COTTA AND THE THEOLOGIANS

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(1) An understanding of the religious convictions and aspirations of educated Romans on the eve of the Christian Advent is a matter of interest in itself, and one of no little importance for the history of the preparatio evangelica. In an investigation of the matter, Cicero must needs be a leading witness: Cicero in his public career, in his voluminous private letters, and in his array of published works of a philosophical character. Among these works, the dialogue De Natura Deorum is devoted explicitly to the religious question.

Of the three participants in this dialogue, two are professorial figures: able exponents of the Epicurean and Stoic theologies; but zealots and pedants, with no horizon beyond their respective systems; ‘enthusiasts’ in the Eighteenth Century sense of the term. The third is a man of very different character. This is Cotta, the student of Greek philosophy, the Academic, the man of public affairs, and Pontifex. Cotta, as portrayed by Cicero, is a remarkable man, one who would stand out in any company. A man of intelligence and learning leavened by humility; of experience and responsibility graced by pietas and urbanitas. One who possesses that rare quality of playful-seriousness which the Greeks called eutrapelia, a quality which testifies to the catholicity of its bearer, a quality which marks the genuine philosopher. Brief though Cicero’s sketch is, we glimpse in Cotta something of the Roman character at its best.

Though, in the preamble to the dialogue, Cicero deplores curious enquiry into his own religious convictions (I, 6 and I, 10), the sincerity with which, by a few deft touches, he portrays the character of Cotta would lead us to suspect a measure of self revelation — at least to the extent that Cotta is the kind of man whom Cicero would like to be. If to this intimation there be added other pieces of evidence from the Ciceronian corpus, then, as Festugiére has argued at length, the substantial identification is established.1 This is not to say that the Cotta of the N.D. fully expresses the religious and philosophical persuasions of the author. Cicero, we may presume, is far from discharging the whole of his robust personality into one character. But we may take it as a point

of departure that in the sentiments of Cotta we have some measure of authentic participation in the inner convictions of Cicero. Thus, to the principles enunciated by Cotta there attaches an historical significance of no small moment.

Furthermore, as we examine the convictions elicited from Cotta when confronted by the two philosophic theologians, we find emerging a matter of crucial importance and perennial debate: nothing less than the proper relations between religion and what in later times would be called natural theology. This question — whether religion is prescriptive or speculative — is the underlying theme of the whole dialogue. A later age would be agitated by the apparent dilemma: 'The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, or the god of the philosophers'. Here, in the forum of Roman religion, Cicero was rehearsing the question. He was not the first to do so. The Greeks had known of an ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers. But nowhere in the pre-Christian world is the matter handled so vividly as by Cicero, nor so perceptively.

(2) Cotta vis à vis the Epicureans.

In the opening scene, when Cicero joins the company at Cotta's house, Cotta explains that they are engaged in a debate on a great matter, no less than the question of the nature of the gods, 'a question which seemed to me, as it always does, an extremely obscure one, and upon which I was therefore enquiring of Velleius as to the opinion of Epicurus' (N.D. I, 15-17).2

Velleius proceeds confidently to expound the Epicurean theology, while Cotta listens politely. When Velleius has finished, Cotta observes:

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

2. Citations from the N.D. are taken from Rackham's translation in the Loeb edition.
Cotta, remarking that the Epicurean doctrines concerning the nature of the gods, though ably expounded by Velleius, seem to him to be unworthy of philosophy and even of ordinary common sense (mediocris prudentia), proceeds to demolish those doctrines seriatim, explaining his recourse to a negative argument and his reluctance to be drawn into positive assertions in theology, by a re-iteration of his earlier warning that in a matter so momentous and profound the wise course is to say what is not rather than what is, a warning which he illustrates by an anecdote concerning Simonides:

‘Enquire of me as to the being and nature of god, and I shall follow the example of Simonides, who, having the same question put to him by the great Hiero, requested a day’s grace for consideration; next day when Hiero repeated the question, he asked for two days, and so went on several times multiplying the number of days by two; and when Hiero in surprise asked why he did so, he replied, “Because the longer I deliberate the more obscure the matter seems to me”’. (I, 60).

In rejecting the Epicurean theology, Cotta is not being misologous, but the reverse. His rejection is on the grounds of the lamentable failure of that theology to stand up to rational criticism, a failure which he had earlier observed when, as a student of philosophy at Athens, he had encountered the authoritative exposition of Epicureanism by Zeno, the then head of the School. Now he can only lament that so talented a man as Velleius should waste his time on a trivial and stupid set of doctrines. (I, 59).

(3) *Cotta vis à vis the Stoics.*
The Epicurean philosophy has been dismissed with contempt. It is no serious contribution to our understanding of the divine nature, but a pretence masquerading as wisdom, ‘How much more truth’, observes Cotta, ‘is there in the Stoics, whom you censure’ (I, 121). Throughout the discussion of the Stoic philosophy, which occupies the remainder of the *N.D.*, Cotta maintains a reserve, but a reserve mixed with a measure of respect and sympathy; a note which Cicero takes up in a guarded remark at the end (III, 95), praising the Stoic Balbus for attaining at least a semblance of the truth.

At the commencement of Book II, Velleius, ruefully blaming his defeat on Cotta’s forensic skill rather than on any intrinsic defect of the system which he, Velleius, represents, retires in favour of the Stoic Balbus, secretly hoping to see Balbus discomfited in turn (cf. III, 95).
Balbus first appeals to Cotta to declare himself as regards the immortal gods in firm and definite terms, an appeal which Cotta declines for the reason previously given: 'Have you forgotten,' says Cotta, 'what I said at the outset, that I find it more easy, especially on such subjects as these, to say what I don't think than what I do? Even if I had any clear view, I should still prefer to hear you speak in your turn, now that I have said so much myself.' (II, 2-3).

Balbus then proceeds to a long exposition of Stoic theology, and ends by appealing to Cotta, as a leading citizen and a pontiff, publicly to espouse the Stoic cause, and to forsake the Academic levity of playing dialectically with the subject, 'for the habit of arguing in support of atheism, whether it be done from conviction or in pretence, is a wicked and impious practice'. (II, 168).

But Cotta is not to be drawn so easily into the Stoic ranks. He acknowledges that the Stoic theology is of much more worth than the Epicurean; it is at least consistent and systematic, however lacking in truth, whereas the Epicurean theology is patently a tissue of absurdities. (III, 3-4). Yet, worthy of serious attention though it is, the Stoic doctrine falls far short of true religion. By conviction, and by oath of office, Cotta is determined to uphold the beliefs about the immortal gods which have been handed down from the ancestors. Cotta's declaration on this point is so vital to our understanding of the man that we must cite it at length:

'Let us then proceed as the argument itself may lead us' says Cotta, 'But before we come to the subject, let me say a few words about myself. I am considerably influenced by your authority, Balbus, and by the plea that you put forward at the conclusion of your discourse, when you exhorted me to remember that I am both a Cotta and a pontiff. This no doubt meant that I ought to uphold the beliefs about the immortal gods which have come down to us from our ancestors, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion. For my part I shall always uphold them and always have done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal gods which I have inherited from our forefathers. But on any question of religion I am guided by the high pontiffs, Titus Coruncanius, Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, not by Zeno or Cleanthes or Chrysippus; and I have Gaius Laelius, who was both an augur and a philosopher, to whose discourse upon religion, in his famous oration, I would rather listen than to any leader of the Stoics. The religion of the
Roman people comprises ritual, auspices, and the third additional division consisting of all such prophetic warnings as the interpreters of the Sibyl or the soothsayers have derived from portents and prodigies. Well, I have always thought that none of these departments of religion was to be despised, and I have held the conviction that Romulus by his auspices and Numa by his establishment of our ritual laid the foundations of our State, which assuredly could never have been as great as it is had not the fullest measure of divine favour been obtained for it. There, Balbus, is the opinion of a Cotta and a pontiff; now oblige me by letting me know yours. You are a philosopher, and I ought to receive from you a proof (ratio) of your religion, whereas I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof.’ (III, 5-6).

Because of this firm conviction and this public responsibility, Cotta cannot accede to the invitation of Balbus to endorse a speculative system of human devising. To do so would be to demean, even abandon, true religion. Cotta keeps his distance from the Stoic philosopher, not because of a real or affected atheism, but because of his loyalty to the higher authority of the Roman tradition of divine worship.

Nevertheless, Cotta is prepared to be respectful to the Stoic doctrines if they can prove their worth; for in so far as they can stand firm under rational criticism, they may take a rightful place as an ancilla to religion, indeed they may be infused into religion even to the point of religious reform. But the tests which the Stoic doctrines will have to pass are severe, and it may be that none will pass in spite of their prima facie claims. Accordingly, Cotta will proceed not to a general refutation of Balbus, but by way of enquiry into specific matters which Balbus had not made clear. (III, 1). To this end, Cotta will temporarily abstract from his convictions; he will question Balbus as if he had never been taught anything or reflected at all about the immortal gods; thus meeting Balbus’s objection that it would be useless trying to teach a man who is already in the repose of an immutable conviction (III, 7).

‘For my part’ says Cotta ‘a single argument [for the divine existence] would have sufficed, namely that it has been handed down to us by our forefathers. But you despise authority (auctoritas), and fight your battles with the weapon of reason (ratio). Give permission then for my reason to join issue with yours’ (III, 9-10).

In this engagement of reason, Cotta first questions whether the Stoic
recourse to argument to prove the divine existence does not betray a lack of confidence on the part of the Stoics, a doubt that the divine existence is really as self-evident as they could wish (III, 9). Further, the very multiplicity of their arguments weakens their case:

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

Cotta then proceeds to examine the various Stoic arguments, and finds them all deficient:

‘As yet therefore, Balbus, so far as it depends on you I do not understand the divine existence; I believe in it, but the Stoics do not in the least explain it.’ (III, 15)

‘The question I shall have to ask you over and over again, as before, is this: What are your reasons for believing that the gods exist?’ (III, 19)

But the ineptitudes of Stoic ratio do not shake Cotta’s own religious convictions:

‘I have learnt more about the proper way of worshipping the gods, according to pontifical law and the customs of our ancestors, from the poor little pots bequeathed to us by Numa, which Laelius discusses in that dear little golden speech of his, than from the theories (ratio) of the Stoics.’ (III, 43)

Cotta concludes by reminding Balbus that the whole dialectical exchange has been an exercise, an exercise intended not to further religious scepticism, but rather to induce philosophical humility, to guard against excessive claims for ratio:

‘This more or less is what I have to say about the nature of the gods. It is not my design to disprove it, but to bring you to understand how obscure it is and how difficult to explain.’ (III, 93)

Balbus the enthusiast even now fails to see the point; with quixotic confidence he believes himself to be the zealous champion of religion, and Cotta, despite his office, to be the betrayer of religion:

‘You have indeed,’ says Balbus, ‘made a slashing attack upon the most reverently and wisely constructed Stoic doctrine (ratio) of the divine providence. But as evening is now approaching, you will assign us a day on which to make our answer to your views. For I have to fight against you on behalf of our altars and hearths, of the temples and shrines of the gods, and of the city walls, which you as pontiffs declare to be sacred and are more careful to hedge the city round with religious ceremonies than
even with fortifications; and my conscience forbids me to abandon their cause so long as I yet can breathe.' (III, 94)

To which preposterous inversion of truth, Cotta replies, politely as a good host should, but with a certain amused irony:

'I on my side only desire to be refuted. My purpose was rather to discuss the doctrines I have expounded than to pronounce judgement upon them, and I am confident that you can easily defeat me.' (III, 95)

(4) Ratio, doctrina, auctoritas, traditio

Underlying the exchanges of the N.D. is the question of the proper relations between ratio on the one hand, and doctrina, auctoritas and traditio on the other. The conjunction is introduced early in the work in the course of Cicero's own autobiographical reminiscences:

'Moreover, if it be true that all the doctrines of philosophy have a practical bearing, I may claim that in my public and private conduct alike, I have practised the precepts taught by ratio and doctrina' (I, 7).

Ratio means argument, evidence, what a man reasons out by his own cogitations and reflections and by dialectical exchanges with others. Of its nature, ratio tends to be universal in subject matter and impersonal in audience, as exemplified in the abstractions of pure mathematics and natural theology.

Doctrina is associated with nurture. It means what a man accepts on trust, what he learnt at his mother’s knee, what he takes on the authority of those he respects: his parents, teachers, bearers of the laws, models of emulation, and a thousand other formative influences. Doctrina tends to be personal, local, specific and historical. In the division of the virtues into intellectual and moral, ratio pertains to the intellectual virtues, doctrina to the family of the moral virtues. Practical life involves a combination of ratio and doctrina; they are distinct but not separate.

Ratio and doctrina together constitute a large part of education, indeed if the connotation of doctrina be made wide enough, they constitute the whole of education. Manifestly, doctrina is closely connected with authority, auctoritas; in a long-established society the doctrina is handed on from generation to generation, traditio; the formative sources in the past are grouped together in the term ‘the manners of the ancestors,’ the mos maiorum. The exercise of auctoritas whereby the doctrina is handed on, is thus a process of begetting, nurturing, cherishing, and enriching. Education consists in
the formation of habits by the reception of the gifts of *doctrina*, the integrated group of habits constituting a man's character. Having been well brought up in the *doctrina* of our society, we become men; the quality of our manhood, our *humanitas*, being dependent on the quality of the society in which we were begotten, the society whose gifts, for better or for worse, we have received. Thus the conduct of human life would be unintelligible without reference to the continuity of historical tradition; without a sense of gratitude to our forebears, and responsibility to our posterity; without a conviction that what civility we possess we hold as trustees, with the obligation to hand on the gift no worse than we found it, and if possible, better; in which course we are being most loyal to that great company, at once of the past and of the timeless present, to whom, under God, we owe everything we have and are.

These sentiments are in the background of Cicero's dialogue. They are not peculiar to Cicero; they are not peculiar to the Romans. They were recognised by the more reflective Greeks, in particular by Plato and Aristotle, and they achieve memorable expression in Socrates' encounter with the personified 'laws' in the closing pages of the *Crito*. (The Greek *nomos* corresponding to the Latin *doctrina*). More: these sentiments must be taken for granted in all human societies on pain of there being no society and no men; though receiving explicit statement only in more articulate times, the offices associated with *doctrina* are, in the long term, ineluctable. Oft-times the offices are partially violated, a dereliction peculiar to 'advanced' rather than to 'primitive' societies, associated with the growth of the shadow, the luxury of which Plato speaks (*Rep.* ii, 372e), the price we pay for brilliance; a dereliction sedulously fostered by those déraciné men, the sophists; but always with time and chastening vicissitude an unseen hand restores the situation towards the norm.

The other element of education, *ratio*, is engendered by the first element, *doctrina*. The capacity for reflective thought, for reasoned argument, for weighing evidence, is awakened by our rearing in good moral habits; indeed, ability to think well and argue well is itself a transmitted habit, a part of *traditio*; so that, in a large view, *doctrina* includes *ratio*. *Ratio* is reflexive; it takes the received precepts of *doctrina* as its first principles in order to scrutinise those principles. The enquiry deepens our insight into the principles, enables us to understand the scope and limits of the principles, elicits the essential expressed in the accidental, the timeless in the
temporal, the end in the means. The purpose of the enquiry is not to dispense with the received precepts of the *doctrina*, but to rejuvenate and ennoble those precepts by infusing them with the eternal and universal. So potent is the inherited *doctrina* that it demands its own transcendence, and thereby its own correction, reformation, and evolution. (Which suggests that the history of the development of any given *doctrina* is the manifestation of the content of an archetypal idea).

The only competent authority to reform the *doctrina* comes from the *doctrina* itself. An authority outside the tradition cannot reform; it can only distort or destroy. But if an outside authority should earn its recognition within the tradition, then, and only then, can it assist in reform. As it is by virtue of the *doctrina* that we are what we are, the critical scrutiny of the *doctrina* is the critical scrutiny of oneself. It was not for nothing that the Delphic precept ‘Know thyself’ was one of Socrates’ favourite maxims. As with a society, so with oneself, reform must be from internal springs; outside authority can assist only to the extent that it elicits inner recognition. Furthermore: as in knowing oneself one becomes more fully oneself and not another person; so a society which submits its institutions to the rejuvenating play of *ratio* ennobles those institutions while preserving their continuing identity.

The proper function of *ratio* is to serve *doctrina*, to be the handmaiden assisting the mistress in her progress. *Ratio* may be indispensable, but it is always dependent, it cannot stand on its own. *Doctrina* is fecund; *ratio* is not, its role is accoucheur (as Socrates was wont to say in his whimsical way). The union of the two, wherein *ratio* intimately serves *doctrina*, is the truly philosophic condition of a man, of an institution, of a society; it is the condition of pilgrimage, of being on the way: institutions and societies to run their destined course of rise, climax, and decay; men to run their course to what the more perceptive of the ancients hoped would be a destination of timeless felicity.

*Doctrina* by itself is meet for children, but with a grown man it becomes stationary, barren, and languishing, the condition of the talent wrapped in a napkin and buried in the earth. *Ratio* by itself is meet for the exciting years of later adolescence (the puppy-dog stage as Plato called it); but if continued into later life it becomes vertiginous, shrill, and dreary, the condition of the *sophoi* who

3. C.S. Lewis in his *The Abolition of Man* is singularly illuminating on this matter.
permanently reject \textit{doctrina}. When Cotta listened to the two professional 'philosophers' he must have thought of them as men who, by some deficiency of education, or flaw of character, or deprivation of opportunity, had never grown up; men for whom a bright summer's day excursion of youth, too long prolonged, had changed into a weary captivity in middle-age. Cotta's experience must have been not dissimilar to that of the first Napoleon when he visited the savants of the \textit{Institut National} and turned away in contempt with the epithet 'ideologues'.

\textit{Doctrina} is acquired by engagement with the day to day workings of a going concern. \textit{Ratio} re-vitalises \textit{doctrina}. But only men already well educated in \textit{doctrina} should embark seriously on \textit{ratio}. (Whence Aristotle's advice that young men not yet firm in \textit{doctrina} should not study moral philosophy, but should content themselves with the abstract disciplines of mathematics). Otherwise, as with Velleius and Balbus, they will endeavour to make \textit{ratio} fill the role of \textit{doctrina} – an impossible task.

The misconception of Velleius and Balbus is related to a fallacy, a fallacy as common in our day as it was in their's: that a man's authority is no stronger than his arguments. The truth, as regards the everyday world, is quite otherwise: all argument presupposes the multitude of universally accepted authorities of daily life. We don't argue \textit{to} common sense; we argue \textit{from} it to clarify special or unusual situations. Argument, the production of evidence, and such like, pertain to law-courts, committees, private discussion groups, etc., all of which are special enclaves within the great world. Only within these enclaves is it true that authority is no stronger than argument; in the public order the dictum has no standing.\textsuperscript{4} It is a mark of the sophistical temperament that a man should endeavour to enlarge the private order until it supplants the public; should believe that human society is but a vast discussion group, and that the exercise of antecedent political authority, the authority of office, is a usurpation. Something of this crassness Cotta has to contend with from his two guests. They think that Cotta needs \textit{ratio} to provide him with \textit{auctoritas}. Cotta cannot make them understand that it is because he already as a pontiff has \textit{auctoritas} that he is embarking on \textit{ratio}.

\textsuperscript{4} J.L. Austin, \textit{Sense and Sensibilia} Lecture xi contains a spirited discussion along these lines.
Cicero’s mission

This, then, was the situation with which Cicero grappled. As an experienced man of affairs, and as a Roman loyal to the great traditions of Roman life, he judged that Roman *doctrina*, for its own good, was sorely in need of the services of a competent *ratio*. Now, he believed, was the appointed time, the *kairos*, for the infusion. He looked to Greece as the classic home of highly developed *ratio*; but he had to tread warily; he had to guard against the entry into Rome, under his auspices, of Greek sophistry masquerading as philosophy; and he had to restrain even an approximation to genuine philosophy when, in its exuberance, it forgot the servant role of *ratio*, and endeavoured to plant *ratio* in the place of *doctrina*. Furthermore he could not simply transplant Greek *ratio*; he had to achieve its recognition by the Romans as something authorised and demanded by their own *doctrina*; he had to arrange the grant of Roman citizenship to the *ratio*. To support him in this great cause, he bring the shades of eminent statesmen, military commanders, orators, scholars, juris-consults, and a pontiff, to give their testimony before the grand tribunal of the public conscience. Cicero, the one-time barrister, was, in his enforced retirement, engaged in the greatest case of his career, and in the highest court in the land.

The *De Republica*, in which Scipio is the principal witness, was as it were, the first major court hearing. Eight years later comes the second major hearing in the *De Natura Deorum*. Cicero is now at the height of his powers; Cotta, the leading citizen and pontiff is his witness; or rather, not so much witness as judge in a model court set up by Cicero. Through Cotta’s handling of the case we see that Cicero was no popularizer of Greek philosophy, no pedantic expositor of Hellenic enlightenment, no compulsive borrower of the exotic, no dealer in spiritual nostrums. His mission was deeper than that. It was no less than the renewal of Roman life from Rome’s own inner resources; a renewal which would be set in motion by the healing touch of the mysterious stranger Socrates; a renewal which would not destroy the distinctive genius of Rome, but would release that genius from its present captivity, so that all men would one day say: ‘Ave Roma Immortalis’. In retrospect we can see that, honourable though his aims, Cicero was before his time. It was in a later age, and on a plane of which Cicero could have no conception, and by the touch of a Stranger greater than Socrates, that Rome truly became the Eternal City.
The use of leisure

'We are now at leisure (otiosus)', Cotta reminds Balbus (II, 3), when the latter fears that a protracted exposition of the Stoic philosophy might weary the audience; we are now, in this time of the Latin festival (I, 15) in a state of repose, of freedom, of play. (A state akin to that of the company on a memorable evening at the Piraeus, and to that of the three old men one mid-summer day walking the uphill road from Knossos). The philosophy of the Academy is the philosophy of leisure, of the mind at play, tossing the pro and contra of any question; for in the exchange the truth is glimpsed. Cotta, as an Academic, is more at home in the holiday spirit than are Velleius and Balbus; for the latter are didactic, and do not appreciate the different tones of work days and holidays; they lack Cotta's sociability and refinement; they require an audience, not a company; in Greek terms, where Cotta is a eutrapelos, the two professors are agroikoi.

As Cotta points out (I, 61), the being and nature of the gods is not meet for public discussion; in the conduct of civic affairs, doctrina and auctoritas are the proper guides; and in his office of Pontifex he is unremitting in maintaining the rights and doctrines of the traditional religion, in which duty he has no doubts or scruples whatever, whether outward or inward. But in a private discussion of a dialectical character, all questions become for the time open questions; in such an interlude we must follow ratio, not doctrina and auctoritas (cf. I, 10); and the purpose served by thus putting doctrina into temporary abeyance is that we may return to the doctrina refreshed. The venture into ratio concerning this topic is, Cotta confesses, one which occasions him much perplexity (I, 61); but he hopes that his philosophic guests may make good his deficiency. Accordingly, though Cotta is already certain ex animo, of the existence and efficacy of the gods, he is on this holiday amenable to intellectual argument on the point; indeed, not merely amenable in a grudging or condescending spirit, but eager to follow the wind of the argument wherever it may lead, provided the argument be sound. In this holiday Cotta will do something which no sane man would entertain for a moment in the course of daily affairs: he will feign to forget everything he has ever heard or thought about the gods; he will enter into argument as an untutored novice. By this undertaking, as we mentioned above, he meets the objection that it would be useless to engage in discussion with a man already convinced (III, 7).
To follow this course is not some idiosyncrasy on Cotta's part. On the contrary, it is in accordance with the practice of genuine philosophy at all times. Thus, no man in his right mind really doubts the existence of the external world, or of other people. But philosophers, in holiday interlude, may properly doubt; the doubt being not real but dialectical; its purpose, to lead to a deeper insight into the assurances of every-day life. (And who would not have to confess, like Cotta, that such questions when treated dialectically, are puzzling; so much so that at moments the spectre of solipsism seems not far away). So here, Cotta does not want ratio to establish his belief; he wants ratio to clarify for him what it is in which he believes.

Cotta is not ambivalent in character. He is not a believer in public and a sceptic in private. He does not look on religion as merely an instrument of control over the credulous multitude, something which the magistrate proclaims on the public rostrum, and derides when he returns to his intimate circle; nor does he regard religion as the opiate of the people in the style of Marx. Cotta is integral in character. He is in earnest about the public religion; as well as being a minister he is a participant. Being in earnest he believes that religion demands constant vigilance; that it needs respectful cleansing and rejuvenation; that in the new circumstances of the Roman world religion requires the services of an intellectual dimension. Cotta looks to the consultations of a holiday to further this end. But the two professors whom he consults fail him. Cotta hopes for a searching ratio, one capable of edifying doctrina. He is presented instead with two ramshackle systems, neither of which can be seriously entertained. And, even more distressing, neither professor can be brought to understand the manners of a leisured day; they are too ill-educated, too parochial, to rise up to Cotta's horizon.

The Epicurean and Stoic professors have no doubts about the nature of the gods. For them there are no mysteries. Each is assured that he has the whole truth of the matter. Since each puts forward a different doctrine, an impasse results. Cotta smiles at their presumption, at the ridiculous spectacle of odium theologicum between two enthusiasts.

Aristotle, it will be remembered, opens his investigations Peri Psyches with the warning that to obtain any assured knowledge about the soul is one of the most difficult things in the world. Cotta
strikes a similar note: the true nature of the gods is a great mystery far above full human comprehension (I, 17). Intimations of the divine nature are implicit in the rites of the ancestral religion. It is our duty to pursue these intimations as far as we can, thereby to approach in correctness of understanding and purity of worship a little closer to the divinity; and it is proper, indeed imperative, to avail ourselves of the services of ratio in the pursuit of this end. The note of theology so conceived is humility. Cotta's theology is thus at the opposite pole from the confident theologies of the Epicurean and Stoic schools. Cotta believes that we humans perforce must commence by straining to see through a dim glass; the claims of Epicureans and Stoics to dispense with the glass and enter immediately into full light make him suspect that they are deceiving themselves; and a scrutiny of their arguments confirms this suspicion.

Cotta is an agnostic when contrasted with the gnosticism of the two philosophers. But he is not an agnostic in the modern sense of suspended judgment. Cotta is agnostic in the sense of being aware of his near ignorance in the face of what there is to know. The modern agnostic complains that he cannot see because of darkness ahead. Cotta cannot see because, peering through and beyond the dim glass, he is blinded by excess of light — like the owl in the midday sun. And the reason for this difference is that the modern agnostic takes ratio as master, where Cotta takes it as servant. Both kinds of agnostic agree that the claims of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers are unwarranted, but they draw different conclusions from this fact: the modern agnostic concludes that religion has not yet established its credentials; Cotta, believing that religion already has its credentials, concludes that it has not yet found its hand-maiden.

Cotta in his agnosticism is at one with Socrates, who commenced by knowing only that he did not know: a profound conviction of knowing more than we can express; a conviction prerequisite to all progress in genuine understanding: a conviction without which we are doomed to the bright but brief career of sophistry.

Cicero, in his preamble to *N.D.*, refers wryly to this situation. Some people are eager to discover his positive opinions on the several questions. Many people are 'surprised at my choosing to espouse a philosophy [the Academic] that in their view robs the world of daylight and floods it with a darkness as of night; and they wonder at my coming forward so unexpectedly as the champion of a derelict system and one that has long been given up.' (I, 6)
From his agnosticism in this sense follows Cotta's predilection for negative theology. While affirming his assured belief in the existence of the gods, he refuses to be drawn into any positive declarations about their nature. He finds it easier, he explains, to think of arguments to prove something false than to prove it true (I, 57; II, 2). Cotta is aware that he knows the divine nature in a very obscure way; yet such knowledge as he possesses is sure. In this surety he knows more than he can express. Hence his reluctance to make positive statements, none of which would be adequate to his implicit knowledge; and hence at the same time his readiness to say what is not the case.

Again, Cotta is following in the path of Socrates, who was ever ready gradually to demarcate what is by putting aside what is not. Indeed, the negative way is an extension of the universal practice of everyday life: we cannot adequately describe a familiar face, nor can we explain how we recognise our friend; but we have little difficulty in rejecting counterfeits. The intellectual world has now forsaken the Socratic negative way, observes Cicero in the preamble (I, 11). They have forsaken it in favour of false lights. Thereby they display, not greater acuity, but dullness of wit.

A genuine *ratio* would have assisted Cotta in the movement from the negative way to the positive way (at least as concerns the lower rungs of theology). But of the *ratio* put before him this day, the Epicurean he judged entirely worthless, and the Stoic so admixed with patent errors as to be of little assistance. So, wisely, Cotta maintains his reserve.

(8) Why Cotta is an Academic
The philosophy inspired by Socrates is the philosophy of leisured minds at play. From the play truth leaps out. But, for this to occur, one condition must be observed: all the players must be loyal to the truth. Loyalty to the truth is a virtue hard to acquire and hard to maintain; we are so easily distracted by pride and partiality. Loyalty to the truth is a last fruit, not a first fruit; it is an ultimate loyalty which can be approached only by slow degree through chastening experiences and self-discipline. The way to this ultimate loyalty is by learning in the school of local loyalties: first the loyalties of family, hearth and home, then in ever widening circles to one's *patria*, then beyond to human kind and the great world, the *oikoumene*. (cf. De Finibus V, 65). No man can be truly oecumenical unless he has come up through this succession. Love of truth in the ultimate sense, and oecumenicity, are two sides of the same coin.
In this hierarchical succession each stage grows out of the preceding stage; but the preceding stage is not thereby abrogated; on the contrary, the preceding stage is required as a continuing support for the stage above; association with the higher stage, far from diminishing the importance of the lower stage, brings that lower stage to perfection. Conversely, if we wish to perfect a local loyalty we are in duty bound to enter into a higher loyalty. No man can bring his office to fruition by confining himself to the routine of that office; he must move simultaneously in the office and in reaches above it.

In expounding this matter, we must needs use the metaphor of height; but the height metaphor alone can be misleading and conducive to dereliction; it should be offset by the metaphor of ‘within’. We discover the universal within the particular, we discover that the particular embodies the universal, is a determination of the universal. When the matter is put in this way we are less tempted to spurn small things, but rather to value them more.

It is not in routine, but in diversity of experience and responsibility of decision, suffused with leisurely counsel and reflection, that we gain insight, that we approach ultimate truth, that we perfect our daily duties, that we confirm our loyalties. Thus there is an intimate connection between a number of things which at first sight seem unrelated: being well brought up in habits, in the *doctrina* of one’s country of birth; life-long fidelity to the *patria*; devotion to duty; wide experience of affairs as a citizen; the even more exacting experience of administering justly to the *oikoumene*; the zest for truth in its universality. All of which amounts to an adherence in matters philosophical to the spirit of the Academy. The Academy, so understood, does not represent a system of thought, but rather the system of life, the one and only way becoming to men at all times and all places. All other philosophical systems or schools are cul de sacs, worth exploring perhaps in the course of education, but not worth remaining in.

Thus it is not by chance or caprice that Cotta is an Academic. Rooted as he is in Roman *fides*; possessed of an intelligence acute enough to see through shams; eager to perfect his office; he could be no other than an Academic.

With the two professors the case is different. Velleius and Balbus doubtless prided themselves on being emancipated from local *fides*; believed themselves to be citizens of the world. In fact they were nothing of the kind. They were merely homeless men, pathetically
seeking refuge in make-believe intellectual constructions. Though not themselves Hellenistic refugees, deprived of effective citizenship by the political upheavals, they had made themselves simulacra thereof. Cotta, the Roman citizen, devoted to his poor little pots, was more a citizen of the world than were the two philosophers.

(9) Cotta in retrospect

It will be apparent that the interpretation of Cotta here put forward is very different from that sometimes advanced by commentators on the *N.D.* Thus J.B. Mayor in his notes on I, 62 treats Cotta as a religious sceptic, concerned with the maintenance of the State religion as a fiction, meet as an instrument of political expediency, but not to be entertained in a private circle of friends. He refers to Gibbon’s acid ‘the various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful’; and to Hume’s scoffing offer to protect Christianity against ‘those dangerous friends who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason’, and his declaration that ‘Our most holy religion is founded on faith not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it, to put it to such a trial as it is by no means fitted to endure.’ Again, in his notes on III, 5, Mayor accuses Cotta of a dislike of reasoning in religion, of clinging blindly to customary reverence and historic feeling, of antipathy to reform through enquiry or debate.

It is not clear that Mayor’s remarks in these two places are consistent with one another. It is clear, however, that both sets of remarks are fundamentally inconsistent with Cotta’s own declarations if our rendering of those declarations is correct. Far from being antipathetic to reasoning in religion, Cotta welcomes it, provided it be sound. Far from being a cynical magistrate, Cotta reveres the time honoured public worship. Nor is there any ground for supposing that Cotta was hostile to reform; indeed, if the identification of Cotta with Cicero is correct, then the sequel to the *N.D.*, the *De Divinatione*, shows one direction in which rational reform would be salutary.

Cotta believes that religion is prescriptive, not speculative; that philosophy must not usurp the place of religion; that the proper function of philosophic enquiry is that of an honoured handmaiden

to religion. This belief in turn is connected with Cotta’s negative theology, or mystical theology. In both respects Cotta is a precursor of the central current of medieval thought exemplified in St. Thomas Aquinas, who observed in the proem to Q3 of the *Summa Theologica* I: ‘We cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not’, and proceeds to treat of the divine simplicity by the way of negation.

In describing Cotta as a precursor of Aquinas a caveat must be entered. Cotta’s religion is a religion of the natural order; to him, the mystery is the mystery of the life of the body politic, that natural body to which, in Cotta’s conception, his natural gods minister. Whereas the divine mystery with which Aquinas is concerned is of the supernatural order; the mystery of the transcendent God who has revealed Himself to men, and of the Church instituted by divine ordinance.

Nevertheless, Cotta (or Cicero) was rehearsing, albeit diminutively, the upsurge of truth of the era to come; he must in justice have an honoured place in the gentile *preparatio evangelica*. 