *Cicero: On Academic Scepticism* [*Cicero*] (Indianapolis, 2006), xix–xxxi. While controversial (as any interpretation will be, given the difficult subject and small evidence), it has precedent, especially in its distinction between Radical and Mitigated scepticism: see e.g. G. Striker, 'Sceptical Strategies', in ead., *Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge, 1996), 92–115; cf. G. Striker, 'Academics versus Pyrrhonists, Reconsidered', in R. Bett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* [*Companion*] (Cambridge, 2010), 195–207; Frede, 'Assent', 140–6. A response to Brittain is J. Glucker 'The Philonians/Metrodorians: Problems of Method in Ancient Philosophy', *Elenchos*, 25.1 (2004), 99–153. For two other recent views see H. Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* [*Scepticism*] (Berkeley, 2009), 84–101, 208 n. 5; id., 'Arcesilaus and Carneades', in Bett (ed.), *Companion*, 58–80, esp. 76–8, 80 n. 21; id., 'Radical and Mitigated Skepticism in Cicero's *Academica*', in W. Nicgorski (ed.), *Cicero's Practical Philosophy* (South Bend, Ind., 2012), 133–51; and C. Lévy, *Cicero Academicus: Recherches sur les Académiques et sur la philosophie cicéronienne* (Rome, 1992); id., 'The Sceptical Academy: Decline and Afterlife', in Bett (ed.), *Companion*, 81–104, esp. 82–9. For a general consideration of the practicality challenge to ancient scepticism see J. Annas, 'Doing without Objective Values: Ancient and Modern Strategies', in M. Schofield and G. Striker (eds.), *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics* (Cambridge, 1986), 3–29.

[9] DeFilippo, 'Cicero', makes Cotta into an even more radical sceptic than the options I list: 'it is obvious that his [i.e. Cotta's] endorsement of tradition is not based on reasons that are intended to explain the truth *or even the persuasiveness* of tradition' (181, emphasis original). As we shall see, I think Cotta takes at least some of his views to be persuasive or plausible.

of RR. I shall call this historical version of radical scepticism the Radical view.[10]

Metrodorus and *Philo of Larissa* thought that Carneades did not accept Premiss 2. They permitted themselves to take impressions to be true. But in the light of Premiss 1 they took these impressions to be *true but possibly false*. This is a version of MR. I shall call this historical version of mitigated scepticism the Mitigated view.

Cotta is an Academic. His role in the conversation is to argue against both the Stoic and the Epicurean position, and he is rebuked both for that and for his scepticism (2. 2; 2. 168). We hear in the opening scene of *DND* that Cotta has 'learnt to know nothing' from Philo of Larissa (1. 17). That Philo was Cotta's teacher might seem to tell us his place in the schema. But in fact Philo was Cicero's teacher, too, and Cicero was a Radical (see n. 27). It is clear that Academic pupils were afforded free choice of their views. So to see where Cotta stands we must look at what he says. Of course an Academic need not stand behind what he says against a dogmatist. But Cotta is sometimes made to talk about himself or to make incidental remarks which are not in service of arguing 'on either side' of an issue. I shall take these to be in earnest. What does Cotta have to say about epistemology?

First we must deal with what I alluded to above, the third Academic answer to the psychological challenge: 'How can we live without beliefs?' This answer is a view adopted by Philo later in his career, according to which there *are* cognitive impressions, but they might be false. On this view one is warranted, albeit fallibly, in taking impressions simply to be true.[11] If Philo taught Cotta, we cannot immediately exclude this view from the list of Cotta's options. So we ask Cotta: are there cognitive impressions? The answer comes in a philosophically productive joke. The Epicurean Velleius has held that the gods are anthropomorphic and that they are supremely beautiful. Cotta argues that if each of the gods is supremely beautiful, then all gods will look identical. He concludes:

[T1] If every one ⟨of the gods⟩ has the same one appearance, then the

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[10] In *DND* 1. 12 Cicero gives a capsule summary of Academic scepticism which I think almost certainly describes the Radical view. But this on its own does not entail that Cotta is a Radical.

[11] See *Acad*. 2. 18, with S.E. *PH* 1. 235 and Brittain, *Philo*, ch. 3.

> Academy must of necessity flourish in heaven! For if there is no dif-
> ference between one god and another, there is no *cognitio* among the
> gods, no *perceptio*.[12] (1. 80)

Cognitio and *perceptio* are both terms by which Cicero translates the
Greek *katalēpsis*, the Stoic term for cognition (*Acad*. 2. 17). (The
point of the joke is that the Academics argued that there is no Stoic
cognition if there are objects indistinguishable by perception, such
as 'identical' twins or eggs: *Acad*. 2. 54.) So here Cotta reveals that
he takes the position of the Academy to be that there is no cognition.
Philo's late view was that there *was* cognition (of sorts). So Cotta
implies that Philo's late view was not the view of the Academy. But
we are to assume that Cotta shares whatever he thinks the Academic
view is. Hence he cannot share Philo's late view.

So we are left to ask whether Cotta says anything which puts him
in the Radical or the Mitigated camp. Does he take his views to be
true but possibly false (the Mitigated approach) or does he *not* take
them to be true but rather *plausible* or *like the truth* (the Radical
approach)? I shall now examine four specimens of Cotta's relevant
remarks, each of which will be useful again in Section 2.

First we shall look at three passages which might seem to suggest
that Cotta is a Radical. To begin, here is part of Cotta's opening
remarks in reply to the Epicurean Velleius:

[T2] I myself for my part will not propose anything better [than Velleius'
      contributions]. For as I just said, in almost every matter but espe-
      cially in physics I can say what is not ⟨the case⟩ quicker than what is.
      You ask me what or what sort of thing a god is: I will use the author-
      ity of Simonides, of whom it is said that when Hiero the tyrant asked
      him this same question, he asked for a day to ponder; when ⟨Hiero⟩
      asked him the same thing on the next day, he asked for two days; when
      ⟨Simonides⟩ frequently doubled the number of days, Hiero marvelled
      and asked why he was doing this. 'Because the longer I think about it,'
      ⟨Simonides⟩ said, 'the more obscure the matter[13] seems to me.' But I
      reckon that Simonides (who is said to have been not only an elegant
      poet but also learned in other ways and a wise man), because many in-
      sightful and difficult points were coming to his mind, in doubt about
      which of them was most true, gave up hope of any truth [*dubitantem
      quid eorum esset verissimum desperasse omnem veritatem*]. (1. 60)

[12] Except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
[13] The reading of one manuscript tradition against the better-attested *spes*. *Res*
makes somewhat better sense and *spes* could have arisen from *desperasse* below. See
the apparatus and comment in Pease, *Natura*.

This approach makes Cotta look like a Radical, and indeed quite an extreme one. The key points in favour of Radicalism are that (i) he does not intend to advance anything 'better' than a position he refutes, and that (ii) he associates himself with Simonides, whom he reconstructs as despairing altogether of the truth because he (Simonides) could not tell which subtle view of the gods was 'most true'. A Radical has given up on the truth in that up to now she has taken nothing to be true, so initially (ii) looks like good evidence that Cotta is a Radical. But it is also (ii) that makes Cotta look extreme, perhaps too extreme. As we shall see below, to despair altogether of the truth is not Radical. But I think that we do not need to take this despair to be a *general* attitude on Cotta's part. Rather, I think his point is that the nature of the gods (as opposed to, say, their existence) is a *particularly difficult* question. This is a theme in *DND*. In the first sentence of the treatise Cicero calls theology *perdifficilis*, 'very difficult' even by the standards of tough philosophical issues. That is why Cotta says that the process of looking for what is 'truest' makes him on each occasion give up hope of truth *about the nature of the gods*. He does not give up on truth in general.

So Cotta can still be a Radical. On the other hand, the difficulty of the question of the gods throws into doubt whether we can rely on (ii) to prove that Cotta is a Radical rather than a Mitigated sceptic. Anyone, even a Stoic, could despair of getting to the truth about a particularly difficult question. So could a Mitigated sceptic. Furthermore, this problem applies equally to (i)—in a difficult matter, regardless of my school, I might see why *your* view is wrong, but not have anything better to propose.

Let us now turn to a second piece of evidence that Cotta is a Radical. This passage, too, comes early in his reply to Velleius:

[T3] In the investigation of the nature of the gods, we ask first whether there are gods or not. 'It is difficult to deny.' So I trust, if it's asked in a speech to the assembly, but in a conversation and gathering of this sort[14] it's very easy. *So I myself, a* pontifex*, who think that the rites and public religious duties are to be defended as most sacred, I would plainly want to be convinced about that which is the first ⟨issue⟩, that there are gods, not only as a matter of opinion but even as regards truth. For many ⟨points⟩ rush in to confuse, so that sometimes there seem to be no gods.* But see how generously I will deal with you: I won't touch what is common to you and other philosophers, like this ⟨position⟩ itself—for

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[14] For this reading of the (difficult) text see Pease, *Natura*.

nearly everybody holds, and I myself am among the first ⟨to do so⟩, that the gods exist. (1. 61–2)

To the whole of [T3] I shall return below. What seems temptingly Radical in the italicized section is Cotta's contrast of opinion and matters of truth: he wants to be convinced 'non opinione solum sed etiam ad veritatem', 'not only as a matter of opinion but even as regards the truth'. This looks Radical in that Cotta implies that his view that the gods exist (and the last sentence of [T3] shows that it *is* his view) is not a matter of truth. So perhaps he holds the view, but does not take it to be true. That would be Radical assent. But there are two reasons for caution. The first is that *opinio* is Cicero's term of art in *Acad.* for taking to be true a non-cognitive impression and therefore a term he might use for an opinion resulting from Mitigated but not from Radical assent. It is possible to read the ablative *opinione*, which I translate 'as a matter of opinion' but could be rendered more literally 'by opinion', as referring to an opinion of Cotta's own.[15] If so and if Cotta intends the term in the technical sense, then Cotta has taken a view to be true. But this is the less compelling of the two reasons for caution, since Cotta could have been persuaded by an opinion of *others*. That is probable given [T6], where Cotta accepts on ancestral authority that the gods exist. The second reason for caution is that even if Cotta uses *opinio* in a loose sense, to mean a view of any sort rather than specifically a belief about truth, his wish to be persuaded as a matter of truth is not decisively Radical. This is because a Mitigated sceptic recognizes that what he takes to be true might be false. So, even when he has taken something to be true, he might wish to get beyond his fallible belief to the very truth of the matter.

Now a third piece of evidence that Cotta is a Radical. A historical reason to think so is that he is *conservative*. That is, he adopts the content of the religious beliefs which he finds in the traditions of his society but is not compelled by rational arguments either for or against those beliefs. A Mitigated sceptic might, like a dogmatist, privilege over tradition views that have relatively good rational arguments for their truth. The Radical finds that there is no cause to take any belief to be true. So how is she to live her life? One way is to follow the apparent conventions of her society. This is what

[15] A seeming parallel for the 'his own opinion' reading is *Pro Murena* 62: 'Non re ductus es sed opinione: "sapiens nihil opinatur"' ('You were guided not by fact but by opinion. "The wise man never opines"').

Sextus recommends. To take his religious views as our example, Sextus follows what appears to him to be the general trend in his society:

[T4] Let us enquire about god, saying first this, that following everyday habit we say (without belief) that there are gods and we treat the gods piously and we say that they are providential, but against the rashness of the dogmatics we say the following:. . . (*PH* 3. 2)

[T5] For perhaps the sceptic will be found more secure next to those who do philosophy in other ways, as (for one thing) he says that there are gods according to the habits and rules of his society and does everything pertaining to cult and piety, and as (for another) he avoids any rashness when it comes to philosophical investigation. (*M.* 9. 49)

Sextus emphasizes the difference between his (in some sense) 'belief-free' dispositions to follow his society's religious conventions and his arguments against the rash positions of the dogmatists (who for the most part would argue that he should be disposed to act just as he does). Cotta strikes some markedly similar attitudes. For example, he says programmatically to the Stoic Balbus:

[T6] But because you were not convinced that it [i.e. the claim that there are gods] was as clear as you would like, for that reason you wanted to show with many proofs that there are gods. For me one ⟨proof⟩ was enough: that our ancestors handed it down to us this way. But you reject authorities, and fight using reason; so let my reason go up against your reason. (3. 9–10)

Cotta seems to repeat the two points we found in Sextus: he follows the authority of his ancestors (that is, the view he finds in his society), but plans to put rational argument against each one of Balbus' rational proofs. So Cotta's conservatism is some reason to think that he is on the Radical side.

So far we have seen three specimens of Cotta's talk about epistemology which have pointed towards Radical scepticism but which have failed to decide the question. Let us now see one piece of evidence that Cotta is a Mitigated sceptic: that he sometimes seems to claim *opiniones*, 'opinions'. The significance of these passages is that in *Acad. opinio* is Cicero's term of art for *mere* opinion (Greek *doxa*), that is, for taking to be true a non-cognitive impression (or, for the Stoics, any assent by a fool).[16] Thus a Mitigated sceptic thinks he

[16] *Acad.* 1. 41; 2. 59; 2. 113; cf. 2. 65–6.

is entitled to form opinions while a Radical sceptic will aim not to. So if we supposed that Cotta uses *opinio* in the same sense, it is possible that he shows his Mitigated hand. We saw that it is possible, although perhaps unlikely, that in [T3] he claims an opinion. But there is also the following passage:

[T7] This [i.e. Balbus' suggestion that as *pontifex* Cotta should defend religion] meant, I think, that I should defend those opinions [*eas*, i.e. *opiniones*] which we have received from our ancestors about the immortal gods, and the cults and rites and religious duties. I myself will indeed defend them always and always have defended them, nor will anybody's speech, ⟨a speech⟩ of a learned man or of an unlearned man, ever move me from that opinion [*me ex ea opinione . . . movebit*], which I have received from my ancestors, about the worship of the immortal gods. (3. 5)

Here Cotta says first that he *defends* the ancestral opinions about the gods, and second that *he will not be moved from* the ancestral opinion about their worship. In the former instance it is possible that he merely defends what he takes to be his ancestors' opinions without committing himself to them. But in the latter case, concerning worship, the phrasing cannot be explained away so easily. Cotta is metaphorically *in* the position from which he will not be moved. What might this mean? To say that someone is 'in' a given opinion is an idiomatic way of saying that he holds that opinion.[17] Thus it is open to us here to understand Cotta as claiming to hold an opinion. A defender of a Radical reading of Cotta might contend that the metaphorical wording is loose enough: perhaps Cotta just accepts the *content* of what was among his ancestors an opinion, but does not assent to this content in such a way as to form an opinion of his own. But another possibility is that Cotta shares the opinion *as* an opinion of his own.

But would the admission of an opinion be a *definitive* reason to attribute to Cotta a Mitigated epistemology? It would not. This is because even Radicals will opine. A Radical *prescribes* avoidance of opinions, but might fail to live by his own prescription. In *Acad.*, Cicero's own character tells us that he is just such a Radical himself:

[T8] On the other hand, I myself am not someone who never approves

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[17] See the citations at *TLL* ix/2. 720. 10–16, e.g. Cic. *Inv.* 2. 27, 'quamquam in falsa fuerit opinione', lit. 'although he was in a false opinion', meaning 'although his opinion was false'; Cic. *Pro Cluentio* 142, 'me . . . fuisse in ea opinione populari', lit. 'that I was in the popular opinion', meaning 'that I shared the popular opinion'.

anything false or who never assents or who never opines; but we are investigating the wise man. Now I myself am both a great opiner (for I am not wise) and I direct my thoughts not at that tiny Cynosure [i.e. Ursa Minor] . . . but rather at Helice and the bright Septentriones [i.e. Ursa Major], that is to say, by more easily accessible principles, not ones refined almost to vanishing point.[18] Thus it comes about that I err and wander more widely. (*Acad*. 2. 66)

So it is possible that Cotta, too, holds a Radical epistemology, but fails to live up to his own standard and opines. We could set this example aside as an exception after all, albeit an important one.

This concludes my survey of Cotta's epistemological remarks. No single piece of the evidence is decisive. Its balance points strongly towards Cotta the Radical. He has, of course, what may be opinions, but in the light of the balance of the evidence I think we should assume that Cotta is a Radical. Perhaps he has opinions in the way that the Radical Cicero is a great opiner. But the wording of [T3] and [T7] makes it possible that he is persuaded by or adopts the content of the opinions of his ancestral authorities without himself taking that content to be true. Given his general outlook and tone I shall assume this latter interpretation. So much for what Cotta says about his epistemology as such. We shall find reason to revisit my assumptions about the nature of Cotta's views in the next section, which is about his inner life.

2. What it is like to be Cotta

One way that Cotta reveals his inner life is to adduce Simonides as a model for his habit of mind. I will examine this model first. Another is to report the history or basis in his mind for his various views about theology. I will go on to examine four such reports.[19]

[18] Ursa Minor as a whole was closer to the north celestial pole than Ursa Major and thus was a more precise guide to true north. But Ursa Major, being brighter and larger in the sky, is easier to find. Translation of 'by more . . . vanishing point' from Brittain, *Cicero*, 39.

[19] In this section I hope to add to Malcolm Schofield's conclusions about the strengths of Cicero's dialogues (Schofield, 'Ciceronian'). Schofield points to two such strengths: that the dialogues are more open-endedly dialogic than those of Plato or Hume and that Cicero achieves 'an existential dimension of engagement or self-exposure' by inserting himself as a character (63–4, 83–4). I aim here to argue for another strength, that in Cotta Cicero presents an illuminating character other than himself. Schofield himself (82) anticipates this point about Cotta.

In considering the nature of the gods, Cotta claims as his model the 'authority of Simonides' whom he described in [T2]. Now there Cotta is at pains to remind us that, in addition to being a famous poet, Simonides was *learned* (*doctus*) and *wise* (*sapiens*). It strikes me that these two attributes are precisely relevant to Cotta. For Simonides' trouble was that as he thought about the problem, 'many insightful and difficult points were coming into his mind'. This is presumably because he was *learned*—he had a reserve of evidence and arguments ready in his memory, which was evoked when he considered the problem. Here perhaps we should recall the treatment of memory Cicero gives to Antonius in *De oratore* (3. 350–60). Antonius attributes the mnemonic technique of 'places' to Simonides, telling a story in which Simonides remembered the order in which guests were seated at a banquet and thereby devised the technique. So Cicero connects Simonides with skilful memory. Perhaps this helps to explain how the latter's reserve of arguments about the gods was so big it could keep him puzzled for days at a time.

Next, once puzzled and subject to the onrush of the many arguments, Simonides reacted by refusing to choose a conclusion. Why? As the various points rushed into his mind, 'hesitating about which of them was most true, he gave up hope of any truth' ('dubitantem quid eorum esset verissimum desperasse omnem veritatem', [T2]). This need not mean that Simonides decided that there was no truth about the gods. More likely he gave up hope of reaching any of it. His reason was that he could not decide which point bearing on the dispute was 'most true'. Now it seems unlikely that Cotta gives to Simonides a view that propositions have degrees of truth. So I shall take this phrase to mean that Simonides could not reach a decision about which point *seemed* most true.[20] This implies that Simonides could never reach the conclusion that one point seemed uniquely more true than any other. At the end of each of his reflections, there were always at least two points that seemed most, and therefore equally, true. Perhaps many or all points shared the highest degree of apparent truth. Simonides could have avoided this impasse by rashly assenting to an option before he had fully considered the al-

[20] Even if Cotta attributes such a view to Simonides, as an Academic he is unlikely to use such an approach to truth himself. It would be easy to translate a Simonidean degrees-of-truth version of wisdom in the investigation of the gods into a Radical degrees-of-seeming-truth version.

ternatives, or could have reacted to it by arbitrarily selecting among the options. But instead he steadily reached the impasse, and once there he did not pick any option. In this sense he was *wise*, the other attribute that Cotta gives him. (We shall see below that Cotta is unlikely to endorse Simonides' further step—*despairing* of the truth about the gods *altogether*. But he could certainly endorse giving up on the truth *on a given occasion*.)

It seems to me that Cotta strives to be *learned* and *wise*, like Simonides, and that this characterizes his scepticism. I shall explain each of these two attributes in turn.

Cotta's *learning* is evident. For at the start of both his rejoinders, to Velleius and to Balbus, he remarks that as he listened to the respective dogmatist speeches his arguments against them were coming to mind (1. 57–60; 3. 1). He then immediately gives these arguments. We see that they are well informed and rigorous, sometimes attributed to specific philosophers (e.g. Carneades, 3. 29) and therefore recalled from a previous occasion. So listening to the dogmatic speeches called to Cotta's mind arguments stored away during his sceptical training. Further, Balbus' speech has a complex nested structure, but Cotta tells us that he was able to commit this structure to memory as it was spoken (3. 10). Cotta's speech which follows bears this out, matching Balbus point by point. Such a feat suggests that Cotta, like Simonides, has a well-trained memory, as indeed we would expect in an orator of Cicero's day.[21]

Thus Cotta has a trained mind and one learned in philosophy. Great learning in this sense fits what Cicero himself says of the New Academy in his preface to *DND* (1. 11–12). He says that it is characteristic of the sceptic to master not only one school of philosophy, but rather all schools, in order to argue both for and against any proposition. By accumulating learning the sceptic in training commits more and more evidence and arguments to memory. This he can do without forming any views—for to remember an argument or a conclusion is not to endorse either. Then, when the sceptic is

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[21] You might argue that I should not make too much of Cotta's learning and feats of recollection, on the grounds that Cicero writes Cotta this way *only* because such characteristics are what *DND* requires of its sceptic. If so, then Cotta might be an unrealistic construct and need not reflect what Cicero thought the life of a real sceptic could be like. But we have seen Cicero make a show of qualities in Cotta which exemplify the wide learning Cicero *explicitly* associates with the Academy in his preface (*DND* 1. 11–12). We are thus entitled to conclude that an Academic could be like Cotta. Cf. Schofield, 'Ciceronian', 82.

presented with an issue to consider or a dogmatist speech to oppose, the stored arguments come to mind and both sides of an issue seem forceful to him.

This store of learning, then, functions in Cotta's Simonidean model of scepticism in somewhat the same way as what Sextus calls the 'oppositional power' (δύναμις ἀντιθετική, *PH* 1. 8–9). For Sextus, the oppositional power is what a sceptic cultivates and what allows her to oppose to *any* evidence for *any* impression equipollent evidence against the same impression. Admittedly 'learning' as I attribute it to Cotta does not have that general scope. In *DND* Cotta does not deploy fully general approaches to sceptical argument like Sextus' 'modes' (*PH* 1. 31–186), nor does Marcus mention them in *Acad*. It is imaginable that you could pose a new argument that Cotta could not oppose just from memory.[22] Yet Sextus himself obviously had time for the 'learning' approach to some part of his oppositional power. He compiled his vast *Against the Professors*, a compendium of arguments on both sides of many issues. Cotta's model, Simonides, could call such opposed arguments to mind so that no one of them alone seemed 'most true'. Among these arguments Simonides thus found his version of equipollence, the *isostheneia* of which Sextus says 'none of the opposed arguments [*logoi*] precedes another as more trustworthy' (*PH* 1. 10). In these respects, Cotta's model Simonides resembles Sextus' Pyrrhonist.

Cotta remarks on the 'oppositional' nature of his own philosophical tendencies (see also 2. 2):

[T9] Habitually, why something is true does not come into my mind so easily as why something is false. It happens to me often and it happened to me while I listened to you just now. (1. 57)

[T10] In more or less all matters, but especially in physics, I shall say what is not quicker than what is. (1. 60)[23]

[22] The Academics have a general argument against *Stoic* claims. For they have an argument against the existence of cataleptic impressions. The Stoic must concede that if there are no cataleptic impressions then none of her claims is justified. But not every dogmatist is a Stoic.

[23] Hume began his essay 'The Sceptic' thus: 'I have long entertained a suspicion, with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects, and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute, than assent to their conclusions' (text from E. F. Miller (ed.), *David Hume: Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, rev. edn. (Indianapolis, 1987)). When he wrote his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume was familiar enough with *DND* to borrow much of its literary form. It is tempting to think that Hume took up Cotta as a sceptic worth emulating. Cf. Schofield, 'Ciceronian', 64–5.

I suggest that Cotta means that he finds it harder simply to find arguments *for* any proposition *when presented just with the proposition*, but easier *when presented with arguments for* a particular proposition to find arguments *against* that proposition.[24] Now, he does not say he finds it *impossible* to find the arguments in favour of a proposition—surely he can find them, thanks to the same learning that facilitates his arguments against. Thus sometimes it should be Cotta himself who finds the arguments in favour and thereby provokes from himself the arguments against, as with Simonides. But arguments against come more easily and quickly, and this seems a natural result of Cotta's *learning*—arguments opposed to arguments are cued up in his trained memory, ready to go. Of course, his propensity for arguments against may also reflect some personal rather than specifically sceptical trait. But here we have, it seems to me, a report by Cotta of a feature of his own psychology, explicable at least in part as a result of his sceptical training.

So much for Simonides' *learning* and Cotta's mirroring of it. Cotta also calls Simonides *wise*. For Cicero's Radical Academics, wisdom is what the successful sceptic has (*Acad*. 2. 99–104). The successful sceptic withholds assent as to truth when evidence is not decisive and follows what is plausible. In that way Cotta is wise too, or tries to be. So these two attributes—learning and wisdom—are the attributes that seem to Cotta to maintain him in his scepticism.

With this model of Cotta's scepticism in hand, let us now turn to how Cotta holds four of his views. First, Cotta has the view *that there are gods*. He says this both to Velleius in [T3] and to Balbus, as follows:

[T11] What is agreed among all people, except the utterly impious, what, for my part, cannot be burnt out of ⟨my⟩ mind, that there are gods— that point itself, of which I am persuaded by the authority of our ancestors—you teach me nothing of why it is the case. (3. 7)

Cotta seems to hold with some conviction that there are gods. In [T3] he says that he is 'among the first' to hold it ('mihique ipsi imprimis'), but he holds it along with 'almost everyone' else ('omnibus fere'). In [T11] he says that it 'is agreed among all people, except the utterly impious' and 'cannot be burnt out of ⟨my⟩ mind'. These

[24] Presumably Cotta does not mean that he finds it easier to prove a proposition that is framed as a denial—'It is not the case that . . .'—than one framed as an assertion—'It is the case that . . .'. For then he could just prove assertions by way of a double denial—'It is not the case that it is not the case that . . .'.

remarks are consistent and suggest part of Cotta's basis for holding the view they relate, as follows. Cicero in his preface said that we are led to the view that there are gods 'with nature as a guide' ('duce natura', 1. 2). Both Velleius and Balbus have argued that since belief in the gods is almost universal, it is a natural and therefore (according to them) a true belief (1. 43–5; 2. 4–12). Cotta does not comment on the naturalness or truth of the view. But he appears to concede the verisimilitude of the sociological and psychological evidence on which the other parties in the dialogue base their claims. He concedes the sociological point when he says that almost everybody has the belief. He concedes a suitably sceptical version of the psychological point when he reports in himself a view which 'cannot be burnt out'. This suggests that the view *cannot* leave him in the face of argument, nor even when subjected to other kinds of force or influence. This is close to saying that the view seems to be an ineradicable part of his psychology, the sort of thing his opponents might call a natural opinion. Of course, for Cotta this is no sign of the view's truth. Further, if Cotta asks himself *why* he accepts that there are gods, he has an answer other than nature—he has been persuaded by ancestral authority. Again, this persuasion is not a reason to think his view true, but rather an explanation of why he holds it.

Now in fact it is not quite true that Cotta's belief in the gods cannot be shaken. For although the view that there are gods will not leave him, it sometimes 'seems' that there are no gods. For in [T3] Cotta explains to Velleius why he wishes to be persuaded of the existence of the gods as a matter of truth: 'many ⟨points⟩ rush in to confuse, so that sometimes there seem to be no gods'. This remark is rather cryptic. Does it sometimes 'seem' *to Cotta* that there are no gods? If so, how does this come about when it 'cannot be burnt out of ⟨his⟩ mind that there are gods'?

Again there is a parallel in what Cotta says to Balbus. But this parallel is also a difficult passage. At 3. 7–10, beginning with [T11], Cotta says he was puzzled when Balbus argued that the existence of the gods is clear (*perspicuum*) and agreed on all sides. Cotta asks Balbus why he first made this claim, but *then* proceeded to give many more arguments that there are gods. Balbus, being a dogmatist, seems nonplussed by this question. Is offering redundant proofs[25] not like giving many arguments for one's case in court, or

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[25] Here and in [T6] and [T12] I use 'proof' to render Latin *argumentum* and its

keeping both one's eyes open—the more evidence, the better? Cotta denies this. That Balbus gave more arguments, he says, suggests that the existence of the gods is not as clear as he (Balbus) wished ([T6]). Perhaps Cotta means that Balbus, requiring *clearly true* beliefs, does not find *that* sort of clarity. But it is possible that in the same passage Cotta experiences something like what he described in [T3]. Perhaps, as happened to Simonides, points against Balbus' arguments have rushed in and made Cotta's view that there are gods less clear:

[T12]   For if in court cases something is obvious and agreed among everybody, I myself am not in the habit of offering a proof of it (for clarity is diminished by proof [*perspicuitas enim argumentatione elevatur*]), nor if I were to do so in public court cases would I do so in this subtle sort of conversation. . . . You bring forward all these proofs for why there are gods, and by offering proofs you make doubtful a matter in my view very little doubtful [*remque mea sententia minime dubiam argumentando dubiam facis*]; for I have committed to memory not only the number but also the order of your proofs. (3. 9–10; [T6] is part of the ellipsis)

Cotta thinks that even in a philosophical discussion proofs make an obvious point less clear. He says that by giving proofs Balbus *makes* it doubtful that there are gods. One way to understand this passage, then, is that as he considers Balbus' arguments Cotta is given doubts about his *own* view that there are gods. On this reading, just as too much argument in court can obscure the issues, so Cotta's experience of memorizing Balbus' many arguments has made *him* waver on the conclusion that there are gods. So perhaps [T12] describes an instance of the phenomenon described in [T3].

Here we should reopen the question of Cotta's epistemological stance. For another way to read [T12] is that in it Cotta does *not* describe doubt on his part that there are gods. Perhaps when he says that the point is in his 'view very little doubtful' he does not mean only that he generally does not doubt it but also that at no point in his debate with Balbus does he waver on it. On this reading, Cotta's

cognates. By this I do not mean to limit the force of *argumentum* to something like a rigorous logical or mathematical proof. On the contrary, I choose 'proof' because (like *argumentum*) it has a *wider* range of uses than 'argument'—a prosecutor can point to a bloody dagger and say, 'There's the proof!' I think Cotta here means to range across the various rhetorical or philosophical methods—rigorous or otherwise, linguistic or otherwise—by which people seek to render a point evident, or seemingly so. For *argumentum* see *TLL* ii. 542. 56–550. 82.

point in [T12] is that when Balbus began to furnish proofs that the gods exist, he admitted that the point is doubtful *for dogmatists but not for Cotta*. This need not mean that Balbus doubted the thesis but rather that Balbus *ought* to have doubted it, given his Stoic principles. Now the importance for Cotta's epistemology of this possible reading of [T12] is that it would give evidence that Cotta is a certain sort of Radical sceptic. For it would suggest that Cotta is 'insulated' from dogmatist debates about truth. Can we sustain this reading of [T12] ?

Here I direct the reader's attention back to [T3]. Let us trace Cotta's line of thought in that passage. He says that in a conversation like the one in *DND* it is very easy to deny that there are gods. *So* ('itaque') he himself as a *pontifex* would like to be persuaded even as a matter of truth ('etiam ad veritatem') that there are gods. '*For* [*enim*] many ⟨points⟩ rush in to confuse, so that sometimes [*interdum*] there seem to be no gods [*nulli esse videantur*].' Now it appears ('So', 'for') that Cotta tries to *explain* his wish to be persuaded as a matter of truth. The explanatory points he offers are that (*a*) in a philosophical conversation it is *very easy to deny* that there are gods, that (*b*) he is a *pontifex*, and that (*c*) *many points rush in so that sometimes there seem to be no gods*. (*b*) suggests that he wishes that (*c*) were not so—he wants it always to seem that there are gods because he is a *pontifex*. So he wants it always to seem *to him* that there are gods. But thus the present problem is that it sometimes seems *to him* that there are no gods. When? When many points rush in. With the Simonidean model freshly given in [T2], it is natural to think that (*a*)'s explanatory role is to say when it is that many points rush in: in a philosophical conversation where the question of the gods' existence is open for discussion. In such circumstances Cotta's learning will bring to his mind arguments on either side, so that *sometimes*, i.e. when the arguments against are uppermost in his mind, there seem to him to be no gods. But this suggests that in [T3] Cotta is *not* insulated from dogmatic arguments about truth. At least momentarily, they can get purchase on him, so that it seems to him that there are no gods in a way he finds disconcerting. So it possible (though not clear) that in [T12] he also describes some temporary hesitations about his view that there are gods.

Now you might think that if dogmatic arguments can get a purchase on him, then Cotta is after all a Mitigated sceptic. Perhaps he

takes his views to be true on the basis of argument, so that when he brings to mind arguments against their truth his views are shaken. But this need not be so. Here I need to make clear what I think is a difference between Sextus' Pyrrhonist and Cicero's Academic Radical. The difference is this: on a very plausible interpretation Sextus' Pyrrhonist does not think of philosophy as a project which hopes to discover the truth, but it is quite clear that Cicero's Radical *does* think of philosophy that way. So the Pyrrhonist conceives of the goal of philosophy otherwise than does the dogmatist, and this affords her insulation from dogmatist debates.[26] The Radical, on the other hand, has never found cause to think any impression true, *but she wishes to*.

As evidence for the latter point about the Radical, consider this from *Acad*. 2. 65–6, where Cicero's own character speaks:

[T13] Thus, were it not that I thought it unfitting in this sort of discussion . . . I would swear by Jupiter and the patron gods both that I burn with zeal for discovery of the truth [*me et ardere studio veri reperiendi*] and that what I say are indeed my views. For how could I not desire to find the truth, when I rejoice if I should find anything like the truth? [*qui enim possum non cupere verum invenire, cum gaudeam, si simile veri quid invenerim?*] But, just as I judge that to see the truth is most beautiful, so it is most foul to approve falsehoods in place of truths. ([T8] follows.)

The latter part of [T13] and its sequel in [T8] make it clear that Cicero here speaks as a Radical. For he holds that although he himself sometimes does what is foul, the Sage will never opine or assent, that is, will never assent in the manner of a Mitigated sceptic. Yet Radical Cicero also burns with zeal to discover the truth. He does not regret this zeal. Rather, he sees it as sufficient reason to rejoice if he discovers even something *like* the truth. Indeed, this passage strongly suggests that Radicals accept views which seem 'truth-like' (*veri simile*) precisely *because* they wish they could discover the truth.[27]

This feature of Radicals means that, even if he is a Radical, Cotta

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[26] For this interpretation of Sextus see M. A. Włordarczyk, *Pyrrhonian Inquiry* (*PCPS* suppl. 25; Cambridge, 2000), esp. ch. 7.

[27] Thorsrud (see citations in n. 8 above) argues that Cicero was an adherent of the Mitigated view and that outside *Acad*. he writes as such. But it seems to me that Cicero consistently writes as a Radical, at least in the later philosophica. As I have argued, that Cicero might think that Academics wish for *truth* is consistent with his being a Radical as Radicals are portrayed in *Acad*. That he himself goes for the truth-

is not insulated from dogmatist arguments. A Radical *wishes* to find the truth. Now suppose he considers arguments against the truth of a view that make it *seem to him for the moment that the view is false*. Then he will indeed *wish not to accept it*. Returning to the case of Cotta, suppose that he is a Radical who wishes to discover the truth. Then what he describes in [T3] is the following. When he hears or brings to mind arguments that it is false that there are gods, it might seem to him for the moment that it is false that there are gods. At such a moment a Pyrrhonist could hold steadily to her view that there are, or seem to be, gods. For she need have no care for the truth. But Cotta wishes to find the truth. At the moment it seems to him false that there are gods, *he wishes not to accept that there are gods*. So he is shaken in his view that there are gods. Of course most of the time Cotta is not thinking about arguments that it is not true that there are gods. So most of the time it is uncomplicatedly his view that there are gods. We may also imagine that much of the time when he *is* thinking about those arguments he will equally have in mind arguments that it *is* true that there are gods. With the arguments about truth balancing, his general view about how things merely seem can reassert itself, as it does in most of *DND*.

It is important not to overstate the scope of this point about Cicero's presentation of Radical scepticism. For you might infer that Radical sceptics are not so radical if they concede the hope for truth in philosophy and thus all the theoretical baggage that comes with truth. But in fact it is clear from *Acad.* that Radical scepticism is altogether global. Radicals suspend judgement on *all* issues (*Acad.* 2. 116–46), to include (for example) basic claims of logic. They have never found any reason to think *anything* true or to think that they have a sense of what it would be like to do so. So their desire for truth and discovery need not come loaded with any theory about what truth or discovery might amount to. What they share with the dogmatist is therefore a very general sense of a philosophical *project* that aims somehow to get at how things are—even if the project seems to them always, and perhaps inevitably, to fail. In that sense, perhaps, they accept a (not *the*) 'global contrast between appearance and reality' (Frede, 'Assent', 150) but not any specifics of what that might mean.

like is no sign of Mitigation. By 'truth-like' I think he means 'seemingly true', not 'approximately true', and an Academic ought not to infer '*p* is true' from '*p* seems true'.

I now move to the second theological view which Cotta reports. This is the *traditional view about the conduct of Roman religion*. In [T7] we saw that Cotta will always defend the traditional opinions about the gods, and that he seems to share the traditional opinion about their worship. This latter, then, is a view that Cotta holds. After [T7] he goes on to cite various Roman religious authorities—*pontifices maximi* and a learned augur—and says that in matters of religion he prefers them to the greatest Stoics (3. 5). Why does Cotta express such confidence here? As a sceptic, is he entitled to it?

To answer these questions, it is important to recognize the context of what Cotta says in 3. 5. Explicitly, he is responding to a challenge from Balbus that Cotta should remember that he is a 'Cotta and *pontifex*', that is, a Roman aristocrat and a priest. Balbus has said that there are two things wrong with such a person being an Academic sceptic. First, he has said:

[T14]   For it is proper for a philosopher and a *pontifex* and a Cotta to have about the immortal gods not a wandering and roving [*errantem et vagam*] view as the Academics do, but rather a stable and sure [*stabilem certamque*] one as our ⟨Stoics⟩ do. (2. 2)

Second, he has urged Cotta not to give a speech arguing against the Stoic theology because he (Balbus) thinks such a speech would be 'against the gods' while Cotta is a 'leading citizen and a *pontifex*' (2. 168). Note that these two challenges to Cotta take proper account of Cotta's scepticism. Neither accuses him of any impious view. Instead, the first accuses Cotta of an inappropriate *instability* of views. This is the version of the psychological challenge to which we see Cotta exposed: is it *possible* for a sceptic to do a responsible job as a *pontifex*? You might think his views are too unstable. The second challenge accuses Cotta of a philosophical outlook which involves him in *giving* the arguments for impious positions, even if he does not *endorse* these arguments or their conclusions.

Cotta, I think, answers both these criticisms in his description of his unwavering defence of traditional religion. First, although Cotta in 3. 5 mentions only Balbus' challenge at 2. 168, it is, I think, with the instability criticism of [T14] in mind that he emphasizes the stability of his defence and of his traditional view about worship. The instability criticism probably has the work of a *pontifex* in mind. The pontifical college regulated important aspects of Roman state religion, public and private, and issued rulings on difficult cases.

Pontifical decisions were made, it seems, not so much by theological principle as by appeal to recorded tradition and precedent.[28] So what Cotta needs to have stable views about is not the nature of the gods, but rather what the traditions and precedents of Roman religion are. The unimpeachable sources for these traditions and precedents are indeed Roman religious authorities such as the eminent *pontifices* he cites, not philosophers. They are unimpeachable because just by giving their opinions they thereby lend those opinions the status of tradition and precedent. It might well seem vividly obvious to Cotta, then, that looking up these opinions is always going to be the way to settle religious questions. Of course, deciding what these sources say is a cognitive process as vulnerable to sceptical worry as any other. When Cotta consults an authority, he may well not be sure that he has a book in his hands or that he is reading it correctly—or that there is any such thing as a hand. But we can see why he is confident that his views about what is traditional in Roman religion are more than stable enough for him to do his pontifical job. As to Balbus' other accusation, that it is impious even to offer arguments against the gods, Cotta has an excellent answer. Balbus' assumption is that to argue against *Stoic theology* is to argue against the gods. Yet nobody but a Stoic need accept this claim. Cotta, reasonably enough, points out that as a 'Cotta and *pontifex*' he takes Roman tradition, not Stoic doctrine, as the measure of his piety.

Is Cotta, as a sceptic, entitled to his *confidence* about his view on what is traditional in Roman religion? It is important to notice that Cotta here does not claim *epistemic* confidence. He does not claim that his opinion will always be *correct* or *justified* such that he will never give it up. Rather, he simply claims that he will never be persuaded to give it up. This is a psychological claim about himself and his experience of holding the opinion, not a claim about its epistemic status. Cotta may protest too much about the stability of his view. Since he regards it as plausible but not as true, he

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[28] Modern scholarship on Roman religion in Cicero's day has tended to emphasize the absence of theological creed and reasoning behind the actions and responses of priests in the state cults. Some statements of this conventional view are M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998), i, pp. x, 42–54; J. Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Bloomington, 2003), 17–20, 30–5; E. Orlin, 'Urban Religion in the Middle and Late Republic', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2007), 58–70. For the evidence on the role of the *pontifices* in particular see *RE* suppl. xv s.v. *pontifex*.

should surely concede that it is somewhat provisional and therefore in principle unstable. (All the more so if I am wrong and his is a Mitigated opinion: an opinion Cotta took to be true but possibly false would be in principle provisional and thus unstable.) But we can understand how a sceptic might make a confident psychological prediction about himself, that he will not change this view, based on his past experience.

Now to the third of Cotta's views, related to the second but distinct from it. It is the view that, once the traditional conduct of Roman religion is established, *Roman religion should be so conducted*. This is, after all, a necessary next step in Cotta's response to Balbus' challenges. A modern scholar might, like Cotta, work out *how* a religious ceremony at Rome was to be conducted, but would not think that it *should* be so conducted today. Cotta thinks the ceremonies are laudable:

> [T15] I have decided [*putavi*] that none of these religious duties [i.e. rites, auspices and haruspicy] is ever to be despised, and I have persuaded myself [*mihique . . . persuasi*] that Romulus and Numa laid the foundations of our state when they instituted the auspices and the cults— our state which would assuredly never have been able to be so great without the greatest propitiation of the immortal gods. (3. 5)

Here Cotta appears to adduce *evidence* and an *argument* which have led him to his view that traditional religion should carry on at Rome. The evidence is that Rome is 'so great'. The argument is that this could not have happened without the 'greatest propitiation' of the gods ('sine summa placatione'). The conclusion of the argument is that the traditional founders of Roman augury (Romulus) and cults (Numa) set up not a contingent feature of the successful Roman state, but rather its necessary foundations (cf. Livy 1. 6–7, 18– 21). This sort of argument puts one in mind of the great speech Livy gives to Camillus, correlating piety with success and impiety with failure in Rome's early history (Livy 5. 51–4). Cotta's argument, too, though baldly stated, seems to be historical. Romulus and Numa laid the religious foundations, and because those religious duties have been kept up, Rome has flourished. Now for Cicero historical argument and writing are a matter of rhetoric, not of proof of the sort found in dogmatist philosophy (*De oratore* 2. 51–64). So when Cotta says that he has 'persuaded' himself by this evidence and argument he is not claiming to have satisfied him-

self that it is *true* that Roman religion should be kept up. To be persuaded by a rhetorical argument can be to find its conclusion *persuasive* rather than true—to give the conclusion Radical assent. Further, this sort of argument from historical correlation makes no appeal to the nature of the gods. Propitiating them might help Rome because they then intervene on behalf of the city, but it might just give the propitiators backbone while the gods take no notice.

The last aspect of Cotta's theological views is not, in fact, a view but the lack of one. As we saw in [T2], Cotta *lacks any view about the nature of the gods*. Unlike Cotta's occasional wavering about the gods' existence, this does not seem to be a lack that is filled in by common-sense views once Cotta leaves a philosophical discussion. At the beginning of the dialogue, he says that the matter of the nature of the gods seems 'very opaque' ('perobscura') to him, 'as it always does seem' ('ut semper videri solet', 1. 17; cf. 2. 3). It is on this question in particular that his model Simonides despaired of the truth. Cotta says that he will defend the traditional Roman opinions 'about the immortal gods' (3. 5) but not that he shares them. So this seems to be a question where Cotta refrains not merely from taking a view to be true but even from taking any view to be plausible. This provides an instructive contrast with the histories of the views which he *does* end up holding.

3. Conclusions

Cicero seems to have given Cotta a consistent character and set of views and experiences across his appearances in *DND*. What have we learnt from Cotta about the life of a Radical sceptic?

First, Cotta has beliefs of a sort, what I have called 'views'. Not only that, but the *content* of those views seems rather normal for somebody in his position—for that is how he picked the content. Now, he seems to hold these views without taking them to be true. Yet for the most part the mental life he reports does not sound strange and it never sounds unmanageable. His answer to Balbus' charge of instability is plausible and to the point: he has not deserted the recommendations of tradition, nor will he. In Cotta, we see RR brought to life as an answer to the psychological challenge. Cotta, by his Simonidean model, is *wise*. Or at any rate, even if he has not achieved complete wisdom, we can see what he thinks it would

be. But we also saw that for Cicero's Radical such wisdom would not mean complete insulation from dogmatic debate. Indeed Cotta seems able to get caught up in the search for truth and, if only rarely and temporarily, to be shaken by it.

We also see how Cotta differs from somebody who has done no philosophy. This is of interest, since a question we might ask about a sceptic who, like Cotta, often accepts common sense or tradition is: what was the point of doing all that philosophy? In Cotta's case one answer is that Cotta is clearly, like his dogmatist friends, committed to the philosophical project. He is the host of the dialogue's philosophical meeting and seemingly its instigator (1. 15–17). It is evident from what we have seen him say that he has given, and continues to give, a lot of thought to philosophical issues.[29] Another answer is that Cotta's psyche has been affected significantly by his sceptical training: he is *learned*. This psychological oddity may well not be obvious in everyday life. But as he describes it, the oddity emerges when he encounters rational arguments. Cotta's training has left him so that all the counter-arguments rush in and he finds *less* plausible even conclusions he would normally accept. He is prepared for even the most cogent dogmatist in a way that somebody without sceptical training is not.

Not all Radicals will be just like Cotta. They can form views with any content and pick that content in whatever way takes their fancy. It is instructive to compare Cotta with Cicero. For not all Radicals will go for common-sense or traditional views to the exclusion of what is rationally established. Presumably even Cotta would not do so entirely. Unless he is very unusual, there are probably some basic arguments of this kind, such as arithmetical operations or *modus ponens*, that tend to convince him. He would not have to accept them as routes to a dogmatist grasp of truths, but he would probably find them persuasive. We could imagine a sceptic who finds appealing in this way not only very basic sorts of argument but also more elaborate dogmatist philosophical arguments. Cicero, in contrast to Cotta, seems to be the latter sort of sceptic. In the preface to *DND* he tells us that his interest in and use of philosophy have been lifelong: 'and if all the precepts of philosophy relate to life, I judge that in matters public and private I have carried out what reason

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[29] For a different estimate of Cotta's commitment to philosophy see DeFilippo, 'Cicero', 184.

and theory dictate' (1. 7).[30] Cotta does not allow reason and theory to dictate his views, in religion at any rate, and finds that he prefers what is traditional. Although a Radical can be a traditionalist in a way that a dogmatist cannot, nevertheless Cotta has this preference not because he is a Radical, but because he is Cotta.

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<div align="center">BIBLIOGRAPHY</div>

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[30] DeFilippo, 'Cicero', 184–6, thinks that by these tendencies Cicero has a 'dogmatic element' in his own scepticism. I think this need not be so, since Cicero can take his views to be merely plausible or truth-like.

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