A Roman View of the Universe
in the First Century B.C.

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What is most difficult for us today to understand about the views and beliefs of the Romans in the first century B.C. is the combination of monotheism and polytheism which in their eyes was matter-of-fact and the truth. A man like Varro was not unaware of the difficulty. He explicitly acknowledges the juxtaposition of a certain monotheism and a polytheism, and believes it to be in accord with the facts. He says about the earth for instance: 'The earth was believed to be Ops because it was improved by toil (opere); it was believed to be the Mother because it brought forth many things' and so on. He adds: 'The belief of our forebears about these goddesses, namely that they believed them to be many is not contradictory... It can happen that the same thing is both one and that in it there are certain things which are many.' Here the Earth is both one goddess and many.

The same applies to the universe as a whole. In the introduction to his 'Natural Theology' (de naturali theologia praeloquens)², Varro describes both aspects. 'He considers that the soul of the universe (animam mundi) called cosmos by the Greeks is god, and that this universe itself is god; but as a wise man although he consists of both body and mind (ex corpore et animo) is yet called wise on account of his mind, thus, considers Varro, the universe is called god on account of his mind, although he consists of both mind and body.' Here the universe is conceived as an immense living being. Like any other living being, he has a mind and a body. This means that although the Cosmos is divine as a whole, he is yet not of the same quality all over. This strange notion is illuminated by an analogy with a human being: the wise man's body in so far as it is part of a wise man is wise also, but, apart from that, it need not be or perhaps is not. Correspondingly, the physical or bodily masses of the universe are divine in so far as they are part of the Cosmic God who is both world-soul and world-body; but apart from him, they are not necessarily divine to the same degree. Here the attribution

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of the fulness of deity to all the parts of the universe is carefully limited.

This gradation in quality is described in detail by Varro in the following passage: 'There are three grades of soul in the whole of nature. One pervades all the living parts of a body and is devoid of sensitivity, but has strength only for life itself. In our body this power (hanc vim) flows through into the bones, the nails and the hair; in the universe, correspondingly, trees are nourished and grow, devoid of sensitivity and are alive in a certain way all their own. The second grade of soul is the one in which there is sensitivity. This power goes into the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth and into touch. The third grade of soul is the highest, which is called mind (animus) in which intelligence is the most excellent part (praeminent). Apart from man, all mortal beings are without it. This part of the world-soul is, according to Varro, called god, while in us humans it is called genius. In the universe there are stones and earth which we can see, but into which sensitivity does not permeate, the bones and finger nails, as it were, of god. The sun again, the moon and the stars which we perceive with our senses, and by means of which the god himself perceives, are his sense-organs. The aether, furthermore, is his mind (animus). The power of his mind entering into the stars makes them into gods also (cuuius vim, quae pervenit in astra ea quoque facere deos; also permanat, but not permeat, Loeb text); what flows through them into the earth makes the earth into the goddess Tellus; and again what from there flows through into the sea and the ocean is the god Neptune. Let us pick out from this rich passage what pertains to the one, the Cosmic god. Stones, earth, and trees are, as it were, his bones, finger and toe nails and hair, pervaded by that grade of soul which means life. The sun, the moon and the stars are his sense-organs, filled with life-giving and sensitive soul. The aether which is the uppermost portion of the universe is his mind. Here soul (anima) is transformed into something higher and more perfect, namely mind (animus); and again mind is transcended by something higher, the highest, namely intelligence (intelligentia). Mind with intelligence is god. Here we encounter again the same complication as in our first passage, namely that both the universe as a whole and the upper portion of the universe, the aether in particular, is god.

In terms of traditional religion the same complexity is found: both the universe as a whole, in fact the Cosmic God is called Jupiter; and also the aether (with some variations) is identified with Jupiter.
In a book, lost to us, On the Worship of the Gods, Varro explains certain verses of Valerius Soranus, who was a contemporary of Varro and Cicero. The verses are as follows: 'Jupiter, mighty Father of kings and of gods and of all things, Mother as well of the gods, one god comprising all others (deus unus et omnes).'

Varro explains these lines as follows: 'The one who emits seed is called male, and the one who receives it female; Jupiter is the universe (mundus), and both emits all seeds and receives them into himself. Hence it is with good reason that Soranus wrote, "Jupiter, mighty Father and Mother as well", and with equally good reason described him as one God, comprising all others (unum et omnia idem esse). For the universe is one, and all things are in that one (mundus enim unus, et in eo uno omnia sunt).' Here Jupiter is identified with the universe as a whole: he is the Cosmic god; and by implication he is, of course, also all there is.

But Jupiter is also the sky or part of the aether or simply the aether. Varro in his interpretation of mysteries of Samothrace 'wants Jupiter to be understood as the sky, Juno as the earth, and Minerva as the "ideas"', referring here to the Platonic theory of ideas. The distinction between Jupiter and Minerva may correspond to the distinction between 'mind' (animus) and 'intelligence' described above. For in the first century A.D. Heraclitus identifies Athene with 'wisdom' and 'intelligence'. He refers to the myth of her birth from Zeus' head, the head being specifically the 'mother of thought'. Cornutus calls Athene the 'intelligence' and 'providence' of Zeus, also connecting this with an allegory of her birth from Zeus' head. Here, Jupiter's daughter Minerva (or Athene) and Jupiter himself together are the aether, that is 'mind with intelligence'. For the Stoic Cornutus, the third century B.C. Jupiter was simply the aether. It is Cicero who gives the fullest expression to this belief in his poem De Consulstt Suo: 'First Jupiter ablaze with the aether's fire turns and illumines with his light the whole world, and eagerly seeks sky and land with his divine mind which from deep within preserves man's sensitivity and life, fenced about and enclosed within the vault of the eternal aether.' Here Jupiter himself as the aether and divine mind is the very highest power; and even the sky stands in need of his penetration. This conception is perhaps closest to Virgil's Jupiter in the Aeneid.

So far we have looked in the main at the monotheistic beliefs of Varro and others. Varro also believes in a number of gods. He affirms that 'the soul of the universe and its parts are the true gods
and these parts of the universe, which are true gods, he describes as follows: 'The universe is divided into two parts, heaven and earth, and the heaven is two fold, divided into aether and air, and the earth in turn is divided into water and land. Of these the highest is the aether, the second air, the third water and the fourth earth. All these four parts, he says, are full of souls (animarum esse plenas), immortal souls in the aether and the air, mortal souls in the water and on land. From the highest circle of heaven to the circle of the moon are ethereal souls (ad circulum lunae aetherias animas esse), the constellations and the stars, and these are not only known by our intelligence to exist, but are also visible to our eyes as heavenly gods. Then between the circle of the moon and the highest region of clouds and winds are aerial souls (aerias esse animas) perceived as such by the mind, not by the eyes. They are called heroes and Lares and Genii. This (says Augustine) is, briefly stated, the natural theology that Varro sets forth in his introduction, a theology approved not only by Varro but by many philosophers. Here we encounter two groups of gods. In the region of the aether, from the top of the universe down to the lunar circle, there are the constellations and the stars which are gods; and in the universe as a whole there are four parts: aether, air, water and earth, which are according to Varro 'true gods'.
Cosmic God's mind enters into the stars and makes them gods, and how through the stars it flows into the earth and makes it the goddess Tellus, and again how it flows from there into the sea and so becomes the god Neptune. A very similar description of this process is given by Cicero as part of his presentation of Stoic views. Cotta criticizing Stoic theology says: 'Of Neptune you say that he is mind with intelligence pervading the sea' (Neptunum esse dicis animum cum intelligentia per mare pertinentem). Correspondingly, Balbus the Stoic says: 'The god pervading the nature of everything (deus pertinens per naturam cuiusque rei), the earth as Ceres, the sea as Neptune, other parts as other gods - these can be understood in their identities and qualities, and the various names traditionally used for these; and these gods we ought to worship and tend.'

It is plain then that to Varro, the Academic, and to Balbus, the Stoic of Cicero's dialogue, the god Neptune is the Cosmic God's mind and intelligence pervading the sea, and the goddess of the earth is the Cosmic God's mind and intelligence pervading the earth, whether she is called Tellus or Ceres or Ops or Mater or Proserpina or Vesta. When Varro in his interpretation of the Samothracian mysteries simply contrasts heaven and earth, he identifies the earth with Juno while Jupiter is the sky as a whole without any division into aether and air.

A variation on this is the view held by Plutarch of the first century A.D. who was an Academic like Varro. He says about Kore, the Moon, that she is the 'boundary of Hades'; and he believes that Homer cryptically expresses this idea when he makes Proteus say to Menelaus that he will not die, but that the immortals will send him 'to the Elysian plain and the boundaries of the earth'. According to Plutarch, Homer reckoned as the end and boundary of the earth the place to which the shadow of the earth extends, which at certain times is the moon. Here earth is not only the solid earth, but also earth's shadow, that is, the dark air between the earth's surface and the moon. So the division between heaven and earth varies.

But most commonly Juno is identified with the air. Cicero says: 'The air, however, which is located between the sea and the sky is according to the Stoics placed among the gods by the name of Juno, who is the sister and wife of Jupiter, because air is very similar to aether and very closely joined to it.' This identification, which goes back to Parmenides, Empedocles and what is most important for our context to Plato is fully described by Cornutus of the first century A.D.: 'The wife and sister of Zeus is according to
One further notion about aether and air is important. When Cicero represents Varro as explaining the views of Antiochus, Varro speaks about the four 'elements' which are fire, air, water and earth. He distinguishes between them as follows: 'Among them air and fire have the power to set something in motion and to bring something about, while the other parts have the power to receive and to suffer, as it were, water I mean and earth.' Here fire and air are active and creative principles, while water and earth are receptive and passive. If fire (which is the same as aether) and air are thought of as Jupiter and Juno, their active nature may well be embodied in the dramatic action of the Aeneid in which Jupiter and Juno are the 'prime movers.'

Having discussed the four 'parts' of the universe we will now turn to their inhabitants as Varro describes them. These parts are crammed with living beings, not only the land and the waters, but also the air and the aether. Earth and sea, lakes and rivers are full of mortal beings: men, animals, fish and so on. The living beings in the air and in the aether are immortal. What happens between the surface of earth or sea and the upper limit of the region of clouds and winds is not specified here. Between this upper limit and the circle of the moon dwell 'aerial souls' (aerias esse animas). We cannot perceive them with our bodily eye but we can apprehend their existence with our minds. They are described as 'heroes,' Larès and Genii. 'Heroes' are men who are deified for their services to mankind. As for genii, we have already seen that according to Varro the highest grade of soul is mind with intelligence which man alone among mortal Beings shares with the Cosmic God; and in man this part is called genius. Elsewhere Varro says that 'the genius is the rational mind (animum rationalem) of each person.' Concerning the larès Arnobius says that Varro 'hesitatingly affirms, now, that they (the larès) are Manes (that is, Spirits of the dead) now again, that they are called aerial gods and heroes, now again, following the opinion of the ancients he says that they are Larvae, certain genii, as it were, and souls of the dead.' This suggests that the larès are similar to heroes, on the other hand, and to genii, on the other, whatever their precise nature. In the air between the circle of the moon and the top of the region of winds and clouds there are then deified heroes and the rational minds - or we should find it easier to speak of spirits of men. Whether Varro believed these human
spirits to be there before birth or rebirth we do not
know;\textsuperscript{25} they are certainly there after death. They
are in fact the immortal spirits of the dead, which
means that Hades, the region of the dead, is up in the
air below the moon - at least in part. Cicero consid­
ered a belief in the Underworld an old wives' tale.\textsuperscript{26}

The ascent of the soul is graphically described
by him: it escapes from the air near us here, and 'breaks through it'; 'it passes through and pushes
apart all this sky of ours in which clouds, rain and
winds are pressed together, which is damp and foggy
owing to the exhalations of the earth.' When the human
soul has won above this region and has reached a place
filled with warm air which is similar to its own nature,
then it stops rising and is there nourished by the same
stuff by which the stars are fed.\textsuperscript{27} This is what hap­
pens to 'famous men and women' according to ancient
belief, as Cicero says elsewhere, while the rest of man­
kind also live on, but 'on the ground' (humi).\textsuperscript{28} The
arrival of a soul ascending to the life of a god is also
described by Virgil in the fifth Eclogue (56-7):
'Radiant with beauty Daphnis admires the threshold of
Olympus which is new to him, and sees under his feet
clouds and stars.' The aether beyond the air, between
the circle of the moon and the very summit of heaven,
is full of immortal Beings whom we can both see with
our eyes and apprehend with our minds: they are the
stars.

When therefore the Roman looked up into the sky,
he did not, as we do, look up into an immense empty
space with inanimate physical bodies moving at enormous
distances; but he looked up into regions of increasing
purity and brilliance, filled with the living spirits
of those who had departed from this life and with gods
visible as stars.

Let us try to envisage this combination of the one
Cosmic God and a plurality of gods and of other beings
in such a way that we can easily hold it in our minds,
and work with it, without continually having to struggle
to reconstitute it again. We will take a coin as our
model. It is round as the cosmos was believed to be.
Suppose it has the head of a sovereign on one side, and
a group of figures in various postures on the other.
Suppose the sovereign's head stands for the One God,
and the figures for the many beings and things that be­
long to the world as we see it. For the sake of eas­
er statement let us call the side of the One God monis­
tic, and the side of the various figures pluralistic.
Suppose this coin is alive: then as the One God moves
in spirit, or to put it differently, as his spirit stirs
into motion the mass of the cosmos, so must the multitud
of beings on the other side of the coin move correspondingly. The unity of movement on the monistic side is obvious and to be expected, since it is the movement of the One God. The corresponding unity of movement on the pluralistic side is a more complex matter. How is the unity in action or movement of this vast plurality achieved so as to correspond to the unity of the One Cosmic God on the monistic side?

In Stoic thought, the term for this close coherence of the parts of the cosmos is 'sympathy', as is well known. Such observations as of the connection between the phases of the moon and the tides and others are used as arguments for the oneness of the cosmos ruled by one divine spirit. Cicero speaks of 'that great kinship of things expressed in an unceasing harmony of agreement'. Here the coherence consists in an interconnection of physical phenomena which are however never, as we have seen, inanimate, because they are always, at least to some extent, pervaded by cosmic spirit. A similar idea is used to explain divination by means of dreams. Posidonius distinguished three ways in which men dream at the instigation of the gods. The second one is based on this, 'that the air is full of immortal spirits in which the clear marks of truth, as it were, are evident' (aliter grud plenus aer sit immortalium animorum...). How this comes about is explained more fully later. 'They believe that our spirits are divine and that they are drawn outside (the body), and that the cosmos is full of a multitude of spirits who are in agreement with one another, and that through this divinity of our mind and its joining minds outside (itself) the future is discerned.' On the word consentientium Pease comments: 'The adjective consentientium is here inserted to express the relationship of 'sympathy' thought of as existing between these animi mutually and between them and the mundus as a whole.' In this context the coherence of the world does not consist in an inter-connectedness of phenomena in nature, but in a harmony of living spirits or minds which throng the air. The power of these divine spirits to connect or bind together the universe is already described by Plato in the Symposium. Having called Eros a 'great daimon' he continues: 'For all the divine spirits together are between god and man and their power is one that 'interprets and ferries across to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods, prayers and sacrifices on the one side, commands and recompense for sacrifices on the other. It is in the middle between the two, and fills it so completely that the whole itself is bound together with itself.' Like Posidonius after him Plato connects prophecy with these divine spirits, and they are 'many and of many sorts', one of them being Eros (203a).
This mighty conception of a cosmos, full of varied movements, yet moving in complete coherence, because it is one living being, has stirred human imagination to rich imagery. Plotinus in the third century A.D. likened the movements of the universe to a dance.

As the limbs of the dancer perform a variety of movements which yet, taken together, are the dance of one body, so the parts of the universe move variously and yet together perform a unified overall movement. In the late first century A.D., Dio Chrysostomus tells a tale of the Persian Magi in which the universe is likened to a chariot drawn by four horses. The outside horse is winged, brilliant as of pure fire, and the swiftest. It is sacred to Zeus himself. The second horse 'touching it and very close to it' is called after Hera, who is Juno in Rome. It is easily guided and gentle, and much inferior in strength and speed. In itself it is dark, but the side that is turned towards the first horse is lit up. The third horse is sacred to Poseidon and is slower than the second. The fourth horse is called after Hestia. It has no wings, but is rigid, and does not move from its stance, but the others move round about it.

This tale vividly pictures the diverse and yet coherent movements of the cosmic parts: aether, air, sea and earth under the direction of one controlling will. What is common to both Dio and Plotinus is the conception of the universe in terms of living bodies in concert.

In traditional religion, it is Jupiter's will or Fate which binds all beings together under one purpose.

There is, however, one piece of literature belonging to the first century B.C., in which the conjunction of the One and the Many is directly described in its simultaneity. That is the fourth Eclogue of Virgil. I will not enter into the difficult question of who the boy is that is to be born; it is plain that he is some sort of Cosmic Being. For as he grows from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to manhood, the universe grows and matures with him.

While he is a small child, nature is at peace and serves him. The earth gives him ivy-leaves and the nard of the countryside, lilies and acanthus to play with. Goats bring him milk of their own accord, and flowers grow up under him when he sleeps. Animals are unarmed of each other; poisonous snakes and plants perish; but Assyrian spice grows everywhere. This is the world of a child, innocent, free of fear and abounding in good things.
As the child becomes a boy and a youth, he reads about the glorious deeds of heroes and his father's achievements, and so becomes a morally conscious person: he learns the meaning of virtus. Correspondingly, raw nature produces civilized fruits: the grassy field ripens into corn, the thornbush grows grapes, and oaks sweat honey. But not all the deeds of the heroic age are blameless: the age of the heroes is in Virgil's eyes no more than a phase in the growth towards perfection. The 'footprints of an ancient deceit' are still just below the surface, and therefore sea-faring, fortification of towns and ploughing of the soil still go on; and these three activities mean for Virgil greed, war and violence done to the earth. Thus, there are still piratical excursions, like the journey of the Argonauts, and wars, like the Trojan War. The youth of the One Being and the youth of the universe are then a time of development in which a growing awareness of moral goodness is mixed with wrongdoing.

Finally, when the youth has grown to the solidity of full manhood, trade overseas will stop, and there will be no more harrowing of the soil or pruning of vine or ploughing with oxen, because every land will produce everything. Even the delight of colours in wool, like red, saffron and scarlet, will be free of the taint of artificiality (which to Virgil is a lie), because the wool of sheep will naturally grow in these colours. In this final phase, the powers of the earth herself have strangely matured so that the products of technical civilization become a product of nature. But the supreme characteristic of this age, mentioned earlier by Virgil (14-16), is that the Cosmic Being enters the life of the gods and rules the world in peace.

Here we see clearly, on the one hand, the one child who grows into a man, and on the other, the earth, plants, animals, and men in all their activities, living at each phase in close correspondence to the child, the youth, and the man.
NOTES


2. Aug., Civ.D., 7.6


4. Aug., Civ.D. 7.9; transl. by W.M.Green (Loeb)

5. Aug., Civ.D. 7.28

6. Boyancé, Varro, p.78, n.2


9. Cicero, Nat. Deor. 1.40


12. Aug., Civ.D. 7.6; transl. by W.M.Green (Loeb)

13. Cicero, Nat. Deor. 3.64

14. Cicero, op.cit., 2.71


17. Plutarch, Moralia, De facie quae in orbe lunae appareat 942F; Homer, Od.4.563; cf.also Plut., De primo frigido 953 B

18. Cicero, Nat. Deor.2.66

19. Cf. Pease on this passage

20. Cornutus, op.cit., p.3; cf. also Heraclitus, op.cit., p.57-8, where the identification of Zeus with aether and Hera with air is used to allegorize their marriage on Mount Ida in Iliad 14.346ff.

21. Cicero, Acad.Post. 1.7.26

22. Boyancé, Varro p.63, n.2; cf. also Cic., Tusc.Disp. 1.27; Horace, Carm.3.2.21-3; M. Pohlenz, Die Stoa (Göttingen, 1949) II, p.140-1; cf. Varro's view: utile esse civitatibus dicit, ut se viri fortes, etiamsi falsum sit, diis genitos esse credant, Aug.,
27. Cicero, Tusc. Disp. 1.19.43
28. Cicero, op.cit., 1.12.27; cf. Somnium Scipionis 9.21 'corporibus elapsi circum terram ipsam volutantur'.
29. Cicero, Nat.Deor. 2.7.19; cf. also De Divinat. 2.34
30. Cicero, De Divinat 1.30.64, and see note by Pease on 'plenus...animorum' for what follows.
31. Cicero, De Divinat. 2.58.119
32. Plato, Symposium 202 E
33. Plotinus, Ennead IV,4.33,1-41